MAISIE BELL



A NOVEL

Scorpio Season

27TH JUNE PARIS **29TH JUNE** BRUSSELS **2ND JULY**
AMSTERDAM **4TH JULY** BERLIN **7TH JULY** WARSAW
9TH JULY PRAGUE **13TH JULY** VIENNA **15TH JULY** ZURICH
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By Maisie Bell

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Scorpio Rising

Scorpio Season #1

Scorpio Season

A Novel

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This book contains explicit content. For more detailed information, please see page 335.

Disclaimer: The content warning includes spoilers for the entire book!

We wish you the best possible reading experience.

Love,
Maisie & LYX

For Sarah, keeper of the vault and my brightest spot of all.

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1

They're at The Hare and Oak, an hour and a half into Florence's shift, when the call comes.

At eight thirty in the evening, the pub is buzzing with a mix of the usual after-work crowd stopping in for a pint and the regulars who are here to catch whatever Premier League game is on. The sounds from the old TV in the corner are all but drowned out by the racket. Florence has to lean halfway across the bar to make out the orders that are being shouted at her, and even then, she's practicing her lip-reading skills.

"Hey, Flo!"

The sound of her name has her looking up from the pint she's pulling. Miray is beaming at her, waving her closer. Florence hands the drink over to Hugh, one of the regulars, before turning toward the end of the bar where Miray and Toni are nursing the bottle of cheap wine that Florence slid them when Earl wasn't looking. The sight of them loitering around the pub after band practice is familiar; the deck of cards spread out in front of them is less so.

"What's this?" Florence asks, propping her hip against the counter.

"I brought tarot cards," Miray informs her. Between the wine and the heat inside the pub, her cheeks are glowing red. "Do you want to pick one?"

Florence has seen these flying around Miray's room before. It's the type of thing Miray loves—less, Florence suspects, because she truly believes in divination, and more for how romantic the idea of it is.

She asks, "Have you all picked one?"

"Miray and I have," Toni reports, a hair tie held between her teeth as she pulls her dark-blond hair off her face. Her curtain bangs still look effortlessly perfect even after a day of working at the climbing gym and three hours of band practice. "Izzy went outside for a smoke. Something about not wanting to 'fuck around with occult bullshit.'"

Considering Izzy's mile-wide superstitious streak and penchant for weird indie horror films, this answer does not surprise Florence. "How does this

work?" she asks. "Do I just pick one at random?"

"Basically! Just try to focus on your intuition," Miray says, handing her the deck.

It's hard to focus on much of anything amidst all the noise. Florence darts a look over her shoulder to make sure Earl is distracted before shuffling the cards. They feel well-used as they glide through her fingers, softened around the edges from passing through Miray's hands so many times. She's not sure if it's her own body heat or the temperature inside the pub that makes them feel warm, but the effect is a disconcerting sense of handling something that's alive.

"Florence." She jumps at the gruff voice that sounds from behind her. "I don't keep you around so you can use my pub to hang out."

Florence hastily picks a card and sets it face down on the counter before turning to offer Earl her most angelic smile. "No," she agrees. "You keep me around because you love me."

The look that Earl sends her is entirely unimpressed. With his towering size and perpetual scowl, he cuts an intimidating figure. Florence would be warier of him if she hadn't grown up calling him Uncle Earl and spending entire afternoons wreaking havoc behind this very bar. Whenever she and her mum would come to London, The Hare and Oak was where they had dinner—Florence distinctly remembers kicking her feet against the counter and sipping ginger ale while Earl and her mum talked adult things. Ever since she moved to London to study, the pub has been her second home. Florence gets mistaken by some of the patrons for Earl's daughter sometimes. When Earl isn't around to overhear, she doesn't bother to correct them.

"You're lucky I haven't fired you," Earl grouses half-heartedly, just as two middle-aged men come up to the bar. Jerking his chin in their direction, he tells her, "Hop to it."

Florence sends Toni and Miray an apologetic glance before she drifts over to the two men. They're followed by a group of American tourists and a gaggle of college-aged boys. At some point, Izzy comes back and slides onto the seat next to Miray, a blur of leather and raven hair in Florence's peripheral vision. One of the football teams scores a goal, and the noise grows even louder, leading to a new wave of drink orders, some celebratory, some sorrowful. Florence smiles and jokes and flirts her way through them,

comfortable in her role as the charming barkeep with a carefully curated air of unattainability. Every once in a while, she checks her reflection in the glass door of the fridge; her dark curls are trying to escape the containment of her claw clip, and her red lipstick needs a touch-up, but there's little to be done about it in the midst of this onslaught.

It's as she's picking out the change for a German couple that Miray calls her name again. "Flo! Someone's calling you." In her hand she's holding the phone that Florence left with them at the beginning of her shift.

"Pick up," Florence shouts back. It's probably her mum; Florence meant to call her earlier but didn't get around to it. Turning back to the Germans, she swiftly counts out the change and wishes them a good rest of their evening. All the while, she has half an ear out for Miray, who is talking loudly into the phone with a hand pressed over one ear.

"Hello? I'm sorry, she can't talk right now. Would you like me to . . . What?"

There's something in her tone that makes Florence turn around. Miray's warm-brown doe eyes have widened to the size of saucers. Her voice comes out in a high squeak as she says, "Are you serious? No, we—no, of course we're free." A short gasp, muffled behind the fingers she's pressing to her lips. "Uh-huh. *No.* Really?"

Florence drifts closer, exchanging a bewildered glance with Toni while Izzy tries to see the number on the screen.

"Yes," Miray says, a tremble in her voice. "Of course. I will let them know. Thank you so much."

She hangs up.

"Who was that?" Florence asks.

Miray stares at her, dazed. "Juno Wilde's assistant."

Florence's heart suddenly forgets how to beat. "Juno Wilde," she repeats. "Juno Wilde as in—the singer? *That* Juno Wilde?"

"Uh-huh," Miray manages.

"Hello?" Izzy asks Miray impatiently. "Tiny? Can you *explain*?"

"I . . . they said . . . Juno wants us. For her tour."

At once, Izzy's and Toni's heads snap around to look at Florence.

“Why does Juno Wilde have your phone number?” Toni asks disbelievingly.

Florence is asking herself the same thing before she remembers. Half a year ago, there was an open call for applications to join Juno Wilde on the European leg of her upcoming tour—in an effort to give up-and-coming artists a chance, even unsigned acts were considered. Florence had sent in a recording of one of their performances without giving it much thought and promptly forgot about it when she didn’t hear back.

“The opener contest,” she explains, clinging to the edge of the bar to steady herself. “I didn’t think . . . I was sure she’d picked someone else by now.”

Izzy’s calloused hands, still smelling like the cigarette she’d just gone outside to smoke, grab Florence’s face to turn it toward her. “You’re joking,” she says, dark eyebrows drawn together. “You’re joking. You’re not?”

“No,” Florence says numbly. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think anything would come of it. There were thousands of entries. It was all over social media. How did we . . .”

“Her tour starts in three weeks,” Toni says, frowning. “This feels incredibly spontaneous.”

Miray shakes her head. “There was another band. They pulled out two days ago due to personal reasons. We were Juno’s second choice.”

“Oh my God,” Florence says. She has to put her head into her hands for a second as the idea that this might actually be happening sinks in. “Oh my *God*.”

“Are we even good enough for this?” Miray asks anxiously.

“Juno seems to think so,” Toni returns.

“Oh my God,” Florence says a third time, abruptly looking up. “We need a drummer.”

For the shows they’ve played so far, they’ve been asking one of their friends from uni to jump in. They’ve been meaning to find a permanent drummer, but so far there has never been a reason to actively search for one. Somehow, they’re going to have to convince someone to drop everything and join their band.

In three weeks. Jesus *Christ*.

"Not just that," Toni says. "We'll need to rent a van to get from place to place and—"

"Hotel rooms," Izzy continues, fidgeting with her septum piercing. "Cheap ones."

"Outfits," Florence adds, "and—"

"What even is our setlist?" Miray asks.

"We'll figure it out." Florence looks from one of them to another, heart thumping in her chest. "If you're in?"

Please say yes. Please say yes. I don't know how I'll go on if you don't say yes.

"What kind of question is that?" Izzy asks. "Of course we're in. Holy *fuck*."

"What about you?" Florence turns to Miray and Toni.

"Obviously," Toni says.

Miray nods fervently. "Of course. Yes. A million times yes."

"Then it's decided." Florence looks between each of them, lightheaded with the sense of possibility that crackles in the air. She has imagined this moment so many times that living it feels like déjà vu. "Oh my God. This is happening."

"What is happening?"

Florence whirls around to find Earl towering right behind her, tattooed arms folded over his chest.

Izzy replies before she can. Her grin is all teeth as she tells him, "We're gonna be famous, old man. Juno Wilde wants us as her opening band."

The expression on Earl's face is perhaps the most surprised Florence has ever seen on him. His eyes dart to her, then to the phone lying on the counter between them. She can tell he's trying to sound unruffled as he says, "Does that mean you lot are finally getting out of my basement?"

"One can only hope," Toni says dryly.

"Well, then. A round on the house for the future rock stars."

"Aw," Izzy coos. "Gonna miss us while we're on tour, Earl?"

"Not even a little bit," he returns without missing a beat.

Florence turns back to the others. A shiver runs down her spine when she sees the tarot card she never got around to looking at waiting face down on the counter. While the others keep chattering, she gingerly turns it over.

The Wheel of Fortune. The flimsy handbook that comes with the deck informs her that it's part of the major arcana.

The Wheel of Fortune symbolizes good luck and destiny. You have reached a turning point. Seize the opportunities that present themselves to you, and trust the Universe as you step into this new chapter.

"Here we go," Earl says, setting four bottles of Florence's favorite cider down in front of them. His large hand settles on Florence's shoulder, squeezing. His voice is quiet in her ear. "I'm proud of you, kid."

Florence tips her head back to smile at him. Once she starts, she finds she cannot stop; she smiles through the clinking of their bottles, through her bandmates leaving to tell their loved ones the news, through the rest of her infinite, surreal shift.

All her life, she's dreamed of this. She imagines her father's reaction, imagines a crowd of five thousand listening to her, imagines endless drives and hotel rooms and a dream ripe for the taking. She has been waiting for this for so long. Now that everything she has hoped for is finally within reach, she wants nothing but to sink her teeth into it, swallow it whole, lick her fingers and then the plate.

You have reached a turning point.

It all starts here.



Florence feels like she's floating as she makes her way home. It's a stifling summer night, the air heavy and sticky as she drifts through Shoreditch, still dizzy with joy. The scent of petrichor heralds the brewing thunderstorm even before the first drops of rain pitter-patter on the warm asphalt.

The bus stop is empty when Florence gets there. She takes a look at her phone: The next bus to Whitechapel is still a few minutes away. She could walk the rest of the way—it's only about half an hour to the flat she and

Miray are renting—but she doesn't trust the weather to hold until she makes it there.

She was right to be cautious. As soon as she pockets her phone, lightning crackles across the sky. The answering roar of thunder comes a few seconds later and then the rain, a downpour like a veil that blurs anything beyond the bus stop.

Florence is too happy to care. She's fairly certain she could be struck by lightning right now, and it wouldn't ruin her mood. She's wondering if she should use the time until the bus comes to call her mum when a tall silhouette emerges from the rain and skids to a stop only an arm's length away from her, soaked to the bone and panting.

Florence casts the newcomer a sympathetic glance. "You tried."

"I really—really did." The stranger gasps for breath as she steadies herself against the glass wall of the bus stop. She looks to be around Florence's age, with short hair that's cropped close at the sides and longer on top. Her black T-shirt clings to her, and water is trailing down her neck and the freckled bridge of her nose.

Suppressing a grin, Florence searches through her tote bag for her cigarettes and lighter. While she finds the former after some digging, the latter is nowhere to be found. Izzy, probably—they have a habit of stealing each other's lighters after their shared cigarette breaks.

"Excuse me," she says, looking to the stranger, who is staring out at the rainy street with a mournful expression while shuffling from foot to foot. "Do you have a light?"

"Er—no. Sorry." A sheepish smile. "I don't smoke."

"I probably shouldn't, either," Florence admits, letting the pack of Marlboro Reds disappear into her bag. Miray always admonishes her, in her sweet and gentle way, that the smoking's going to ruin her voice.

Lightning flashes again. The thunder sounds even louder this time.

"Christ," the stranger murmurs, leaning forward to peer out into the darkness. "It's really coming down, huh?"

"Yeah." Florence checks her phone for the time. "The bus should be here any moment."

The stranger makes a face and shakes her head, sending drops flying. The image reminds Florence a bit of Miray's family's golden retriever after a dip in the inflatable kiddie pool. "I only just showered," she mutters.

Florence's eyes drop to the duffel bag slung over her shoulder. She's probably on her way back from the gym. Her freckled arms are toned, and for the first time, Florence really *looks* at her. Even with her shoulders curled forward, she has a few inches on Florence. In the harsh light of the buzzing fluorescent tube, her hair is a dark auburn, her eyes a warm hazel rendered more vivid by the dark circles beneath them.

Florence becomes a bit more aware of the way she's standing. She turns her body to face the stranger and says, voice dropping slightly, "I'm Florence."

The stranger offers her a smile. There's a slight gap between her two front teeth that has absolutely no right to be as attractive as it is. "Luca."

"Charmed," Florence says, holding out a hand.

Luca's fingertips brush the underside of Florence's wrist in a way that sends a shiver down her spine. "Nice to meet you. Where are you headed?"

"Whitechapel," Florence says. "You?"

"I don't live too far from here. Only about ten minutes. I was going to walk, but . . ."

"Then the world ended," Florence says. "I see." She brushes her hair behind her ears. Even though they haven't gotten wet, her curls are already starting to frizz from the humidity. Looking out at the unceasing rain, she asks, "Are you in a rush to get home?"

"Oh, yeah," Luca snorts. "I have an important date with my bed and the new episode of *Taskmaster*."

"They must be heartbroken to miss out on the time with you." Tilting her head to the side, Florence tries to use every inch of her body to telegraph interest. It's a skill she perfected long ago, as a prerequisite for having any kind of nonplatonic interaction with another woman. Unless she's with the band or in an explicitly queer space, she's rarely read as a lesbian.

"I know, it's tragic." When Luca glances at her this time, she seems a little flustered, like she's finally catching on to the fact that Florence is flirting with her.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” Florence says. “Misery loves company, et cetera.”

“Definitely better than getting wet on my own,” Luca agrees—and promptly turns beet-red when she realizes what just left her mouth.

Florence feels her own grin widening. “That’s what I always say.”

“Oh my God.” Luca buries her face in her hands. “Forget about that. I didn’t say anything.”

Shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter, Florence looks at her phone. The bus should have been here several minutes ago now. There’s no sign of it.

They spend a few minutes in companionable silence while the rain taps soothingly on the glass roof of the bus stop.

Having reemerged from behind her hands, Luca stifles a yawn.

“Long day?” Florence asks.

“Kind of.” Luca scrubs a hand over her face. “I had an early shift at the café where I work.”

“Do you work there full-time?”

Luca pauses for a second before answering, “I used to go to uni, but I . . . It’s full-time, right now.” She shifts her weight onto her other foot. She’s slouching a bit, like she doesn’t quite know what to do with her height. “What about you?”

“I finished my bachelor’s last month. Right now I’m just working at the pub around the corner,” Florence says. Her lips quirk as she realizes that in a couple of weeks, her answer to this question may be different. “And I give piano lessons.”

Luca’s gaze drops to Florence’s hands as though pulled there by some kind of magnetic force. Her ears—protruding and a bit too large—turn pink when she meets Florence’s eyes again. Florence wishes she could see inside her head and know what Luca thought of that made her look like that: wide-eyed, caught. In a voice that’s slightly hoarser than before, Luca asks, “Did you just get off from work?”

“Yeah.” Florence refreshes her app again. Still no sign of the bus. “You know, Luca,” she says, “I fear we may have been forsaken. I don’t think the bus is coming anytime soon.”

Luca scratches her neck. “I think you’re right. Hey—there’s a Tube station not far from here. My flat is on the way there, if you want to walk together?”

Florence glances up at the sky. She did not, of course, have the foresight to carry an umbrella. She’ll likely be soaked to the bone within minutes, but she’ll take it over waiting for God knows how long at the bus stop.

She nods. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Okay. Here goes.” Luca takes a deep breath and steps out into the rain. When Florence hesitates, she turns back to her, rain sluicing down her nose, and calls, “Come on!”

With one more bracing inhale, Florence leaves the shelter of the bus stop. It’s immediately awful. She can’t see and nearly runs into a streetlamp before Luca’s hand closes around her wrist and pulls her to the side. The electricity that sparks across her skin in response feels like it could rival the thunderstorm.

“Careful,” Luca laughs.

They keep going, running down the empty pavement, dancing around puddles. It seems like everyone but them has had the good sense to stay inside. Luca’s fingers are still curled lightly around Florence’s wrist, which is good because Florence can barely see a thing. She’s glad she isn’t wearing any makeup beyond her lipstick, or else she would be giving her best raccoon impression by now.

“How much farther to your flat?” she shouts over the next roll of thunder.

“It’s just around the corner!” Luca responds.

Florence is almost disappointed at this news, and she has to actively fight against her body’s impulse to slow down.

A moment later, they reach Luca’s street, and Luca’s fingers drop away from Florence’s wrist.

“This is me,” Luca says, gesturing at the house next to them.

Shivering and out of breath, Florence nods. Her dark curls are plastered to her forehead. Water is dripping down her nose and gathering in her lashes. “All right. I’d best keep going. I think this might’ve been a terrible idea.”

With her hands stuffed into the pockets of her baggy trousers, Luca shifts on her feet. Her gaze is fixed on a point somewhere to the left of Florence's face as she says, "Or you could come up to my flat. Warm up for a bit."

Florence freezes.

In her split second of hesitation, Luca scrunches her nose and says, "God. Sorry. That sounded like a bad porn intro. Never mind. You should probably __"

"I liked how it sounded."

Now it's Luca who stills. The look on her face clearly broadcasts something to the effect of *I can't believe that worked*. "Really?"

The Wheel of Fortune flashes in Florence's mind again. *Seize the opportunities that present themselves to you.* "Yeah."

"Oh. Wow. I mean, right. Um. Follow me?"

Florence pinches her own arm to make sure she isn't dreaming as she trails after Luca to the front door. She's not sure what she's doing. She's never done anything like this—gone home with a complete stranger. Miray would freak out if she knew. Izzy would probably high-five her, which is usually not a sign she's making a smart decision.

It occurs to her that it would be incredibly stupid to get herself murdered on the same night her dream finally starts to become a reality. But by that point, Luca has already unlocked the door and is ushering her into the stairwell, and really, she looks more nervous than Florence feels.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Florence thinks.

She follows her inside.

2

Luca's flat is on the second floor. "My flatmate is out," she tells Florence as she unlocks the door. After stepping out of her shoes, Florence follows her through the narrow corridor to the room at the very end. "Sorry it's a bit messy. I wasn't expecting anyone."

"You don't make a habit of picking up strangers at bus stops?" Florence asks.

Luca breathes a small laugh and sets her duffel bag down next to the door.

Florence lets her eyes roam around the room. It's a comfortable sort of cluttered; photos cover most of the wall above the desk, and little trinkets are strewn across most free surfaces. Luca apparently listens to the kind of music Earl has in his car—hanging above the bed are posters featuring Nirvana, Green Day, Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"I like your room," Florence says as lightning flickers outside the window.

"Thanks." Luca throws her a smile over her shoulder while she rifles through her closet. A moment later, she finds a towel that she offers to Florence.

In the mirror next to the door, she can see herself. The white blouse tucked into her high-waisted black slacks is near-transparent, clearly showing the outline of her wine-red bra. Her dark hair is clinging to her neck. Her cheeks are flushed, and her dark eyes are blown.

She looks utterly debauched, and they haven't even done anything yet.

"Thank you." Her fingers brush against Luca's as she accepts the towel.

They dry off in silence. When it's not dripping wet, Luca's hair reveals itself to be a warm copper. With every movement, the muscles in her back flex through the fabric of the dark shirt sticking to her skin.

Florence drapes the towel over the chair by the desk. "So," she says. "Just so we're on the same page. You *did* invite me up here to have sex,

right?”

When Luca flushes, it spreads all the way down her neck. “Um.” She turns around to face Florence again. “Only if you want to.”

“I do,” Florence says. “Do you?”

Luca’s eyes are already drifting down, tracing the outlines of Florence’s body through her clothing. Her quiet “Yeah” comes out breathless.

“Oh, good.” Florence grins. The universe really is on her side today. Luca’s eyes are still on her as she sets about undoing the buttons of her blouse.

“Can I . . . ?” Luca asks, stepping closer.

Florence’s hands drop to her sides. She can’t help the shiver that goes through her as Luca takes up the task, fingertips brushing the hollow of Florence’s throat as she works. She has large hands with long, slender fingers and that same dusting of freckles that her entire body seems to be covered in. There’s a small, concentrated furrow between her brows. Her throat bobs with a swallow when Florence shrugs, letting the fabric slide from her shoulders.

“Your turn?” she asks.

Luca reaches for the hem of her shirt, but Florence beats her to it. “What kind of workout were you doing earlier?” she asks as she slides it up. The freckles continue across Luca’s belly and all the way up her chest, disappearing beneath a black sports bra.

“Arms,” Luca responds. “Why?”

Florence says nothing, her mouth dry as she pulls the shirt over Luca’s head and lets it drop to the ground. Luca’s shoulders are broader than Florence’s, her arms clearly toned. Her belly is soft, with a dusting of light hair leading down the front of the boxers that are peeking out of her jeans.

Florence wants, with a sudden and frenzied urgency, to put her mouth on every inch of Luca’s body.

“Are you all right?” Luca asks when the silence drags on. She’s shifting on her feet again, hands fiddling with the small leather bracelet on her wrist.

In response, Florence unhooks her own bra.

Things move faster after that. Their clothes pile up on the floor as they hastily undress, until Florence is walking Luca over to the bed. Luca

doesn't look away from her once, even as the backs of her knees hit the edge of the mattress and she sinks down, resting on her elbows while Florence crawls into the space between her thighs. The hair on her unshaven legs is golden and downy. Her breasts are smaller than Florence's, dusky nipples already pebbled from the chill.

At the same time that Florence notices these things, she's acutely aware of Luca watching her in turn. She angles her body slightly where she's kneeling between Luca's legs, pleased when a drop of rain falls from her soaked curls and trails aesthetically down the side of her breast.

Florence should really do this more often. She likes the thrill of a one-night-only performance, likes playing seductress and finding out what makes someone tick, likes rifling through her chest of tricks that she's picked up from other people. Most of all, she likes being looked at the way Luca is doing right now, her eyes dark and her lips parted as she tracks the raindrop's journey down Florence's body.

"You're so hot," Florence says, pressing a kiss to Luca's collarbone, still clammy from the rain. "What do you like?"

"I. Um." Luca stares up at her, dazed. "Anything."

"Anything?" Florence echoes. Smiling, she kisses the base of Luca's throat. Her skin is feverishly warm under Florence's mouth. "That's a lot of options."

"I have, um." Luca's brows furrow, as though she has to focus in order to string together the next words. "There's some stuff in my bedside table."

"Is that so," says Florence. She has to lean over Luca in order to pull open the drawer. One of Luca's hands settles on the small of her back to steady her as she does.

Florence can feel her blood thrumming in her veins as she takes in the small array. There's a handful of dental dams; a dark blue bullet vibrator; a half-empty bottle of lube; and a strap-on, black silicone and a harness nestled at the very back of the drawer. The idea of Luca using any of these things, in this very bed, makes her breath catch.

She leans back to look at Luca. "You have no preference at all?"

Luca, ears an interesting shade of pink, shakes her head. "I'm fine with anything."

Florence dips her head to hide her grin. She didn't expect Luca, with her swaggering walk and crooked smile, to turn shy and quiet once they're in the bedroom. It's more endearing than it has any right to be.

"Want me to pick?" Florence asks.

Luca nods, melting back into the sheets with something like relief.

"All right. How about . . ." Florence dances her fingers over the toys in the drawer. She lingers on the strap-on, but in the end, it's the bullet vibe that she reaches for. "This?"

"Yeah," Luca breathes.

"Is it fully charged?"

"I . . . I don't remember."

"Hmm." Grinning, Florence presses the *on* button. The toy starts to buzz in her hand, tingly against her palm even on its lowest setting. "Let's hope it is, or this is going to be frustrating."

This close, Florence can hear the click of Luca's throat as she swallows. *Oh*, she thinks. They're going to have so much fun.

"Ready?" she asks.

Luca nods.

Kneeling between her thighs, Florence leans forward and holds the vibe to Luca's left nipple. The reaction is instantaneous, a full-body shiver followed by a quiet gasp.

"Sensitive," Florence observes, delighted, and switches to the right nipple.

Luca's fingers curl into the bedding. Her voice is a small, breathy whine. "Yeah."

"You're so pretty," Florence murmurs. Leaning forward, she licks a hot stripe up the side of Luca's neck. She smells incredible—like rain and clean skin and shampoo, woodsy and vaguely masculine.

Florence leans back a fraction so she can look at her hand as she trails the vibe down Luca's torso. The muscles in her stomach jump at the contact. By the time Florence holds it to her clit, she's panting, eyes fluttering shut as her back arches into the touch.

"Oh," Florence whispers, using her free hand to trace a knuckle along Luca's jaw. "You're a quiet one, aren't you?"

Luca’s only response is a strangled “Y-yeah” as she turns her cheek into Florence’s touch.

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Florence ups the intensity on the vibrator, drinking up every shift in Luca’s expression. Even though she’s barely making a noise, she’s still so responsive. Her entire body is taut, fingers white-knuckled where they’re clutching her sheets. She’s trying to look at Florence, but her eyes keep fluttering shut. Something about her unthinking compliance, the way she’s keeping herself still while taking what Florence is willing to give her, fills Florence with a deep, molten heat.

“Was this what you needed?” she asks softly.

“Uh-huh,” Luca manages. Her head tilts back, her hips twitching uncontrollably upward as Florence flicks to the second-highest setting. “Florence, I think I—”

“Are you close?”

“Yeah. Can I . . . ?”

The fact that she’s *asking*, her voice all raspy and pleading, does something to Florence. There’s a part of her that wants to be a little bit mean—to see how far she can push, to see Luca’s control fray, to find out if she can draw any sounds out of her if she gets truly desperate—but they haven’t spoken about any of this beforehand, and either way, right now all Florence wants is to make Luca feel good.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” she says. “You can come.”

And that’s all it takes. Luca comes with nothing but the softest hitch in her breath, body trembling beneath Florence’s until she shuts off the vibrator and drops it onto the mattress.

Without its buzzing, the room falls quiet, save for the steady pattering of rain against the window.

Florence smooths a hand down Luca's rib cage. "Good?"

One arm flung over her eyes, Luca gives Florence a breathless thumbs-up.

Florence can't help it: She laughs, her own need momentarily forgotten as she drops a kiss to Luca's sternum. "I'm glad."

Luca takes another second to come back to herself before pushing herself up on her elbows. Her eyes are dark and heavy-lidded as she looks at Florence and asks, "Can I go down on you?"

"Do you want to?" Florence asks.

"Please."

Florence tilts her head at her. For someone who had remarkably few opinions about her own pleasure, Luca is looking like a no would break her heart where Florence's is concerned. "All right," she says.

Luca sits up—Florence notes with some satisfaction that her thighs are still trembling—and procures a dental dam from the bedside table. Florence takes her place on the bed, sinking back into the pillows that smell like Luca. The sight of Luca above her, easily holding herself up on her arms while she slots herself between Florence's thighs, makes her heart skip a beat.

"Can you hand me a pillow?" Luca asks.

Florence reaches behind her to give one to Luca.

"Thanks." There's a quiet confidence in the way she grips Florence's hips and makes her lift herself up so she can slide the pillow beneath her. Her energy is different now: more focused, intensely attentive as she nudges Florence's thighs apart and holds the dental dam in place.

"Okay?" she asks.

"Perfect," Florence confirms.

With another dimpling smile, Luca dips her head.

Unlike Luca, Florence likes hearing herself—almost as much as she likes being heard. Her lips part on a soft moan the moment Luca's mouth is on her. Luca knows what she's doing; the drag of her tongue, barely muted by the latex, is firm and torturously slow. Within seconds, Florence's breathing turns fast and shallow, her hips rocking up of their own accord.

Luca lifts her head to mumble, "Sound so good."

Florence smiles, warming at the compliment like a cat bathing in the sun. Desperate for something to hold on to, her hand finds its way into Luca's hair. "Is this all right?" she asks breathlessly.

Luca's agreeable hum vibrates through her, drawing a hiss from Florence. The way her mouth closes over Florence's clit has Florence's fingers tightening in her hair.

"Oh God," she gasps. "Yeah. Like that."

Luca's small answering sound lights up every single one of her nerve endings. She feels like she's melting. This might be the best decision she's ever made.

Her orgasm is a slow, rolling wave that builds gradually and takes her breath away when it crests. She expects Luca to stop, but she just keeps *going*, drawing it out until Florence is writhing beneath her.

"God. Fuck." Florence's fingers tighten in Luca's hair. It's just on this side of too much, the kind of feeling she chases when she touches herself, slow and decadent, drawing it out until the pleasure melts into pain. "You're so—you're enjoying this, aren't you?"

The small, wrecked noise Luca makes sounds like confirmation.

"Yeah, I can tell you are." Florence laughs, near delirious, before she chokes on another moan. It's so much. She can't take any more, but at the same time she wants to take *everything*, wants to lie here and let Luca take her apart until she can't remember her own name. "God, you're beautiful. So handsome. So good, sweetheart, it's like you were made for this," Florence babbles, and Luca honest-to-God *keens* and—

And then she's coming again, quicker than she's ever gotten off on her own, her entire body alight with it. It's the kind of pleasure that makes her heart stop for a moment, that has her entire body twitching with overstimulation until she uses her hold on Luca's hair to pull her away.

When she manages to open her eyes, Luca is already looking up at her. Her cheek is resting against the inside of Florence's thigh. She looks just as satisfied as Florence feels, quiet and sated in the glow of the bedside lamp. "That was incredible," Florence says, still catching her breath. "*You* are incredible."

"Thanks," Luca says, flushing. Slowly, she pushes herself up to sitting. Florence doesn't know how it's possible for her to seem so shy again mere

seconds after giving Florence two of the best orgasms of her life. There's a hint of tentative humor on her face as she asks, "Do you feel warmer now?"

"Much," Florence says. She casts a look at the alarm clock on Luca's bedside table and winces when she sees how late it is. "Oh, God. I should go. My flatmate probably thinks I'm dead in a ditch."

With a small nod, Luca gets to her feet and hands Florence her clothes from the floor. They're still damp as Florence shimmies back into them, but, floaty with postorgasm endorphins, she can't find it in herself to care.

Once they're both dressed, Florence follows Luca back to the front door. They pause there, awkward in the half light of the hallway, Florence's hand lingering on the doorknob.

Luca scratches at her neck. "So."

"So."

"Do you think . . . Um. Do you think we'll see each other again?"

"I would love that." Florence brushes a damp curl behind her ear. "It's just that I'll be gone soon. I won't be in London for a few weeks, so . . ."

She regrets the words as soon as they're out. They come with an unexpected sense of disappointment that settles, cold and heavy, in the pit of her stomach.

Luca quickly nods, hazel eyes slinking elsewhere. "That's all right. Get home safe."

"I will." Florence hesitates for a second before she gets up on her tiptoes and presses a kiss to Luca's cheek. "Thank you. I had a great time."

Luca smiles. "Yeah. Me too."

Then Florence is stepping outside and the door is clicking shut. Her breaths echo in the stairwell. Almost instantly, the last hour feels like a vivid hallucination. The only thing that proves otherwise is the sense memory of Luca's fingers digging into her hips and the full-body shudder still echoing in her bones.

Florence slips her tote bag higher up her shoulder and makes her way downstairs, trying to suppress the pang of remorse that comes with leaving. She could've given Luca her number, but she doesn't want to make this more complicated than it has to be. Once they're on the road, she won't have time for anything real—she'll only end up ghosting Luca after a few

painful weeks of stilted texting, and what good would that do either of them? Better to keep tonight preserved in her memory as it is: a hot, dizzying, lightning-in-a-bottle encounter that she'll probably be thinking of for months to come.

3

The bed still smells like her when Luca wakes up. It was one of the first things Luca noticed about Florence yesterday: her perfume. Her scent clings to the sheets, sweet and heady, like dark wood and cinnamon and the faintest hint of smoke.

Also, like sex.

Turning off her alarm, Luca rolls over and buries her face in her pillowcase. Even now, her body is still thrumming with the memory of Florence in her bed. Florence, drinking in every single one of Luca's reactions while she played with the settings on the vibrator. Florence, squirming underneath her. Florence, ringed fingers buried in Luca's hair, murmuring filthy things with that *voice* of hers, calling her pretty and handsome and *so good, sweetheart, it's like you were made for this—*

Luca muffles a groan into her pillow. Out of all her self-destructive, impulsive decisions, this one has to rank in the top five. Now she will have to go the rest of her life knowing that there is a woman like Florence out there, a woman who *wanted* Luca, enough to follow her home through the rain but not enough to give her her number. And now she'll probably never see her again.

Her alarm rings a second time.

Luca smothers another groan for good measure before she heaves herself to the edge of the bed. The mirror on the wall reflects her groggy face and bedhead. Her arms are sore from yesterday's training as she gets up and pulls on a T-shirt. It's dark green, with a frog sitting on a lily pad printed on the front along with the words **MILF—Man I Love Frogs**. Mason, the eldest of her two older brothers, gave it to her for her birthday two years ago, and she has worn it so much the colors have started to fade. It's her comfort shirt, which probably reveals as much about her questionable taste as it does her mental state.

When she stumbles into the kitchen, teeth brushed and hair somewhat tamed, Parker, her flatmate of two months and counting, looks up from his

cereal and says, “You look like shit. What happened?”

“Oh, you know,” says Luca. “The horrors.”

“Ah.” Parker looks down at his phone again.

Luca grabs a protein bar from the cupboard. There’s no time for a real breakfast. She’s late for work. Again.

“Catch you later,” she says.

“See ya,” Parker says absently around a mouthful of cereal.

Luca shrugs on her tote bag and grabs her keys. She’s halfway down the stairs when she remembers her meds and turns around, racing back to the flat. Parker barely looks up as she barrels past the kitchen and grabs the pills from her desk. She swallows her medication dry before running back out, the door slamming behind her.

When she makes it to the coffee shop two minutes after the beginning of her shift, Jemma greets her with a “Hey! Almost on time!”

Luca accepts her high-five across the counter before she goes to the back to drop off her stuff. It’s uncharacteristically quiet for a Saturday. Luca takes the opportunity to make herself a cup of coffee to join the protein bar and ADHD meds sitting heavily in her stomach.

Wait. Did she take her meds today? She feels like she did, but maybe she’s confusing it with yesterday. Jesus Christ.

“You good?” Jemma asks. She’s nibbling on a chocolate muffin—she steals one pastry per shift—while leaning against the counter.

“Hm?”

“You good?” Jemma repeats.

Luca has no idea how she’s doing. Sleeping with Florence has left her off-kilter. It’s the contrast, she thinks; it was such a relief to turn her head off for half an hour. To hand control over to someone else. To feel, for once, perfectly and utterly anchored in her own body. The moment Florence left, Luca felt adrift again.

This is probably the reason she doesn’t have one-night stands.

“I’m good.” The coffee is hot enough to burn her tongue when she takes a sip. Through a pained grimace, she asks, “How are you?”

“Ugh,” Jemma says. “Uni is trying to kill me. So many assignments, Luca. Too many assignments. Positively buried in them, I am.”

Luca does her best to convey sympathy, which is a difficult thing to achieve while also panting like a dog to cool down the third-degree burn in her mouth.

In truth, she doesn't know what to say. She dropped out of uni a month ago. She wishes she were buried in something besides a vague feeling of existential dread, but she doesn't think that would be helpful for Jemma to hear right now.

As if reading her mind, Jemma says, "Oh! There's some new stuff on the Board, if you want to check it out."

The Board is a corkboard at the front of the coffee shop where people can pin all sorts of flyers, from missing pet posters to advertisements for after-school tutoring. The thing that Luca scours it for, day after day, is job openings.

Setting her bazillion-degree coffee down on the counter, she strolls over to the Board. Not a lot has changed since yesterday. Someone has added an ad for a poetry slam competition. A certain Julius Hedgerow is searching for an original 1984 vinyl of The Smiths' self-titled album. Pretentious stuff. Very Shoreditch.

Luca is about to admit defeat when the bell above the door chimes. The newcomer doesn't even look at the counter but heads straight for the Board, marching with so much purpose, Luca instinctively sidesteps. Her leather jacket creaks as she reaches out to pin something up.

Luca squints to read what the flyer says. Printed on dark-red paper are the words *Scorpio Season*.

We're a queer indie rock band looking for a drummer for our upcoming tour. Must be 21+, preferably from London. Willing to tour for five weeks this summer and attend weekly practice sessions.

Below that is a phone number.

"You're looking for a drummer?" Luca blurts.

The newcomer turns to look at her. She *looks* like she'd be in a rock band: Her black hair is cut in a shaggy mullet, and her dark eyes are smudged with eyeliner. Luca can't even count the number of piercings in her ears, matching the silver glint of her septum ring. She's even taller than Luca, though some of that height is sponsored by her clunky platform boots. "Yeah. You interested?"

“Yes,” Luca says without thinking.

The newcomer studies her, eyes traveling slowly up and down Luca’s body, lingering for a moment on her cursed frog shirt. There’s the hint of an accent seeping into her words as she asks, “You drum?”

Luca nods. “Since I was nine.”

“Sweet. Shoot me a message, yeah?” She taps the flyer with one tattooed knuckle. Luca is still trying to place her accent. Birmingham, definitely, and something else—Russian, maybe? Polish? “I’ll send you the address. We’re meeting tonight.”

“All right,” Luca says, nervous for no reason at all. “Yeah. Will do.”

“D’you have any videos of you playing?”

“Yeah. Just . . . covers and stuff, but—”

“Nice. Send me those. I’ll show them to the band before we meet.”

Luca feels like she’s caught up in a riptide, everything moving too fast for her to comprehend what’s happening. She’s never felt like she was chatting with a force of nature up until this moment. “Okay. Yeah.”

The slow curl of the stranger’s lips reveals a chipped front tooth. “I’m Izzy.”

“Luca.”

“Luca,” she repeats. “Message me. Really. You would fit with us.”

Luca blinks at her, unsure what that means and how Izzy could have gathered that much from one look at her. “Okay.”

Izzy’s gaze is startlingly intense as she gives a short nod, like that settles it. She turns around, then looks over her shoulder once more to point at Luca. “Your shirt,” she says. “Brilliant.”

“Thanks,” Luca manages, just barely suppressing the urge to give a stupid thumbs-up. Then the door falls shut again, leaving her to stare at the wine-red flyer. She hesitates for all of a second before tearing it down and bringing it with her back to the counter.

“What was that about?” Jemma asks. In the absence of any customers, she has started playing Candy Crush on her phone—her second strategy of entertaining herself at work, after petty pastry theft.

“She’s in a band,” Luca says. “They’re looking for a drummer.”

Jemma's eyes light up. "Oh my God. Are you going to join?"

"I think they have to decide that," Luca says.

"Okay, but are you going to *try*?"

Luca curls her fingers around her coffee cup for comfort. "Do you think I should?"

"*Yes.* Go forth. Follow the hot goth to your destiny. You know you want to."

For the first time that day, Luca's lips twitch into a real smile. For weeks, she's been standing in front of the Board, looking for something to break through the aimless monotony of her day-to-day and make her feel *useful*. Maybe this is it.

Maybe it isn't, but at least she can say she tried.

She pulls out her phone and drafts a message.

4

"We are *not* playing 'a ballad for bruised knees' as our first song."

"Why not?" Izzy demands.

They're scattered around their practice room in the basement of The Hare and Oak. Florence is pacing the length of the tiny space, sidestepping the crates of beer and cleaning supplies. Toni is perched on an old, rickety barstool that Earl has graciously spared them. Izzy lounges on the faded green sofa, her legs draped over Miray's lap as her dark eyes follow Florence around the room.

"Because," Florence says, "it's borderline pornographic. We should at least ease them into it."

"'swallow me,' then."

"How is that any better than 'ballad'?"

"Toni," Izzy says. "What d'you think?"

Toni doesn't look up. Dark-blond hair falls into her eyes as she quietly tunes her guitar. "Don't rope me into your shit."

"Boring. Miray?"

"Why don't we look at the rest of the setlist first and then decide?" Miray suggests diplomatically. In her pastel-pink overalls and heart-shaped earrings, she's a bright burst of color in the glum grays and browns of the basement.

With an exaggerated eye roll, Izzy tilts her head back and looks at Florence again. "I think 'ballad' sets the tone."

"I wasn't aware our tone was *debauched sex den*."

"It could be," Izzy insists.

"This is our first tour." Florence rubs at her temples. "The impression we make here is crucial in establishing our brand."

"Why can't our brand be sexy? Jesus, Florence, are you *slut-shaming* me?"

“What? How can I be slut-shaming you when *I* am the one who wrote the stupid so—”

Florence breaks off when she sees Izzy’s lips curl into a grin that clearly reads, *Gotcha*. It’s reserved for instances like this one, when she manages to rile Florence up in exactly the way she intended. Two years of being in the band together have given Izzy ample opportunity to learn how to push every one of Florence’s buttons.

Florence narrows her eyes at her. “We leave ‘ballad’ for the end. Second-to-last song.”

Izzy looks like she wants to keep arguing, but Toni beats her to it. “Hey, Iz. When did you say the next drummer’s going to be here?”

“Should be any minute now.” Izzy looks down at her phone to check the time.

“Has anyone else reached out?” Florence asks.

“Not yet. ’s pretty spontaneous, to be fair.”

The tension headache building behind Florence’s temples increases. They’ve been messaged by two other potential band members so far. One was a thirtysomething guy named Greg who immediately asked how much of a cut he was going to get (none—they’re going to be firmly in the red with hostel bookings and travel costs alone) and if he’d be allowed to play one of his own songs as well (Florence’s eyes still hurt from how far they rolled back into her skull). The other was an eighteen-year-old student who wanted something to do over the summer holidays.

“And you’re sure this one sounds promising?” she asks.

“She’s not a teenager and she’s not Greg,” Izzy answers with an expansive gesture. “That answer your question?”

Having finished tuning her guitar, Toni strums a solemn A minor. “Great standards we’ve got there.”

“I showed you the videos, didn’t I? She’s good,” Izzy says.

Florence grudgingly agrees. The videos were low-quality, shot on a phone in a dark basement not unlike this one, angled so that only the drummer’s hands and a sliver of her torso were visible. Even so, it was obvious that she knew what she was doing, her playing easy and confident over the tinny sound of an old Fall Out Boy song.

“Also, she’s, like—proper fit,” Izzy adds. “You’re gonna like her, Flo. Bet she’s gonna make you reconsider our debauched sex den potential.”

Florence bristles. “You don’t know what I like.”

“Yeah, I do.” Izzy’s grin grows impossibly broader. “You’ll see.”

Before Florence can say anything to that, Izzy’s phone goes off. She points a finger at Florence as she gets to her feet. “We’re not done with the setlist discussion.”

“Izzy,” Toni says. “Go get the newbie.”

Izzy goes, letting the door slam shut behind her.

“Are you two going to get through the tour without ripping each other’s heads off?” Miray asks, fiddling nervously with one of her space buns.

“I’m not the one who started it,” Florence says petulantly.

“For the record,” Toni says, “I don’t think Izzy’s wrong. We could lean into it. The whole dark, sexy vibe we have going on in ‘ballad.’”

“I don’t know if we should,” Florence says. “We’re an all-female rock band *and* we’re queer. We’re already going to be fetishized and held to different standards. I don’t want them to think we’ve only gotten this far by being hot gay women.”

Toni’s lips twitch. “We are hot gay women, though.”

“Are you worried about your father?” Miray asks gently.

Florence cringes. Trust Miray to take one glance at her and pull to light her most tender insecurities. That’s what she gets for being friends with someone since primary school, she supposes. “He might see the things they say about us. He might agree with them.”

“Sure,” Toni accepts. “Good thing he isn’t in our band.”

When she says it like that, it sounds so simple.

Before Florence can reply, the door swings open, whining plaintively on its hinges. “It’s a shithole,” Izzy is saying to the person behind her, “but it’s *our* shithole. If you make nice with Earl, he’ll even let you in on the salted peanuts he keeps behind the bar.”

The person behind her laughs. The sound does something strange to Florence’s stomach even before she sees who it is. Then Izzy steps aside, allowing the newcomer to enter the practice space, and Florence has to grip the edge of the keyboard so she doesn’t keel over.

It’s Luca. Bus-stop Luca. Running-through-the-rain Luca. Head-between-Florence’s-thighs, melting-at-having-her-hair-pulled Luca.

Luca, who Florence has been thinking about since she woke up this morning, still feeling the phantom touch of her fingers on her skin.

Luca, who she was certain she was never going to see again.

“Everyone,” Izzy says, “this is Luca. Luca, this is Toni, our lead guitarist. Miray plays the keys. And that’s Florence, our lead singer. She writes all our songs. I play bass.”

Izzy’s voice is almost drowned out by the rushing of blood in Florence’s ears as Luca’s gaze latches on to hers. In those few seconds of silence, Florence can see the entirety of their last encounter play out behind Luca’s eyes. She looks as mortified as Florence feels, her face draining of blood as her ears turn an alarm-signal red.

Florence makes a small noise that might generously be called a laugh if it didn’t sound so strangled.

“We met at the coffee shop,” Izzy is saying. And then: “Florence. You with us?”

“Y-yes. I’m here,” she manages.

Luca abruptly looks away. One of her hands comes up to scratch at her neck, the same nervous fidget she showed when she invited Florence up to her flat not even twenty-four hours earlier, right before they—

Oh, God. She can’t think about that right now.

Somehow, she manages to scrape together the dignity to say, “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Luca says scratchily.

“All right.” Izzy drops back onto the sofa. “I’ve done my job. Someone else take over.”

Florence takes that as her cue. Her own voice sounds far away as she rattles off her script. “Thanks for coming. Like we wrote on the flyer, we’re looking for a drummer to join us on tour. We’ll be opening for Juno Wilde.”

The dazed expression on Luca’s face gives way to blatant disbelief. “Wait. Juno Wilde? As in . . .”

Florence nods.

“We’ll be touring with her for five weeks, with a week-long break in the middle,” Toni says. “We start in three weeks.”

Luca blinks. “Three weeks,” she echoes.

“It’s not a lot of time,” Toni says, “but it should be enough. We have a short setlist of songs, three of which we’ve already recorded with a friend of mine. He also did the drums on them. It’s nothing too fancy—you should get the hang of it in no time.”

“Right.” Luca’s throat works as she swallows. While she seems to panic over the logistics of learning to perform an entire set in three weeks, Florence is still spiraling over the reality of Luca being here, in their practice space, Florence’s hideaway for the last two years.

“We’ll warn you up front,” Toni says. “This won’t be glamorous. We’re not signed to any label. The instruments, the outfits, everything will come out of our own pockets. We’ve put aside some savings for this, but it’s not a huge budget. We’re going to be renting a van and staying at shitty hostels.”

“Two of us will have to share a bed each night,” Izzy adds. “We’ll save money where we can.”

Florence fights the urge to bury her face in her hands. This whole thing feels like a sick joke. There are thousands of drummers in London, and the universe chose Luca—who Florence *had sex with* and then *left* without giving her her number, like an absolute *prick*—to be the only one to respond to their flyer and actually be qualified for the job. The odds of this happening feel minuscule.

“So,” Miray says, beaming at Luca, oblivious to the tension between them, “what do you think?”

Luca’s mouth opens and closes twice before she says, “I think . . . I think I need to speak with Florence for a second.”

Florence freezes at the sound of her name. Izzy’s eyes dart between her and Luca, visibly delighted about this turn of events.

“Okay,” Florence says. She forces herself to smile. “Sure. Let’s step out for a moment.”

5

Florence is wearing the same perfume as last night. It's not even in the top-three most important things to be thinking about right now, but it's all Luca's brain can focus on as she follows Florence down a dingy hallway and into a cramped storage room. It's lit by a single dirty lightbulb and so small, Luca has to press her back against a shelf in order to not be touching Florence as she shuts the door behind her.

"I didn't know" is the first thing she blurts out.

"I know," Florence says. Her eyes are fixed on a point somewhere next to Luca's head. Luca can't read the expression on her face at all.

"I can leave," Luca makes herself say. "If this is too weird, I can tell them I changed my mind."

The brief moment of silence feels like half an eternity. Luca fidgets, shifting from foot to foot as she waits for a response.

Finally, Florence says, sounding like it pains her, "We need a drummer."

Luca doesn't dare point out that they could wait for someone else to reach out. She's not the only drummer in London. She's nothing special. "Are you sure?"

Florence runs a hand through her hair. Luca remembers how those fingers felt brushing her skin, the deliberate care with which they touched her, and has to bite down on her tongue to make herself focus on something else. "We don't have time to wait for more applications. We should've started preparing for this tour months ago. And besides . . . you're good."

Those words, such a close echo to the honeyed praise Florence sighed out last night, are enough to send a terrible little shiver through Luca. "You saw the videos?"

Florence nods. "It'd be stupid not to take you. You're everything we're looking for."

Hope is a dangerous flutter in Luca's stomach. "Are you sure?"

“That this is a good idea? No,” Florence admits. “But it’s not just my decision. Izzy advocated for you. I’m sure Miray and Toni will agree.”

She’s so different here. There’s no trace of the playfulness with which she flirted with Luca yesterday, the ease with which she made Luca feel comfortable. Instead, there’s something clinical and detached to the way she’s speaking, like they’re on two different sides of a glass wall. Luca looks down at her scuffed trainers.

“My one condition is that we don’t let this—” Florence gestures between the two of them “—affect the band.”

“Okay,” Luca manages.

“It’s just—this band is the most important thing to me,” Florence says. “And we’re so close to everything we’ve been working toward.”

Looking up, Luca can see it in her eyes, then: the desperate, tunnel-vision *want*, a hunger she must have been carrying with her for years. Luca doesn’t think she has ever craved something quite as badly as that.

“I understand.”

“We can keep it professional,” Florence says. “Right?”

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Luca swallows. Her heart is racing at being this close to Florence. The scent of her brings back every single thing they did in bed last night—every single thing that Luca will never get to have again.

She tries to picture herself saying no—leaving the basement and the band behind and going back to the never-ending clockwork of sleep-work-gym-sleep and staring at the Board and only playing the drums for herself every other day when the anxious buzz under her skin becomes too much.

She can’t.

And so, because she’s stupid and self-destructive and would rather chop off her own arm than miss this chance, she says, “Of course.”

“We have practice in two days,” Florence says. “Izzy will send you the sheet music, so you can prepare.”

“Sounds great,” Luca says weakly. Now is probably not the time to let Florence know that she has never learned how to read sheet music.

“Right. Okay.” Florence pauses. “Are you ready to go back to the others?”

Luca nods mutely.

She follows Florence out the door and back to the practice room. The muffled conversation inside falls silent the moment they enter.

Izzy looks up at them from where she’s sprawled across the sofa with her bass in her lap. “Good talk?”

“Yes,” Florence says tightly. “Luca is interested. She’ll join us for practice in two days.”

“Nice,” the guitarist—Toni?—says, effortlessly cool in a tight white top that shows off the tattoos scattered down her tanned arms.

“We can’t wait!” chirps the girl behind the keyboard, whose name Luca has already forgotten. “This is going to be so fun.”

“Can’t wait,” Luca echoes weakly. She juts her thumb at the door. “I’ll, er . . . leave you guys to it, then. See you at practice.”

“See you,” says Florence, almost inaudibly.

Luca takes the steps to the pub two at a time, bursting through the door so abruptly, the hulking barkeep looks up from the table he’s wiping down to raise an eyebrow at her. She mumbles an apology as she hurries toward the door.

After the darkness of the basement, the sun outside is blinding. Standing in the middle of the pavement, she takes a deep breath. Uncurls her fingers from where her nails have been digging into her palms. Drops her face into her hands and lets out a muffled, helpless laugh.

Five weeks of traveling together. Of sharing hotel rooms and beds. Of playing music together and killing time backstage and trying to forget that she ever learned what it feels like to come apart under Florence’s hands.

It’s going to be hell. Luca can’t wait.

6

Florence feels like a live wire for the rest of the evening. After they get home, she and Miray make dinner together in their tiny kitchen while Miray waits patiently for Florence to explain what's going on. When their stir-fry is almost ready and Florence still hasn't said a word aside from "Can you pass me the pepper?" or "Shall we put in the peas?" Miray delicately clears her throat.

"Flo. Are we going to talk about what's going on?"

"What's going on?" Florence asks.

The look Miray spares her as she squeezes past her to get two bowls from the cupboard is entirely unimpressed. She's taken down her space buns, her chin-length brown curls still damp from her shower. She smells familiar and sweet, like the almond shampoo and vanilla body lotion she's been using for as long as Florence can remember. "You're almost vibrating. Is this because of Luca?"

"Why would it be?" Florence asks. She has to fight to keep her voice from going up an entire octave, the way it always tends to do when she's lying. "I don't know her."

"Well, obviously." Miray sets the bowls down on the table with a quiet *clink*. "What did you think of her?"

"She seems . . . cool."

"Cool," Miray echoes.

Florence pretends to be incredibly invested in adding soy sauce to the stir-fry. "Yeah. She seems nice."

Even with her back turned, Florence can feel Miray's gaze boring into her. "Are we just going to ignore the fact that she's *aggressively* your type?"

At that, Florence almost drops the entire bottle of soy sauce. She barely manages to catch it in time, whirling around to stare disbelievingly at Miray. "What's that supposed to mean?"

“I just mean,” Miray says, “the way she looks. You know. Tall. Muscles. Masc.” She laughs. “Why do I even have to spell this out for you? You *know* what your type is.”

Golden retriever butches, Florence recalls saying once. And, curses, Miray is right. If there was a textbook definition of the phrase, Luca’s picture would be next to it. Florence loathes herself a little bit for being so utterly predictable.

Turning back to the stove, she turns off the burner and takes the pan off the heat. Miray hands her one bowl to fill, then the other. Florence grabs two spoons; Miray has already set two glasses of water down on the table. After three years of cohabitation, they’re a well-oiled machine.

“Are you worried I’ll be distracted by her?” Florence asks as she sinks down on her familiar chair opposite Miray. Their two plates barely fit on the tiny table—it’s the kind that folds up against the wall, a rickety contraption that they’ve been wanting to exchange ever since they moved in during their first semester but never got around to.

Miray, sitting with one knee pulled up to her chest, tilts her head at her. “I don’t think anything could distract you,” she says. “You just seemed rattled by her, is all.”

“I’m not,” Florence lies instinctively. “And even if I were, I wouldn’t make it the band’s problem.”

“You could, though,” Miray says.

“Could what?”

“Talk about it. With us. With me.”

Florence frowns. “Right. But I won’t. Because there won’t be anything to talk about.”

“All right, Flo,” Miray says placatingly. She blows on her spoon before taking the first bite. Her eyes scrunch as she hums happily. “Mmm. This is good.”

Some of the tension seeps from Florence’s shoulders. It *is* good. As they eat, she glances around their tiny kitchen—the photos on the wall, the plants hanging from the ceiling, the suncatcher on the window, scattering the pink light of the setting sun across the floor tiles. It still feels surreal that in three weeks, they’ll leave this flat and go on tour.

“How do you feel?” she asks, looking back at Miray. “About all of this?”

Miray holds a hand in front of her mouth as she says around a mouthful of rice, “I don’t think it’s sunk in yet. I’ll probably start panicking when we start packing.”

Florence nods, just as her phone vibrates against the table. Since it’s face up, she can see the notification: Izzy has added Luca to their group chat. Below, there’s another pop-up message, this one from the band’s socials.

Florence waits until they’re done eating—they have a rule about not using their phones during meals—and have cleaned up the kitchen before she opens the notification.

@junowilde tagged you in a post

“Miray, did you see—” Florence begins, but Miray is already standing behind her, one hand braced on the back of Florence’s chair. She gives a little gasp as Florence taps on the notification.

A picture of Juno Wilde’s upcoming tour dates fills her screen. The caption reads, **I am so thrilled to announce @scorpioseason as my opening band for the upcoming Europe dates! These girls are the coolest. Check out their music so we can all scream it together next month!**

“Oh my God,” Florence whispers. The post has only been up for eleven minutes, and already their follower count has more than doubled, shooting from a modest 2,300 to 6,000 followers. Their inbox is flooded with messages.

“That means we get to announce it too, right?” Miray asks excitedly.

“Yeah. Do you want me to or do you—”

Miray is already unlocking her own phone. “I’ve got it.”

While she chooses a picture and drafts a caption, Florence keeps staring at Juno’s post.

Juno is a legend in the world of alternative rock. After winning a talent competition at nineteen, she rose to fame with her first album, *Conversations in a Parked Car*. She made headlines after coming out as bisexual five years ago, and then again when she launched an abortion fund for women in Ireland. Florence has cried to her music more than anyone

else's; when her first and only long-term girlfriend broke up with her at eighteen, she listened to nothing else for an entire month. Everything she knows about songwriting, she's learned from Juno Wilde. And now she's here, her band linked in a post on Juno's account, Juno's name in her follower list. None of it feels real.

While Miray refreshes her notifications to look at the comments trickling in, Florence copies the link to Juno's post and sends it to her father. She doesn't write anything else.

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7

Luca spends her weekend watching every single Scorpio Season live performance that has ever been posted to social media. Most of them are grainy recordings from various London pubs, but even though the audio is choppy and the lyrics are hard to understand, Luca can tell right away: They're *good*. Florence commands any room, whether it's The Hare and Oak or a posh wedding venue. Izzy is electric on stage, and Toni makes playing ridiculous guitar solos look easy. Miray's sweet voice twines around Florence's during quieter songs as she plays the keys.

Their music is not what Luca expected, if she'd expected anything at all. It's gritty and sensual. Strangely hypnotic, she finds, as she loops the same song on repeat thrice.

Luca wants, so badly, to be a part of it. She spends every moment she isn't listening to their music practicing on the drum kit that's been gathering dust in her and Parker's dingy basement, playing by ear until the rhythm comes as naturally as breathing. She only stops when one of her neighbors comes downstairs to ask, very politely, if she could stop—by then it's nearing midnight, and Luca realizes she hasn't eaten anything in eight hours.

It isn't particularly unusual for her. When something catches her interest, it's almost impossible to tear her away. Her childhood therapist's voice echoes in her head again: *The term ADHD is a bit misleading, really. Luca doesn't have a* deficit *of attention. She just has a trickier time pointing it where it needs to go, is all.*

For now, her attention has firmly latched on to the band and the four songs she needs to learn. She wishes it could've done the same when it came to her uni studies, but she'll take what she can get.

On Monday, she's practically buzzing out of her skin by the time she arrives at practice. The room they're rehearsing in feels like it's about ten thousand degrees. Izzy, Toni, and Miray are already there—Izzy is messing

around with her bass on the sofa, while the other two are poring over something on Miray's phone.

"I think it looks good," Toni says as Luca enters. She glances up at her. "Luca, hey. What do you think of our new logo?"

Luca squints as she steps closer to look at the sketch on Miray's phone. The name of the band is written in wine-red cursive font on an off-white background, with a coiled scorpion in place of the first S.

"It's really cool," Luca says.

Miray beams at her. "Thanks! I spent all weekend drawing and redrawing it. Izzy, what do you think?"

Izzy looks up from her bass, motioning for Luca to hand her the phone. She whistles through her teeth as she takes in the logo. "Looks sick. Good job, Tiny."

Miray's cheeks turn rosy as she takes her phone back. "Great. I already showed it to Florence—she likes it too."

"Speaking of which." Toni glances at her phone. "Did she say when she was going to—"

As if on cue, the door bangs open and Florence swoops in. "Sorry! So sorry," she says, tossing her tote bag onto the sofa next to Izzy. "Piano lesson ran late. Did you guys already start?"

The sight of her makes Luca's stomach do something funny. She looks like she ran here; her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is coming apart from where she's pinned it up. Her perfume is different today—a lighter, citrusy smell.

Luca forces herself to look away. As it turns out, sheer power of will and two days apart are not enough to convince her body to stop being attracted to Florence.

"We were just talking about the new logo," Miray fills her in.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She reaches for the mic stand that Luca hasn't noticed until now, given how well it's blended in with the rest of the junk filling the basement. "Shall we start, then?"

With a creaking of her unseasonably warm leather jacket, Izzy gets up and grabs her bass. Miray goes to sit on the wobbly stool behind her

keyboard, while Toni stands next to Florence, adjusting her guitar strap so it doesn't snag on her hair. Luca slowly walks toward the drum kit.

"It's nothing fancy," Toni says. "It's the cheapest thing we could get second . . . actually, maybe thirdhand."

Luca sincerely doesn't care. She sits down behind it, rifling through her backpack for her own drumsticks.

"Did you have a look at the sheet music?" Florence asks.

It's the first time she's addressing Luca directly. Looking up, Luca realizes that the way they're positioned, forming a loose circle, leaves her looking straight at Florence.

"Yeah." She clears her throat. "I don't know if I have everything down, but . . ."

"We'll just see how it goes," Toni says. She turns to Florence. "What do you want to start with?"

"Something calm to start, I think," Florence says. "Let's do 'alexandria.'"

It's one of the songs that's already out—Luca added it to her playlist last night. "Cool," she says. Her palms feel very sweaty. Her heart is thumping the way it used to do right before a uni exam.

Miray starts the song off with a quiet, lilting piano intro. When Florence opens her mouth to sing, Luca feels a chill run from the top of her head all the way to her toes.

None of the recordings did her justice. Florence's voice is out of place in the claustrophobic basement. It feels like something you should have to pay to hear, something to listen to on a record player with a glass of something pricey in your hand. It's rich and warm and velvety, with an intentional raspiness on some words that makes Luca's mouth go dry. She sounds like an angel. She sounds like a siren about to lure someone to their death.

Toni joins in, then Izzy, playing a dark, foreboding bass line. Luca is so caught up in it, she almost misses her cue, but she startles out of her reverie just in time.

The addition of the drums makes the song feel like the building of a wave, Florence's voice rising above their instruments and mingling with Miray's once they reach the chorus. Luca faithfully keeps time; the slow, steady rhythm reminds her of a heartbeat running below the song, only

speeding up during the bridge, as Florence sings of the Library of Alexandria, of burning herself to the ground before she lets her lover know all of her.

The last note fades, and Luca realizes she hasn't looked away from Florence once. She averts her gaze just as Florence opens her eyes.

The silence lingers for a moment before Izzy says, "Damn."

"Yeah," says Toni.

"We sound," Miray says giddily, "*so* good."

When Luca dares to glance at Florence, she catches the exact moment Florence's face breaks into a grin. Luca thinks it might be the most genuine expression she's seen on her face since Florence left her flat three nights ago. "I think this is going to work," she says.

Luca lets out a breath.

From across the room, Izzy catches her gaze. "Good job, Rookie."

"Thanks," says Luca, trying not to preen.

"All right." Florence takes a sip from the reusable water bottle on the shelf next to her. "Let's take it from the top."



After practice, Luca somehow ends up perched on a barstool in the pub upstairs, wedged between Izzy and Miray as Florence puts up her hair and starts her shift.

It's fascinating, watching her work. She moves behind the bar with an ease that looks effortless, joking with customers, pulling pints, leaning forward onto the counter to give house recommendations, a perfectly manicured nail tapping on the paper menu. There's something about her, though—something deliberate to the way she holds herself, to the pitch of her voice and her gestures. Every couple minutes, Luca catches her subtly adjusting her necklace, her rings, the way her shirt is tucked into her black slacks. Her eyes keep straying to the refrigerator door, trying to catch a glimpse of her reflection. It's like she's editing herself in real time, curating a very specific version of herself that falls somewhere between the Florence

Luca met at the bus stop and the Florence from the practice room but is somehow also something else entirely.

"What about you, Luca?" Miray's voice sounds from next to her.

She shakes herself. "Sorry?"

Miray offers her a patient smile. Her chin is cupped in one hand while the other holds a chip from the little bowl Florence slid their way earlier. The contrast between her and Izzy is almost comical: On one side of Luca there's Izzy in her clunky silver jewelry and dark eyeliner, and on the other there's Miray in a white blouse with little flowers embroidered along the neckline and sparkly pink lip gloss. "Did you get the time we're on tour off from work?"

"Oh. Yeah." Luca picks at the label on her sweating bottle of ginger ale. "I have some savings, and I've been working loads the last few months, so it should be okay. What about you?"

"Same here," Miray says.

Luca tries to keep her eyes from straying back to Florence. "What do you do?"

"I teach piano lessons, same as Florence."

"Not same as me," Florence cuts in. Her gaze meets Luca's as she explains, "Miray started during our first semester. She has enough clients now to do it full-time."

"A proper businesswoman, our Tiny," Izzy says, reaching around Luca to ruffle Miray's hair.

Miray's cheeks pinken. She gives a sheepish little shrug.

Florence goes back to pouring drinks. Luca has always thought that the little hose in the counter that the lemonade comes out of looks like it would be so much fun to use.

"What about you?" she asks Izzy.

"I work at this thrift store in Camden. It's one of them really pricey ones. Make you give an arm and a leg just because there's brand items and it's *curated*." Izzy says the last bit with exaggerated air quotes. "It's bloody robbery, honestly. I love it, though."

"Did you get time off, Iz?" Miray inquires.

“Yeah. I think I’ve worked enough overtime to go on holiday for half a year.” Izzy grins. “Toni too.”

Toni has already left, so Miray fills Luca in for her. “Toni works at a climbing gym. She . . . instructs people? Makes sure they don’t fall?”

“Something like that,” Izzy agrees.

“Did all of you study at King’s together?” Luca asks.

“Just the other three,” Izzy says easily. “I started working straight out of school.”

Luca feels strangely relieved about that—to not be the only one in the band who isn’t some kind of academic. Rationally, she’s aware that one doesn’t need a degree to be good at playing drums, but it still eases something inside her to know she’s not alone.

She’s about to reply when the sound of Florence’s laugh distracts her. Somehow, it sounds different than the laughs Luca has heard from her so far, enough to make Luca glance over.

She finds Florence standing on her tiptoes to murmur something to Earl, her hand resting on his tattooed arm to steady herself. Everything about the gesture looks worn-in, familiar. Whatever Earl says to her in response makes her laugh a second time, bright and delighted, a little breathless. It reminds Luca of those videos of actors in between takes on a film set where you only realize how well they’ve been acting once you see them break character.

Then Earl shoulders past Florence to the kitchen and Florence returns to the line of customers, and the moment passes.

Luca reaches for another chip and wills her attention to move elsewhere. She feels like she’s gotten away with something, like she’s seen something she wasn’t supposed to. She wonders if Florence knows what she’s doing and, if so, if she plans on keeping up the act for the entirety of the tour. She wonders if the hour in Luca’s bed was just another role Florence slipped into, then cuts off the thought when she realizes that she’s never going to find out.

They’re bandmates, and nothing more. Really, Luca has no business wondering about Florence at all.

littlelamb

Does anyone have any recommendations for sapphic rock music? I feel like I see so many sapphic pop girlies but my playlist needs some more variety! 
#keirarambles #sapphicmusic

ephemeralbeans 20 hours ago

i stumbled upon this band called scorpio season a few days ago! juno wilde posted about them. they only have a couple songs out, but they’re really good!

littlelamb 9 hours ago

Ohhhh, I’ve never heard of them! Will check them out 

8

Over the next week, they have practice almost every single day. For the most part, everything is the same. Florence and Izzy still bicker over the setlist. Toni still works on refining her solos. Miray still tries to gather the courage to sing louder on the harmonies.

Only now, Luca is there too, quiet and skittish except for when she's playing.

Neither of them has acknowledged their night together since that first day. Which is . . . good. Florence steadfastly ignores the flutter in her stomach whenever Luca brushes past her and the way her stomach swoops as she watches Luca on the drums, absently twirling the sticks in her hands while they're talking about the arrangement on a song, the way the hair falls into her eyes and the muscles in her arms ripple. And if Florence has to get herself off in bed after every practice, that's only for her to know.

"I think we should release another song while we're on tour."

Florence blinks back to awareness at the sound of Toni's voice. She's sitting on her stool, guitar draped across her lap as she fans herself with her hand. The basement has heated up over the last few days—like the rest of Earl's pub, it's almost unbearably stifling.

"We don't have anything recorded," Florence points out.

"I know," Toni says. "But we could do a live recording of something. Compile everything into an EP. We should have at least a few tracks up once the tour gets going so Juno's audience knows what we're about."

Florence considers it. "We could do 'big teeth.'"

It's one of her favorite unreleased songs: a big, brooding track about female rage dressed up as a werewolf allegory.

Sitting on the floor in front of the sofa with her long legs stretched out in front of her, Izzy snorts. "'big teeth—live from the basement.'"

Miray laughs. "How about we just go with 'big teeth—demo'?"

“I like that,” Florence says. She looks over at Luca. “What do you think?”

Like every other time she’s been directly addressed or asked for her opinion on a band matter, Luca sits up straighter. The deer-in-the-headlights look on her face should absolutely not be so disarming. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

“We could record it tomorrow?” Toni suggests. “We can film it as well, post it as a little music video?”

While the others talk logistics, Florence darts another glance at Luca. She’s harder to read than Florence expected; Florence can’t tell if she actually likes the idea of recording the new song or if she’s just going along with it. When they were in bed together, she’d assumed that Luca’s quietness was just due to nerves, but it’s revealing itself to be more of a personality trait. She hardly speaks around the others, and she seems hesitant to utter any of her opinions. Florence thinks the only time she’s heard Luca express what she wants was when she asked to go down on Florence—and, God, if that isn’t something.

It really is very hot in the basement. Fanning herself with her lyric book, Florence says, “We have our setlist and our logo. What about the van?”

“I’m on it,” Izzy says, taking a sip from her—surely lukewarm by now—Capri-Sun. Her eyeliner is smudged under her eyes. Florence feels like her own makeup is melting off. “One of my mates is down to lend us his van for the tour. It’s a bit shit, but it should hold.”

“Reassuring,” Toni comments.

“That’s what you get when you’re on a budget, baby.”

Florence looks at Miray. “What about hostels? Do you need any help?”

Miray shakes her head. “Oh, no, it’s all right. I’ve gotten us rooms for almost every stop. I’m just waiting for the confirmation from the hostel in Prague, and then we should be set.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Luca asks tentatively.

“Play the drums and look pretty,” Izzy tells her.

Luca flushes. Florence remembers the way Luca melted at her praise the other night and suddenly feels the intense urge to dash out of the basement in search of a cold shower.

“Great!” she says, slightly too loud. “Brilliant. I’m going to go upstairs for a minute. Catch some air.”

Miray cranes her head back to frown at her. “Are you all right, Flo?”

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“Fine. Just. My mum called me earlier. I should call her back.”

Florence turns before anyone else can question her and takes the stairs back to the pub two at a time. It’s hardly any colder outside, but she feels like she can breathe easier the moment she steps through the back door. Her fingers are itching for a cigarette, but she left her things inside. With little else to do, she pulls her phone from her pocket.

It rings a couple of times before her mum picks up. Her voice crackles through the speaker, warm and familiar. “Kelly Gibson speaking.”

“Hi, Mum.”

“Florence! I’ve been trying to reach you. I saw the post you sent me.”

Florence’s lips tilt into a smile, hearing her own giddiness echoed in her mum’s tone. “Yeah?”

“It looks like a tight schedule. When are you leaving, then?”

“Tour starts on the twenty-seventh.” Only nine days. Somehow, it feels more impossible the closer they get. “The first stop is in Paris, so we’re leaving on the twenty-sixth.”

“Paris,” her mum repeats, a touch wistful. Florence can picture her sitting in her office in Oxford, glasses pushed to the top of her head while she takes a break from grading papers. “When are you getting back?”

“We have a one-week break in the middle. So we’ll be on the road for three weeks, then come back to London, and have another two weeks touring in the UK and Ireland.”

“Oh? Is that standard procedure nowadays?”

“I don’t think so.” Florence shields her eyes with one hand as she tips her head back against the wall of the pub. Above her, the sky is a spotless blue. “Juno’s manager told us that Juno has a teenage daughter. She doesn’t want to leave her for an entire month.”

The answer comes with a bitter taste in her mouth.

As if reading her mind, her mother asks, “Did you hear anything from your father?”

“No.” Her message has been left unanswered for the last week. It shouldn’t surprise her, at this point, but Florence still hasn’t quite learned to ignore the acrid disappointment in her gut. If not even this—the biggest achievement of her fledgling music career—gets a reaction from her father, what will?

“Prick,” her mother says, sudden enough to draw a startled laugh from Florence.

“Yeah.” A pause. “I can get you tickets to our London show, if you want? It’s in Hyde Park. Miray’s parents will be there as well.”

“Of course,” her mother says immediately. “I would love to come. You know I would follow you all over Europe if I could.”

“Yeah. I know.” Florence bites her lip. She knows it’s not what her mum intended, but she can’t stop the guilt from welling up in her throat. It’ll be the longest she’s ever been away from England, and the farthest too. Once they’re on the road, she won’t have much time to speak to her mum—or anyone else, for that matter. “Mum, I have to go now. We’re in the middle of practice.”

“Always working,” her mother says, and Florence can’t tell if she sounds fond or chiding. “I’ll let you go. Say hi to Miray from me. And Earl, of course.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and Florence?”

“Yes?”

“Do call me when you’re on tour. I want to hear what you’re getting up to.”

Florence lets out a slow breath. “I will. Bye, Mum.”

Hanging up, she drops her head back against the brick wall behind her and shuts her eyes. She stays there for a few more minutes, gathering the courage to return to the basement and the tormenting sight of Luca's arms.

SETLIST

1. ~~a ballad for~~ big teeth
2. swallow me
3. a ballad for bruised knees
4. alexandria

9

"You really don't talk much, do you?"

Luca blinks, startled. Toni is looking at her, head tilted to the side. "Sorry," Luca says lamely, drawing herself up straighter. They're leaning against the counter at a guitar shop in Shoreditch, waiting for the owner—a friend of Toni's—to find something in the back. "I was just thinking about tomorrow."

In her head, she's been going through the list of things she still has to pack. Probably, she should've started two days ago. Now she's going to be rifling through her closet for clean shirts at two a.m. instead.

"Nervous?" Toni asks.

"Yeah," Luca admits. She's been anxious all day. All week, maybe. "You?"

"I think it'll be fine," Toni says.

"Yeah," Luca says again, quieter.

"We have nothing to lose, really. We're at the very start of our careers. There's nothing at stake yet."

"I think Florence would disagree," Luca dares to point out. "She seems to take this really seriously."

The evidence is in the sore muscles of her arms and shoulders. They've had grueling, three-hour practice sessions every evening this week. Since they're leaving for tour tomorrow, today is a day for them to, as Florence put it, *get their affairs in order*. Luca's affair is picking up her in-ear monitors; when she mentioned it to Toni, she suggested they go run their errands together.

With her arms braced on the counter, braless in a white top with her dark-blond hair falling over her shoulders in loose waves, Toni looks like a '70s rock star on a *Rolling Stone* cover. Luca glances down at her own scuffed Converse and wonders if she's about to spend the entire tour feeling horribly underdressed.

“Flo takes everything seriously,” Toni says. “I don’t think she’s ever been chill a single moment of her life.”

Luca gives a noncommittal smile. “How did you guys become friends? The others told me you studied music at King’s together?”

Toni nods. “We met during freshers’ week.”

“What about Izzy?”

Toni scrunches her nose. The sunlight filtering through the grimy shop window catches on her nose piercing. “We matched on a dating app.”

Luca isn’t sure if Toni is joking or not. With how dry her humor is, Luca sometimes can’t read her tone at all. “Really?”

“Yeah. On our third date, I mentioned to her that our band was looking for a bassist. We’re much more compatible musically than romantically, it turns out.”

Luca combs through her memory for any noticeable tension between the two but comes up empty. “And it isn’t . . . awkward, or anything?” she asks.

“I don’t see why it would be. We only hooked up once.”

It takes conscious effort for Luca not to twitch. She and Florence only hooked up once, and look where it got them. Luca still feels herself blush every time she meets Florence’s eyes. It’s a miracle the others haven’t noticed anything.

Before she can ask anything else, the shop owner emerges from the back room and announces, “Here it is.” He sets a small device down on the counter.

Toni picks it up, turning it over in her hands as she inspects it. She asks him a few questions about it—none of it means anything to Luca—before she pays and they step back into the street.

“I’ve always wanted one of these pedals,” Toni says. “The last one I had was ancient.”

“Nice,” Luca says, for lack of anything smart to contribute.

“Hey,” Toni says. “My girlfriend works three minutes from here. Do you mind if I pop in and say hi?”

“No,” Luca says. “’Course not. Do you want me to wait here?”

Toni shoots her a bewildered look. “What? No. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

For some reason, that makes Luca feel warm. “Okay. Yeah. If you’re sure.”

“Of course I’m sure,” Toni says. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.”

Toni’s girlfriend, it turns out, works at a store just off Brick Lane. It sells the kind of stuff that Luca’s mum loves: colorful vases and candle holders and a million different decorative pillows, each of which probably costs as much as Luca earns in tips on a good day. The air smells like vanilla and fresh-cut wood. There are only two customers around, leaving the soft acoustic cover of some pop song to fill the silence.

Toni heads straight for the cash register while Luca trails behind her. The blond behind the counter looks up. “Toni?” she asks. “What are you doing here?”

Toni holds up the oat milk chai they picked up on their way. “Thought I’d bring you a little mid-shift treat.” She gestures at Luca. “Esther, this is Luca, our new drummer. Luca, this is Esther.”

Esther’s blue eyes flicker over to Luca. She looks a bit like a porcelain doll: perfectly falling blond hair, perfect eyeliner, a perfectly pleasant smile. “Hi, Luca.”

“Hey. Nice to meet you.”

Esther looks back at Toni. “Are you going to be home tonight?”

“Yeah. I told you, we don’t have practice today.”

“Right. I wasn’t sure. Sometimes they’re spontaneous.”

Toni frowns. Luca has the distinct feeling she’s missing something. “I’ll be there. We’re doing Mexican, right?”

“If you want,” Esther says. “It’s your final evening.”

Toni makes a face. “That makes it sound like I’m dying. It’ll only be three weeks.”

“And then another two.”

It’s at this point that Luca decides she shouldn’t be listening to this. With her hands in the pockets of her jeans, she strolls over to one of the display tables. While Toni and her girlfriend keep talking, she pulls out her phone and opens the group chat with her two brothers.

Henry:
hey

Henry:
r u free tonight?

Luca:


Mason:
Okay if we drop by to say goodbye?

Luca:
I still have to pack

Henry:
we'll bring pizza?

Luca:


Henry:
why do u always text like a dad

Luca:
Your mum texts like a dad

Mason:
. . .

Mason:
We'll be there at 7

Luca:


Henry:


"Luca." With a start, she turns around to find Toni waiting for her by the exit. "Let's go."

Esther is still sitting behind the counter, the oat milk chai untouched in front of her. Luca gives her a small wave before following Toni outside.

"Everything all right?" Luca asks carefully.

"Sure," Toni says.

They don't talk much after that.



“Have you told Mum and Dad yet?” Henry asks around a mouthful of pizza. They’re sitting on the floor in Luca’s room, surrounded by clothes and toiletries. Her suitcase waits half-packed on her bed.

Luca sets down her slice to shoot him a look of betrayal. “Why’d you have to ask me that in the middle of eating?”

“Oh, sorry.” He blinks innocently at her. “Did you want to keep pretending you won’t have to eventually?”

“I’m *going* to tell them, I just—”

“You really should,” Henry says. “They’re going to wonder why you have enough time to go traveling all across Europe when you’re supposed to be doing assignments, or whatever.”

“No, they’re not,” she says stubbornly. “The summer term ended at the end of May. I have until August.”

“Luca,” Mason cuts in softly. “I really don’t think it’s going to get better the longer you put it off. Do you want me to tell them? I can—”

“No,” Luca says, looking down at her half-eaten pizza. As much as a part of her wants to simply hand the responsibility off to her oldest brother, she knows that this is something she needs to tell her parents herself. This isn’t a broken vase or a detention because she wouldn’t stop rocking her chair in class. This is her dropping out of uni without talking to her parents first, effectively wasting the thousands of pounds they’d invested in her education and leaving herself without any real prospects for the future. “I promise I’m going to tell them. Just . . . after the tour.”

In her periphery, she can see her brothers exchanging a glance. Mason is frowning, gently concerned in the way that’s pretty much his default expression. Henry is chewing on his thumbnail, the worry as out of place on his freckled face as it would be on Luca’s.

Luca hates this. Mason marched straight through university and into a classroom; he has a wife, a child on the way, and a decent house with a garden in southwest London. Henry is a freelance web designer who works from all over the world and never once seems to doubt that he made the right decision. Next to them, Luca sometimes feels like her parents’ problem

child—always struggling, always a mess. It took her two years to decide what she wanted to study, and then she didn't even last one semester. She doesn't know how to explain any of it to her brothers, much less her parents, who were so *proud* when Luca got into uni and moved into a place of her own, who sound so excited every time they ask how her studies are going. The idea of picking up the phone and telling them she couldn't do it makes her stomach hurt.

"Whatever nightmare scenario you're imagining," Mason says, reaching over to squeeze her ankle, "I promise it's not going to happen. They love you no matter what."

Luca lifts her shoulder in a small shrug, her throat too tight to speak.

After a moment, Henry asks, "What are they like, then?"

"What are who like?" Luca asks quietly.

"The band," Henry clarifies. "What are they like?"

Luca picks at the pizza box in her lap while she considers her answer. "They're . . . really cool. Almost too cool."

Mason frowns at her. "You're cool too."

"Right," she says. "Um. They're really nice. Miray, she plays keys—she's really sweet. Toni went shopping with me earlier. Izzy is—a little scary, but also nice."

"What about the singer?" Henry asks. "What's her name again?"

"Florence," Luca says reluctantly. She's almost afraid to say it out loud in front of her brothers. A part of her fears that they're going to know what she and Florence did just from the way her mouth shapes Florence's name. "She's. Um. Nice."

"So they're all very nice," Mason summarizes.

Luca opens her mouth. Shuts it. Says, "Yeah."

Henry, chin smeared with tomato sauce, squints at her. "What are you not telling us?"

And Luca tried, she really did—for almost three weeks, she has kept her mouth shut and not told a single person about what happened. She feels like a bottle of sparkling water that someone has shaken. Sitting in her room with her brothers, she physically can't contain herself anymore. "Isleptwithher."

Henry chokes on a bite. Mason helpfully thumps his back while he looks at Luca, owl-eyed behind his glasses. “What?”

“I slept with Florence.” Luca buries her face in her hands. “I didn’t mean to. I mean—I did, but that was before I knew.”

“I’m not following,” Mason says.

Henry makes another strangled choking sound in agreement.

“It was just a stupid coincidence. We slept together, and the next day I walked into band practice and she was there—”

“Oh my God.”

“—and we agreed not to tell the others, but now we’re going on tour and she’s just going to be *there*. Every second of every day. And she makes me feel—I feel like I’m going to combust whenever I’m around her.”

Henry gives one last cough as he blinks at her. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” She runs her fingers through her hair with a ragged laugh. “Shit.”

Mason carefully sets down his pizza box. “Okay. So . . . that isn’t ideal.”

“No, Mason, it is not,” Luca agrees, a touch hysterical.

“Do you want to sleep with her again?”

“Oh God,” Luca says. Her face is on fire. “Please don’t ask me questions like that.”

“You started it!” Henry cries out.

“Come on.” Mason nudges his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his pinkie finger. He’s using a tone that Luca is almost sure is the same one he wields in the classroom. “We’re all adults here.”

In the loosest sense of the word, yeah. Luca exchanges a miserable glance with Henry.

“Well?” Mason prods.

“It wouldn’t matter if I wanted to,” Luca begins.

“Which you do,” Mason observes.

Henry makes a retching sound and pulls out his phone.

“We’re in a band together. We’re going to be spending the next month in each other’s pockets. More than a month, if this goes well.” Luca fiddles with her leather bracelet, twisting it around her wrist again and again. “There’s too much riding on it now. I don’t want to mess it all up.”

“Do you think you can keep pretending it didn’t happen?” Mason asks.

Luca wishes her brother weren’t so good at verbalizing every single thought she tries her hardest to repress. “I think I have no choice.”

“Oh, shit,” Henry says next to her, eyes on his phone. “This is her?”

Luca leans over to see what he’s looking at. It’s one of Scorpio Season’s live performances. Florence is prowling across the stage of a tiny pub, her hair falling in wild curls, hands cradling a microphone.

“She’s . . .” Mason says. “Intense.”

The word describes her well. Luca thinks back to Florence between her thighs, eyes wide and hungry as she drank in every one of Luca’s reactions, and has to get to her feet to walk off the buzz underneath her skin.

Mason watches her pace the room with a concerned furrow between his brows.

“I’ll keep it professional,” Luca says. “I have to.”

“Okay,” Mason says.

“We can be friends. People become friends with people they’ve slept with all the time, right?”

“I . . . guess?”

“Right. So. There’s no need to worry.”

There is, in fact, a lot of need to worry. Her brothers know as well as she does that Luca isn’t exactly great at keeping secrets. Sometimes, things leave her mouth quicker than her brain can catch up. It’s why she usually tries not to say very much at all.

Her breaths are coming shallower than they’re supposed to. “This is a really bad idea, isn’t it.”

“Luca.” Suddenly, Mason is in front of her, blocking her path. His touch is gentle but firm as he takes her by the shoulders. “It’s going to be fine. Hey. This is incredible. You’re going to be touring all over Europe with a band. Fifteen-year-old Luca would be having a fit if she knew.”

She would. Luca sucks in a breath. “Yeah.”

“If you become famous,” Henry says, “I want you to tell everyone that I was the one who got you into drums.”

“You weren’t,” Luca says automatically.

“Yes, I was. I convinced Mum and Dad to get you a drum set for Christmas.”

“I’m pretty sure that was Lukey,” Mason says. “She wouldn’t shut up for *weeks*. There were a couple days there where I actually think *drums* and *please please please* were the only words we heard from her.”

Luca winces. She was a nightmare child. A nightmare teenager too. “Sorry.”

Mason shoots her a funny look. “You were nine years old. You were allowed.”

“The point is,” Henry says, “remember me for your award speech.”

“We’re not winning any awards if I implode the band because I can’t keep it in my trousers,” Luca tells him.

“I wish you wouldn’t phrase it like that,” Henry says before he, too, gets up. “Luca. You’re good at drums. You’re *incredible*. And it’s only five weeks. Repeat after me: I can keep it together for five weeks.”

“I can keep it together for five weeks,” Luca says.

“Okay, now say it like you mean it.”

“I can keep it together for five weeks,” she repeats, with all the desperate fervency of a prayer.

Henry nods solemnly. “Yes, you can.” He boops her nose, face splitting into a familiar grin. “And if not, it’ll at least be a hilarious story.”

10

Florence wakes up at five in the morning with a level of nervous excitement she doesn't think she's felt since Christmas morning when she was twelve years old. Miray finds her in the kitchen two hours later, chugging black tea and rereading the email Juno's tour manager sent a few days ago detailing their schedule. They're both too nervous to eat anything, so they get ready in a loaded, anticipatory silence before lugging their bags and gear downstairs.

Florence paces the pavement while Miray texts her friend who will be taking care of their plants while they're away. She's about to call Izzy to ask what the holdup is when a beat-up silver van rounds the corner and comes to a screeching halt in front of them. There are speckles of rust and too much duct tape to inspire confidence in its ability to transport them safely across the continent. A whining guitar solo blares from inside.

"Jump in," Izzy shouts over the music, poking her head out the open window of the passenger seat.

Florence makes eye contact with Toni through the windshield, trying to silently communicate *Is this safe?*

Toni lowers the volume of the music before shoving at Izzy's shoulder. "You. In the back. Miray's better at navigating."

"Ouch," Izzy says. "That is *hurtful*, Antonia."

When Toni gives no response beyond a meaningful raising of her eyebrows, the passenger door opens, and Izzy's long legs appear. "Unbelievable," she grumbles, grabbing one of Florence's bags.

When she opens the back doors of the van, Florence catches a glimpse of Luca's ginger hair. Her heart gives a little lurch, but she tamps down the feeling. Tour is starting. The time for useless pining is over.

Between Florence, Izzy, and Miray, they make quick work of stowing away their luggage. It's a tight fit—they're going to have to play Tetris at every stop to retrieve their overnight bags and instruments.

Once they're done, Izzy holds the door open for Florence with a flourish. "M'lady."

Tentatively, Florence pokes her head inside the van. The seats are as worn down as the rest of the vehicle, and the stuffy air inside carries the scent of old weed and the cloying vanilla air freshener currently dangling from the rearview mirror.

Sitting on the right-hand side of the backseat, Luca offers Florence a sheepish smile while she turns something small and square over in her hands. "Hey."

"Today, maybe?" Izzy asks behind her, drumming her hands impatiently on the roof of the van.

Florence gets in. Sliding into the middle seat brings her closer to Luca than they've been since Luca joined the band. Florence can smell the lingering scent of shampoo on Luca's damp hair as she reaches for the seat belt, fingers fumbling it twice before she manages to fasten it.

Izzy slides in behind her, slamming the door shut with terrifying finality.

Once everyone is seated, Toni looks at Florence through the rearview mirror and puts on her sunglasses. "Ready?"

"Yeah," she says, a touch breathless. "Let's do this."

A second later, they're off.



The drive to Paris takes eight hours. Florence dozes off while they're in the Channel Tunnel, only startling awake again when they reach France. Around noon, they stop at a rest stop for lunch, and Miray and Toni swap seats. Izzy's offer to drive is quickly shut down, as is her request for the aux.

The entire time, Florence is acutely aware of Luca's presence next to her. It's impossible not to be touching her; after a few hours, she gets used to the feeling of their knees knocking, the warm brush of skin where their arms are pressed together.

"Nervous?" she asks eventually, watching Luca play with her fidget cube.

Luca's brows furrow, confused, before she looks down at her hands. "Oh," she says. "No. Just bad at sitting still."

Florence has noticed. She doesn't think Luca's right leg has stopped bouncing for the entirety of the journey. "Not much longer, now," she says.

"Yeah." Luca glances at her, skittish. "Are you? Nervous?"

"No," Florence lies. "I'm excited for this."

Luca's thumb clicks the little switch on one side of the fidget cube, on and off, on and off. "At least we'll all be going on together."

"Perks of being in a band."

There's a moment of silence.

"Have you ever performed on your own?" Luca asks.

"Only when I was little," Florence says. "I don't think I'd be suited for a solo career. I like knowing someone has my back up there."

"We will," Luca says, so earnestly that Florence has to look away.



The hostel they booked for the night is, frankly put, a shithole.

Miray apologizes as she hands out their room keys in the lobby. "It was the cheapest one I could find that wasn't on the other side of the city."

"It's all right," Florence says. "It's only two nights."

Miray winces. "I think this might actually be one of our better accommodations."

They split up to ride the lift so no one from the hostel staff questions why there are five of them moving in when they only paid for four. Florence is the last one to step foot into the room. It's barely large enough for all of them to stand in, crowded together between the two metal bunk beds. The yellow carpet is stained in places, and the window looks straight at a brick wall.

"I call dibs on the top bunk," Izzy says, already swinging her overnight bag onto the bed.

"Anyone volunteering to share tonight?" Toni asks.

Florence does her best not to look at Luca as she says, “Miray and I can share.”

Miray, bless her, nods right away.

After spending all day in the car, they’re keen to stretch their legs a bit. Florence feels dazed as they wander through the 19th arrondissement. The streets aren’t the postcard-pretty Paris she’s seen in films, but she loves them all the same. Even with a distinct lack of limestone buildings, it’s enough to know they’re here, in another country, nearer to the Eiffel Tower than she’s ever been, simply because someone liked their music.

For dinner, they get pizza at a hole-in-the-wall two streets away from where they’re staying—trying to place the order quickly brings Florence to the limits of her school-learned French—before heading back to the hostel. Florence removes her makeup sitting cross-legged on the carpet, using wipes and her small hand mirror while the others take turns showering. Luca is the last one to emerge. Steam wafts out behind her as she steps out of the bathroom wearing low-slung pajama pants and a white T-shirt that says **ALPHA MALE**.

In the low light from one of the bedside lamps, Florence can make out the flush on her cheeks, the drops of water still clinging to her lashes. “Careful,” she says as she holds the door for Florence. “It gets really hot really fast.”

Florence, mouth dry, gives a small nod and slips past her into the bathroom. The misty air still smells like Luca’s shampoo. Florence takes shallow breaths and makes quick work of showering and washing her hair, yelping when the water turns from pleasantly warm to scorching in a heartbeat. From outside, she can hear Izzy cackling.

By the time she crawls into bed with Miray, the others are already tucked in. Luca is in the top bunk above her, which is good because it means that Florence only has Toni to look at. Miray shifts so she’s almost pressed against the wall, making sure that Florence has enough of the blanket. They’ve been sharing beds since they were kids, so it’s easy to curl up beside her, Florence’s knees pressed to the backs of Miray’s like a familiar puzzle.

Toni turns off the last light. In the dark, the breathing of five people becomes deafening. Light from the street below filters in around the edges of the curtains. A group of men in the hallway is talking loudly in French.

“We’re going to open for Juno Wilde tomorrow,” Florence whispers.

“Yeah,” Izzy says.

“People are going to hear us.”

The bed creaks as Luca shifts above them. “Mm-hm.”

“This could be the part where everything changes.”

“Florence,” Toni says. “Go to sleep.”

Florence exhales. There’s some rustling before Miray’s hand finds hers, squeezing. Florence presses a smile into her pillow and wills her body to sleep.

Interview with Jeffrey Blake on Fuse Radio, August 10, 1992

Interviewer: And we’re here, live at Glastonbury with Jeffrey Blake. You also performed here last year. Since then your career has skyrocketed. How does it feel being back?

Jeffrey: Incredible. Incredible, yeah. I don’t think I’d be where I am now without that show last year.

Interviewer: And what a show it was. Tell me, looking back, what do you think —what was it about that show that made the world fall in love with you?

Jeffrey: I think . . . Presence is everything. People don’t always understand art, but they understand charisma.

Interviewer: The rain probably helped too.

Jeffrey: A little bit, maybe.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*] How do you come about that confidence? You’re . . . what, twenty-four now? But there’s this self-assuredness about you that I think draws people in. Have you always been this way, or was it something you had to learn?

Jeffrey: Oh, I’ve always been like this. In this industry, you’ve got to believe in yourself. No one else will. I think everyone is here for a purpose, and mine is music. I know that this is what I’m made for. When you have that conviction, there’s nothing anyone can say to make you doubt yourself.

Interviewer: Was there ever a plan B in case this didn’t work out?

Jeffrey: No.

Interviewer: No?

Jeffrey: I knew I was going to make it. You can’t go into this with a plan B. You’ve got to have a hunger that gives you no other option but to succeed.

Interviewer: Well, you’ve certainly got that hunger. [*Laughs.*] Do you think there’ll ever be a point where you’ll be satisfied? Where you’ll look out at a crowd and think, “This is it, I’ve made it”?

Jeffrey: No. I think there’s always more.

11

They're expected at the venue at two p.m. for sound check. Luca feels faintly nauseous as they pull into the parking garage. Her breakfast consisted of her ADHD medication, a croissant, and an ill-advised coffee that seems to have gone straight into her bloodstream. She spent the whole thirty minutes it took them to get through the crawling Paris traffic bouncing her legs. Florence, who is sitting next to her again, hasn't said a word about it.

Once they've gotten out of the van and unpacked their instruments from the back, they head for the entrance of the venue. Luca feels naked: While the others are carrying guitars or keyboards, she has nothing to hold on to as they step through the doors. Juno Wilde's drummer was kind enough to let her use his drum set for the duration of the tour, seeing as they don't have the budget or car space to bring their own.

They pass through a heavy entrance door before stepping onto a lift. Luca rocks back and forth on her feet as it creaks its way up to the ground floor.

A very short woman wearing a very bright yellow blouse is waiting for them when the doors open. At the sight of them, her face breaks into a warm smile. "Hi! It's so great to see you. I'm Amy, Juno's tour manager."

Florence looks remarkably self-assured as she steps forward to shake Amy's hand and introduces them. "I'm Florence Gibson. This is Izzy Dabrowska, Toni Paredes, Miray Tezel, and Luca Walsh."

"Wonderful." Amy shakes each of their hands in turn. Luca desperately hopes her fingers aren't as clammy as they feel. "Juno and her band are just about finished with sound check. Follow me!"

She turns around, leaving them to trail after her.

Luca has never been in a venue right before a concert. Even without any fans there yet, there's already a steady buzz of activity: On their way, they pass by the merch stand being set up and the bar being prepared. Their steps echo loudly from the high ceiling. As they near the doors, the music grows

louder. From the corner of her eye, Luca catches Florence's hand reaching for Miray's arm, fingers curling into the fabric of her denim jacket.

Then they're stepping through the doors and into the empty concert hall, and there she is: Juno Wilde, walking across the stage in a black turtleneck and jeans, her gray-streaked dark hair held back by a claw clip. One hand is in her pocket, absolutely *effortless* as she belts out a song that made Luca cry the first time she listened to it. Her voice is so familiar. Luca's brain can't compute that it's coming from a real-life woman who is only a short walk away from her.

"Breathe," Amy laughs next to her, and Luca instinctively sucks in an inhale.

Toni has come to a halt next to her, mouth agape; Florence is very quietly murmuring "Oh my God, oh my God" over and over while still holding Miray's arm in a death grip. Somehow, Izzy is the calmest of them all: Her head is tilted back, her face breaking into a slow smile as she takes in the venue.

Juno Wilde finishes the chorus and nods, satisfied. She exchanges a few words with a serious-looking man in a flannel shirt—a sound engineer, probably—before looking their way and waving. "Well," she says into the microphone, and even her speaking voice sends a shiver down Luca's spine, "if it isn't my favorite Scorpios."

"She knows our band name," Miray whispers.

Toni gives Florence a little push. She immediately catches herself and walks toward the stage, shoulders back, spine straight, every inch a front woman.

Luca tries not to drag her feet as she and the others follow her down the aisle between the seats.

Juno studies each of them in turn from behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. There's so much quiet confidence in her posture that Luca feels, for a moment, incredibly unworthy to be standing in front of her. "Hello," she says. Her Irish accent is stronger when she's not singing. "Welcome to the tour. I'm so thrilled you're here!"

Florence looks like a deer in the headlights as Juno steps forward and pulls her into a hug. "Thank you for having us."

Juno turns to Luca next. “I haven’t seen you in any of the videos,” she says, “so I’m guessing you’re the new drummer?”

It takes Luca two tries to get her tongue to cooperate. “Y-yeah. I joined a few weeks ago.”

“Exciting stuff.” Juno’s smile is unexpectedly warm. Her hug is, maybe, the best one Luca has ever received. Juno doesn’t seem to be wearing any perfume, but she still leaves behind a pleasant smell of fabric softener.

One after another, she moves down the line. She has to get on her tiptoes to hug Izzy in her platform boots, and then again when it’s Toni’s turn. It’s incredible how someone no taller than five three can feel larger than life.

“How are you guys feeling?” Juno asks once introductions are over. “Nervous? Excited?”

“All of the above,” Toni says.

“I’d be concerned if the answer was any different.” A woman steps out on stage, pointing at her phone, and Juno shoots her a thumbs-up. “Sorry,” she says, “it’s my daughter. You guys do your sound check—you’re in great hands with Dave. I’ll see you before the show.”

They’re left to stare after her in disbelief.

“She is *so* cool,” Miray breathes, watching Juno disappear behind the stage.

“I think my life just peaked,” says Florence. “It’s all downhill from here.”

Before anyone can say anything else, Dave, the sound engineer, waves them closer. “Come on, ladies,” he says. “This is your first time, so this might take a minute. Let’s make sure we stay on schedule. You got all your instruments with you?”



The venue seems even larger from up on stage. Even with her contacts in, Luca can barely make out the last row of seats. The stage, too, feels ridiculously large. They’re used to playing between beer crates and cleaning supplies in Earl’s basement—as they scatter around on stage, no one seems to know what to do with so much space.

“All right,” says Dave. “In-ears in? We start with the drums.”

Luca dutifully strolls over to the drum set. Every piece of it looks brand-new, glossy black and expensive. There are a few more add-ons than she's used to on her own kit, but at least most things are in the same place. Her mouth goes dry as she steps onto the drum riser and sits, looking out at the stage. The venue sprawls in front of her, only the first few rows visible with the way the stage lights are angled. Everything beyond fades into shadows. Luca is grateful for that; it'll be overwhelming enough to see the standing area once it's packed, when there's people looking up at them and pressed up against the barricades.

"Luca?" Dave prompts, and she snaps back to what she's supposed to be doing. "We already checked the drums with Mikey earlier today. This is just to make sure you're comfortable with the setup."

Luca grips her drumsticks a little tighter. The monitors feel strange in her ears. She's suddenly very aware of all the eyes on her. From her spot by the mic stand at center stage, Florence gives her an encouraging nod.

"Whenever you're ready," Dave says.

Luca looks down at the drums in front of her. The first beat of the bass drum reverberates all the way through her chest. The snare drum is crisp and the toms are full and weighty, and after the first out-of-body lurch of hearing her own playing fill an entire hall, Luca's limbs move on their own, falling into a familiar mid-tempo beat. It's the type of thing she's played a thousand times to warm up, and her heart settles a bit. Nothing about the venue is familiar, but this is—the weight of the drumsticks in her hands, the gentle strain in her muscles, the easy rhythm that pours out of her without any input from her brain. She'll be okay as long as she doesn't think too much about any of it. When she closes her eyes, she's nine years old playing in her childhood bedroom and seventeen jamming to Nirvana and twenty-three rehearsing with the band just a week ago. This is the part she knows; beneath the adrenaline, there's her muscle memory, reliable as a safety net.

"How does that feel?" Dave's voice sounds in her in-ears.

She stops. "Um. Good, I think."

"Sounded good on my end," Dave confirms. "Keys next, please."

Luca sets her sticks down, feeling like she just passed some kind of test.

From her perch at the back of the stage, she watches as Miray plays a few tentative scales. She mostly spaces out, her eyes drawn again and again to the vastness of the hall, the rows of seats stretching farther than she can see. Once all the individual instruments have been checked, Dave runs Miray, Toni, and Florence through vocal check. Florence jumps as her voice echoes through the venue, and Luca has to press her knuckles to her mouth to suppress a grin. Florence settles into it as quickly as Luca did—on the second line she sings, her lips break into a fierce little smile, and all Luca can think is that it feels right seeing Florence up here, hearing her voice amplified loud enough to echo in Luca's bones.

After a few minutes of tinkering with the sound, Dave asks them to run through the first verse and chorus of a song together. Luca takes a deep breath before counting them in and launching into the drum intro of "big teeth."

It's the same as the way it is in their practice room, and yet completely different. They're standing so far apart, and for the first time, Luca can't see the others' faces as they play, but she can *feel* them. Miray's keys are like fingers trailing up her spine and Toni's guitar whines in her ribcage and Izzy's bass settles under her skin like a metronome and when Florence opens her mouth to sing, Luca feels the air humming with it as much as she hears it through her in-ears, close and unbearably intimate.

She thinks she might be laughing, bright and giddy. They surge into the chorus and the music gets impossibly louder and for the first time today, Luca isn't scared. As she looks out at the venue and tries to imagine the rows filled with people, the standing area a sea of faces, the only thing she feels is anticipation, bright and champagne-fizzy, filling her to the brim.

12

Thirty minutes before they're due to go on, the atmosphere in the dressing room is electric. Over the music blasting from a Bluetooth speaker—they put on ABBA, for comfort purposes—Florence can make out the flurry of voices, the pounding of footsteps a level below them. Fans have started to be let in. Fans who are going to *hear* them; the first real crowd that's ever going to see them on a big stage.

Florence feels a little bit sick to her stomach.

She wants to ask the others what they think will happen if this goes terribly—if her voice cracks or she forgets the lyrics or simply throws up the second she sets foot on stage—but she doesn't want to worry them. This whole thing was her idea. The least she can do is not lose her head minutes before they go on.

So she does what she has done before every other gig they've ever played. She paces. She changes her hairstyle three times. She goes through her vocal warm-up with Miray. She eats a tablespoon of raw honey, as she's done before every choir performance since she was thirteen, cloying sweetness that she imagines glossing over her vocal chords as it goes down her throat.

"What's that for?" Luca asks. She's sitting on the beat-up leather sofa. Her legs haven't stopped jiggling since they were deposited here an hour ago.

"It makes my voice sound better," Florence says.

"Allegedly," Toni adds from where she's sitting cross-legged on the rug, softly strumming her guitar. If Florence didn't know her, she'd think she was wholly unaffected by the entire affair. As it is, she can see the subtle signs of tension in Toni's shoulders, in the way she keeps checking and rechecking that her guitar is in tune.

"One time I didn't do it," Florence says, "and I sounded awful."

"You were thirteen years old singing a part meant for a soprano," Miray gently points out.

She has a point there. In the beginning, Florence was unwilling to admit to herself or her exasperated choir teacher that she was, in fact, an alto. It was a hard pill to swallow for a prepubescent girl with Primadonna tendencies who fancied herself the next Kate Bush.

The door opens, and Izzy slips back into the dressing room after her third nervous smoke. Florence's own fingers are itching for a cigarette, but she has a feeling all the honey in the world couldn't cancel out the effects of tobacco this close to showtime. "How is everyone feeling? Are we ready?" Izzy asks, flopping down next to Luca on the sofa.

The answers are variations on *Not particularly*.

Florence strides over to the mirror to check her makeup. Her uniform for any gig so far has been a black suit with a white button-up, platform boots that give her another inch or so, and deep-red lipstick. The tarot card she tucked into her bra presses against her skin as she leans forward and uses her pinkie finger to wipe a trace of wayward mascara from her eyelid.

She jumps when the door opens again and Amy pokes her head inside. "Five-minute warning!"

"Thanks, Amy." Florence draws a last deep breath before turning around.

"Speech time?" Miray asks.

Florence nods. She waits until they've gathered in a circle before she says, "This is our first real show. Everything we've done before this has been practice. Out there is a crowd of six thousand people. They're not here to see us. They're here to see Juno."

"Wow," says Izzy. "Inspiring stuff."

Florence ignores her. "They're not here to see us," she repeats. "Right now, they don't even know who we are. It's our job to make sure they do. When we get out there, we have thirty minutes to make them care about us. We don't have to make them *like* us—no one likes the opening band. For today, it's enough if we can get their attention. And maybe there will be ten, twenty people out there who have always been waiting for a band like ours. Who will look us up on social media and stream our music and maybe, by the time we put out an album, remember us and check it out. If we manage to get to those ten people, then tonight is a win. All right?"

"Let's do this," Toni says.

"Come on." Izzy spreads her arms, beckoning Florence closer.

Within seconds, they're huddled in a group hug in the middle of the dressing room, arms slung over one another's shoulders, heads bent together. Florence can smell the smoke on Izzy's clothes, hear Toni's even breathing, feel the faint tremor in Miray's frame. Luca is opposite her, eyes closed and head bowed, looking a little like someone during prayer. Having them all this close makes Florence's chest feel tight with gratitude and something else, too big and unwieldy to put into words.

"Let's go, Scorpios!" Amy calls from the door.

They go.



Florence was eight years old the first time she stood on a stage. Her music teacher had asked if she wanted to sing a solo at the Christmas school assembly, and Florence had spent all of December learning the words to "O Christmas Tree," driving her mum insane humming it at every meal and during each car ride to school.

She remembers the way it felt, walking up the three steps to the stage. Seeing the microphone stand, seemingly a world away. Feeling the heat of the spotlights pointed at her. Hearing the room fall to a hush as she drew a breath and stepped closer to the microphone. She couldn't make out any faces, but she knew that her mother was somewhere out there. Her father wasn't, but her mum said she'd film it for him, and Florence told herself that was good enough.

She remembers how her voice trembled for the first few notes before all those hours of furious practice kicked in and carried her through the song. She remembers the applause, thunderously loud to her ears, filling her with a feeling too large for her tiny chest to hold. She remembers thinking for the first time that she understood why her father was never home when he could feel like *this* every night.

She had sung a song, and the room had been silent. For three whole minutes, she had known that all eyes were on her, listening, admiring, paying attention.

She remembers knowing even then that it was a feeling she would spend the rest of her life chasing.



The in-ears muffle the noise of the crowd as they step out, but Florence can feel it all the same. It vibrates through the soles of her boots and lodges itself in her chest like a second heartbeat. The lights are so bright, she can't see a thing beyond the stage. She forces her feet to move, one step in front of the other, while the others fan out behind her.

She has been imagining this moment for years, but nothing could have prepared her for the reality of it. As she cups her hands around the mic stand, she thinks of "O Christmas Tree," of their first gig crowded together in a corner of Earl's pub, of her mum at home and her father an ocean away.

She reminds herself to breathe, to straighten her shoulders. *Presence is everything. Presence is everything.*

The moment stretches like spun sugar, fragile and dreamlike. It's a shock when she hears Luca through her in-ears: her soft *one-two-three*, and then the drum intro of "big teeth." Miray follows—Florence's anchor in every performance, her north star from school choir to the practice basement—then Toni and Izzy, dark and foreboding.

This is it, Florence thinks.

She closes her eyes, takes a breath, and sings.

13

Thirty minutes pass in a haze. There's the crowd cheering as they enter the stage. The tremor in Luca's hands as she picks up the drumsticks. Florence, prowling across the stage like she was born there, her voice crystal clear in Luca's in-ears. Toni and Izzy playing back-to-back, flashing silhouettes drenched in red light. Florence walking around to introduce each of them, the brush of her fingertips on Luca's bare arm. "*Give it up for our drummer, Luca Walsh!*" Miray smiling from ear to ear. Florence, again, dropping to her knees during "a ballad for bruised knees," and Luca finally understanding what she and Izzy were arguing about when Florence said the song was pornographic all those times they fought over the setlist.

Then it's over and they're stumbling offstage, sweaty and delirious. The moment they're out of sight of the audience, Florence releases a high, disbelieving laugh. "We did it!"

"We did!" Miray says, muffled against Florence's shoulder as she pulls her into a hug.

"That was fun," Toni says.

Izzy slings an arm around Luca's shoulders, grinning. "Good job, Rookie."

For once, Luca's smile comes easy. "Thanks."

Florence flings herself at Luca next. For the first time since Luca stumbled into band practice, there's nothing awkward about the interaction. Florence wraps both arms around Luca, and Luca does the same without thinking twice, feeling the warmth of Florence's breath on her neck as she laughs, almost too quiet for Luca to hear.

"You were brilliant," Luca tells her, squeezing her upper arms.

Florence tilts her head back. Her cheeks are still flushed. Her eyes are so bright. "So were you."

"Good job, guys!" Amy cuts in. "That was incredible! Come on—there's drinks and snacks in the dressing room, and then you can go to your seats to watch Juno's show."

They don’t have to be told twice.



Because Luca’s entire life is a fever dream now, Juno finds them after the show and invites them out to dinner with her and her band. An hour later, security escorts them into the back of a Parisian restaurant. It looks too expensive for them to ever set foot in on their own, all shiny marble floors and heavy silverware glinting in the candlelight. Luca ends up sitting between Miray and Florence, with Juno opposite them.

“So,” Juno says as they wait for their food, “how are you feeling after your first show?”

“Relieved,” Miray says.

“Tired,” Toni says.

“Like I want to do this every single night of my life,” says Florence.

Juno laughs. “It does have that effect, doesn’t it? You girls did an incredible job up there. Much better than I fared during my first performances.”

“That’s not true,” Florence says. She smiles as she leans forward, easily taking up space. “We’ve all seen the recordings.”

Juno was only nineteen when she won the talent competition that helped her land her first record deal. Her winning performance has several million views; Luca thinks half of them were probably from Florence.

After her performance, the jury raved for minutes about Juno’s *star power*—how her presence could fill any stage, how being in the same room as her felt like witnessing something monumental. Looking at Florence, Luca thinks she understands what they meant. She’s radiant in the flickering candlelight, all bright eyes and quick answers, her fingers curled loosely around a glass of wine. Luca wonders if she’s aware she’s holding the attention of everyone at their table, or if she’s used to the way every single person in her orbit seems drawn to her as she talks.

“—about you, Luca?”

Luca jumps back to attention to find Juno Wilde looking questioningly at her. “Sorry?” she says thinly.

“Have you acclimatized to being in a band?” Juno asks.

“Oh.” Luca darts a look at the others. “Yeah. Practicing for this tour has been really fun.”

“You only joined super recently right?” The question comes from Juno’s drummer. He’s twenty years older than every member of Scorpio Season. He’s probably been touring with bands since before Luca was born.

Her tongue feels heavy in her mouth, so all she does is nod. She’s suddenly overly aware of what her hands are doing. She hides them in her lap where no one can see them fidget.

“We were so lucky to find her,” Florence says. “The first time we played a song together, all five of us, it felt like everything just clicked into place.”

The arrival of their food saves Luca from having to contribute anything equally meaningful. While the others keep up a steady stream of conversation, Luca focuses on eating her pasta without getting sauce all over herself. Izzy is chatting—flirting?—with a guy from Juno’s string quartet while Toni and Juno discuss their favorite guitar brand. Miray and Florence rope Amy into a conversation about what she thinks will be the best tour stop. Luca lets it all wash over her without trying to hold on to anything.

When their plates have been cleared away and the others are poring over the dessert menu, Luca gets up and excuses herself to the bathroom. It’s hidden away in the basement of the restaurant, down a winding staircase and at the end of a dimly lit hallway. Luca exhales the moment the door clicks shut behind her.

Pulling out her phone to check her messages, she finds that added to the preshow good-luck messages from her parents and Jemma, which she has yet to respond to, is a slew of messages in the group chat with her brothers.

Henry:
DUDE

Henry:
I SAW CLIPS FROM YOUR SHOW

Henry:
THAT WAS SO COOL

Henry:
SINCE WHEN ARE YOU SO COOL???

Henry:
also you have so many followers now wtf

She quickly realizes the reason behind the flood of new followers is the picture Miray posted on their band account. It's a photo Amy took of them minutes after the show. Miray and Toni are sitting on the dressing room sofa with Izzy draped across their laps. Florence is perched on the back of the sofa, with Luca standing next to her. Seeing the photo, her body provides her with the sense memory of Florence's arm around her middle, her hand splayed over Luca's rib cage. In the photo, Luca is laughing, looking down at Florence with sweat-damp hair falling in her eyes.

"Luca?" She jumps when the door to the bathroom squeals open and Florence slips inside like she was summoned here by Luca's thoughts. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," Luca says instinctively, pocketing her phone.

"Are you sure?" Florence leans against the counter with the sinks. "You seemed quiet during dinner."

Luca blinks at her. She didn't think she was any quieter than usual. "Oh. Sorry."

Florence frowns at her. Where Luca still feels sweaty and disheveled from the show, Florence looks impeccable: Her white blouse is tucked into high-waisted black slacks, and her red wine–colored lipstick is perfectly

intact even after two dinner courses. “We can leave if it’s too much,” Florence tells her. “Today was a lot. If you’re feeling overwhelmed—”

“No,” Luca says immediately. “I really am fine. Sorry, I . . . I didn’t mean to make you worry.” And what a strange concept that is: Florence worrying about her. Florence paying enough attention to notice she was gone from the table too long and following after her. Luca doesn’t know what to make of any of it.

Florence is still studying her with an intensity that has Luca wanting to melt into the tiled bathroom wall. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable?”

Luca suppresses a frustrated noise. She’s not sure how to articulate the squirmy wrongness in the pit of her stomach, the way her skin doesn’t seem to fit quite right when she’s the center of attention at this particular table. “No. I just . . .” She gestures vaguely. “I’m not good at pretending to be something I’m not.”

It’s only because they’re standing so close that she notices the way Florence flinches.

Not the right thing to say, then.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she says quickly. “Sorry. I’m just not very good in groups.”

It’s not entirely true. She doesn’t usually get like this. The last time she felt this way was during a group discussion at uni. It was a similar thing, then: a sense of being in over her head, and knowing deep in her bones that everyone else could tell as well.

Florence is still studying her with a tiny furrow between her brows. “I disagree” is all she says. “Do you want to stay here a bit longer, then?”

“No,” Luca says. “Let’s go back.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods. Hiding away in the bathroom with Florence is the opposite of keeping her distance. She doesn’t need anyone speculating about why they were away from the table for so long.

Together, they make their way back to their seats. By the time they get there, dessert has arrived. Luca sits back down and watches as Florence works her way through her mousse au chocolat while regaling the table

with the story of how she convinced Toni to join her and Miray's band. With every person hanging on her words, she looks just as she did on stage: expressive, untouchable. Completely in her element.

14

“There,” Izzy says, tossing a paper bag into Florence’s lap. “Breakfast of champions.”

Florence opens the bag, sighing in delight when she sees it’s filled to the brim with pains au chocolat. Miray, sliding into the passenger’s seat, is carefully balancing a paper cup holder.

“A mocha for Izzy,” she says, handing a paper cup through the gap between the seats. “Oat matcha latte for Toni. Soy milk latte with two pumps of caramel and one pump of vanilla for Flo . . . and a cappuccino for Luca.”

Luca smiles gratefully as she accepts her drink from Miray. Her energy levels this early in the morning are mystifying to Florence. While she was still gathering the strength to open her eyes, Luca had already gone for a thirty-minute run around the block. Even now, she’s thrumming with energy, her fingers drumming on the outside of her cup as everyone gets settled inside the van.

Izzy knocks her own cup against Florence’s. “Pretentious.”

Florence wrinkles her nose at her. “You are literally drinking hot chocolate. I’m not taking any criticism from you.”

Izzy slurps her drink loudly in response.

Up front, Miray plugs the ancient aux cable into her phone. “Any music requests?” she asks.

“Hozier,” says Florence.

“Bauhaus,” says Izzy.

“Right,” says Miray. “I’ll just put on the radio, then.”

The radio comes to life with a faint crackle. Miray switches through the static until she finds a channel that works, only for Florence to recoil as her father’s voice blasts from the speakers. Wincing, Miray skips to another channel.

A moment later, they're rolling out into the street to the sound of an upbeat French pop song. Florence takes a fortifying sip of her drink before saying, "So. What did we do well last night?"

"Really, Florence?" Izzy protests, temple resting against the window. "Right now?"

In truth, Florence thinks she displayed a remarkable amount of self-restraint by refraining from asking until now. Usually, it's the first thing they talk about the moment they finish a performance, whether that's in the practice basement or in a pub. It's a habit she, Miray, and Toni picked up during their bachelor's degree. She can still hear her professor's voice in her head: *What did you do well?*

"I'll start," Toni says while she seamlessly merges into the traffic on the motorway leading away from Paris. "I think our energy was good throughout. And I liked my solo."

"Your solo was perfect," Florence agrees.

"I liked the way you introduced each of us," Miray says. "And our harmonies were really good."

"I agree," Florence says. "I felt like the audience was with us for most of it. And I think all the cardio paid off—I wasn't too out of breath even though I was moving around the stage a lot."

Izzy scrubs a hand over her eyes. "I liked the song order," she says after a moment. "It was the right choice to put 'ballad' toward the end. It felt like the climax of the set."

Florence suppresses the urge to grin triumphantly and settles instead on a gracious, "I think so too." She turns to Luca. "What about you?"

Luca's fingers are picking at the lid of her cup. "Um. I . . . I just had a lot of fun." She smiles, a touch too nervous for Florence's liking. It's the same way she'd react during practice whenever Florence asked for her input—every time, Luca briefly froze, like it was a trick question, some kind of test she had to pass. "I forgot about the audience for the most part. I feel like once we got into the flow, it all felt really natural."

"That's good," Florence says. She takes another sip, savoring the sweetness. "What can we improve?"

"I think we can move around the stage more," Toni says, looking at Izzy through the rearview mirror. "We have a huge amount of space. We should

make use of it."

"Yes," Florence agrees. "I sounded flat on the bridge of 'alexandria.'"

"Not the whole bridge," Toni says. "Just the last line."

"And I could probably interact with the audience more," Florence continues. "Miray, I still think you can sing louder on the harmonies. Your voice adds so much."

Miray ducks her head, ears pinking. "Sorry. I got nervous."

Florence reaches through the gap between the two front seats to scritch Miray's head. "That's all right. It was our first show. We'll get there."

"I think," Izzy says suddenly, "our outfits are shit."

At that, everyone in the van—except for Toni, who is a wonderfully responsible driver—turns to look at her.

"What do you mean?" Florence asks.

Izzy gestures impatiently with her drink. "There's no cohesion. We've got you in a suit. Toni looks like someone from the '70s jumped forward in time and accidentally landed on our stage. Miray looks like an art teacher and Luca like she just got back from the gym. And then there's me." She gestures down at herself: her black T-shirt showing off the tattoos on her arms, a leather jacket draped across her lap. "We just don't make any sense, visually."

Grudgingly, Florence concedes that she has a point. She had bigger problems to worry about last night, but now that she thinks back to the photo they posted, she has to admit that they clashed horribly.

"What do you propose we do?" she asks.

"Figure out what our aesthetic is supposed to be, for starters," Izzy says. "A band isn't just music, right? It's . . . everything. The logo. The stage visuals. The outfits. Scorpio Season isn't just the five of us fucking around on stage. It's a brand."

Toni frowns. "What *is* our brand?"

"Well," Izzy says. "We're called Scorpio Season. Mystical. Dark." She counts off on her fingers. "We've got the logo. We've got our sound. Then we've got Florence's unhinged lyrics about—I don't fucking know, the moon, cannibalism, whatever."

"They're quite feminist," Miray says.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

"Very lesbian," says Toni.

"Sensual," Luca says quietly.

Florence glances at her, taken off guard. "What?"

"They're really sensual," Luca repeats, a touch louder. She's looking down at her hands, which are still fiddling with the empty paper cup. "It was the first thing I noticed when I listened to your music. It's not just the lyrics—it's the way you sing them too. I don't know how to describe it."

And that—that does something strange to Florence's insides. "Sensual," she echoes. Her thoughts race as she thinks back to last night's show. The stage drowned in red lights. The dark, pulsing quality of their music. Her on her knees, singing about wanting to be consumed, a metaphor that somehow sounded more sexual up on the stage than it did in their practice basement. She doesn't know what to make of the fact that it was Luca, out of all of them, who'd paid enough attention to sum it up so perfectly in one soft-spoken word.

"You're right." She can feel her own face lighting up. "That's exactly what I was trying to do."

Luca's eyes flicker up to meet hers, wary, like she's scared Florence is making a joke at her expense. Whatever she sees on Florence's face makes her shoulders relax, her mouth curving into a smile that matches Florence's own.

"How do we make those things our brand?" Toni asks. There's a furrow between her brows as she taps her fingers against the steering wheel.

"I think we can start with colors," Izzy says. Unlike moments ago, she seems perfectly alert as she leans forward in her seat. "I'm thinking reds, blacks, whites. Red lipstick and dark eye makeup. Lace and silk and satin. Flowy skirts and lacy white shirts with a few buttons undone. Nothing that shows more skin than we're comfortable with, but still . . ."

“Sensual,” Florence finishes. Her heart rate picks up as she imagines it. She has always been a storyteller first—it’s ridiculous that, until now, she didn’t consider that their appearance on stage could be the scaffolding of the narrative they’re trying to tell. “I like it.”

They lapse into silence. Looking out the window, Florence goes through the things she packed and how she can combine pieces in a way that matches the new vision that’s appeared, sudden and clear, in her head.

They throw their empty cups away at the next rest stop. When they continue driving, Izzy puts on her headphones, and Luca is once again playing with her fidget cube. Florence watches her. It’s unexpectedly thrilling to see hands that she knows to be so competent occupied with something as silly as playing with a bunch of little buttons.

Luca notices her watching. Looking at Florence, she says, “Sorry. Am I being annoying?”

Everything she just thought feels like too much of an admission to say out loud, so Florence only shakes her head.

Luca is still for a few moments before she begins playing with it again. She really does have the most beautiful hands.

“Which one’s your favorite?” Florence asks.

Luca barely has to think before turning the cube to a side with a switch that makes a satisfying clicking noise. “This one.”

“Can I?”

“Sure.” Luca’s fingertips brush hers as she places the fidget cube in Florence’s palm.

She turns it this way and that, trying all the little buttons and textures. When she reaches the switch, she nods. “Oh, yeah,” she says. “This one for sure.”

From the corner of her eyes, she catches Luca’s face breaking into a smile.

Interview with Juno Wilde on the Morning Show with Tommy Brown, May 18, 2020

Tommy: I actually want to get a bit deeper into this. Your rise to fame was meteoric. You were only nineteen when you won that talent competition and

released your first album. You're twenty-eight now. Looking back, is there anything you wish could have been different?

Juno: Oh, God. A lot of things. I think—being in your early twenties is already such a confusing time. You're an adult on paper, but really you feel like a frightened child—at least that was my experience. There were so many things I was struggling with, especially after my daughter was born. My relationship, my role as a mother, my body after pregnancy. Fame exacerbated all those things.

Tommy: It must have been rough to have everyone's eyes on you while you're still trying to find yourself.

Juno: Exactly. Now when I see artists that age, I wish I could just bundle them up in a little blanket. [*Pause.*] I don't mean to make it all sound terrible. Being in your early twenties and being a musician can be incredibly exciting in a good way too.

Tommy: You have a lot more energy for touring, I imagine.

Juno: When you don't have a baby, probably, yes. [*Laughs.*]

Tommy: Is there anything in particular that you wish was different for younger artists starting out in this industry?

Juno: Oh, so many things. Especially for young women, it feels like every move you make is scrutinized and picked apart. I wish there was more tolerance for mistakes. Most of us don't come into this business because we want to be famous, but because we love the music. I wish people would see that the artists they love are just humans. You don't know us. You don't know what's happening behind the scenes. A bit more kindness, I think, is what I hope for.

Tommy: If you could say anything to those younger artists who might be listening, what piece of advice would you give them?

Juno: Focus on the music. I know the noise can get so loud, but remember that the music is what you're doing it for. You can't control how you are perceived. You can't control how people feel or what they say about you. But the music you can control. Find your people and make the best art you can. And please, for the love of God, stay off the internet.

15

It's incredible how quickly they fall into a routine. Like they did in Paris, they spend the morning in Brussels sleeping in. Luca gets up before everyone else and goes for a quick run. When she gets back, she showers while the others do their makeup and then they go out to find someplace cheap to have breakfast. The part of the city they're staying in is surprisingly quiet; there's a park near the hostel where they spend half an hour sitting in the shade of a tree. Miray dozes with her head in Toni's lap while Izzy talks to someone on the phone and Florence scribbles in the little notebook she carries everywhere with her. Luca alternates between watching the ducks in the little pond and trying to braid a crown out of daisies. When she's finished, she leans over to set it down on Florence's head. In turn, she receives a bewildered look that morphs into a tentative smile.

It's nice, sitting there in companionable silence. Luca thought they would get sick of each other after the first two nights, but aside from some light bickering over whose turn it is to use the bathroom or who has to share a bed, band life has been surprisingly harmonious so far.

At three p.m. they walk through the doors of tonight's venue. It's even bigger than the one in Paris; Amy tells them it holds eight thousand people.

Sound check, then some snacks from the vending machine, then back to the dressing room. It's smaller than the last one, with beat-up beanbag chairs and walls plastered with posters of bands who've played here over the years. They're getting ready to the sound of Florence's preshow playlist when Izzy says, "Luca. How do you feel about makeup?"

"In general, or on me?" she asks.

"On you."

"I've never really tried it." Her only experiences with makeup were makeovers during sleepovers. Since she grew up shopping in the same section as her brothers and never bothered with more styling than a little hair wax, it was always an event when her girl friends got to put lip gloss on

her. Luca didn't mind it; she liked the careful touches and the close attention and being told she was pretty.

So when Izzy asks, "Can I try something on you?" she nods without hesitation.

"C'mere," Izzy says.

Luca shuffles across the room and plops down on the beanbag closest to Izzy. Florence glances up from her phone as she passes her.

Sitting on the floor, Izzy considers the makeup scattered around. She's wearing eyeliner and a dark-red eye shadow under her eyes that makes them appear sunken-in. She looks like a really hot, sleep-deprived vampire.

"Is there anything you *don't* want?" Izzy asks.

Luca hesitates. "I don't really like how mascara looks on me." Her eyelashes are so light, you can barely see them; it always looks strange when they're pronounced.

Izzy nods, once, before getting up and unceremoniously straddling Luca's lap. "All right?" she asks.

Overwhelmed by the sudden proximity, Luca manages a winded, "Yeah."

Izzy gives her a considering look. "Start with the eyes, I think," she says, more to herself than to Luca, and picks up an eye shadow palette.

For the next few minutes, Luca shuts off her brain and simply lets herself be handled, closing her eyes when Izzy tells her to and obediently turning her face this way and that at the touch of her hands. It's as nice as she remembers. Izzy is a grounding weight in her lap, the touch of her calloused fingertips soft and businesslike. At some point, Luca becomes aware of Florence watching them. She hopes Izzy can't feel the way her face heats up as she quickly looks away.

"There," Izzy says eventually. "Done."

Luca blinks her eyes open and takes the little hand mirror that Izzy holds out for her. The first glance at her reflection makes her breath catch. She looks . . . *cool*. Really cool. Izzy used a dark eyeliner pencil on her waterline and some kind of glittery dark green stuff on her eyelids that goes nicely with her ginger hair. The overall impression makes her think of the male rock stars from the 2000s whose music videos she watched obsessively growing up.

“Luca!” Miray exclaims from where she’s sitting on the floor with her Nintendo. “You’re *so* handsome.”

Toni looks up from her phone to nod approvingly.

Florence is the last person Luca looks at. Her gaze is heavy in a way it wasn’t before, dark and unreadable as her eyes slowly rake over the planes of Luca’s face. Luca’s tongue darts out to wet her lips, and Florence abruptly looks away. “Good job, Iz.”

Luca tries not to feel disappointed. Because her brain hates her, it chooses this exact moment to replay the memory of Florence kneeling between her thighs, leaning over her to lick a hot stripe up her neck. *You’re so pretty.*

“Thanks, Izzy,” she says as she gets to her feet. Her legs feel unsteady. Water. She needs water.

“I took some photos of you two,” Miray says, holding up her screen. “Is it okay if I post them on the band account?”

Luca only gives them a fleeting glance before nodding her approval.

“Are you our new social media manager?” Izzy asks while Luca walks over to the console to grab a bottle.

“I guess.” Miray’s smile is obviously proud as she adds, “We hit twenty thousand followers last night.”

Izzy ruffles her hair. “Well done, you.”

The water is barely cool anymore and does nothing at all to get rid of the dryness in Luca’s mouth. They only have fifteen minutes left. She wishes suddenly that it were even less; standing there like a tool with the bottle clutched in both hands, she’s aware of every single step that separates her from where Florence is sitting. Florence, who’s wearing a wine-red corset over a white dress. Florence, who’s applying a dark shade of lipstick that only makes it harder not to stare at her mouth. Florence, who Luca will have to watch on stage for thirty whole minutes, dancing and laughing and sounding like some mystical creature meant to lure poor fools like Luca to their death.

Oh, God.

16

There's a strange magic that warps time when they're performing. The thirty minutes they spend onstage somehow feel like both a heartbeat and a lifetime. By the time they stumble backstage, Florence's blood is thrumming in her veins, her ears still buzzing with the cheers she heard when she took out her in-ears for only a few seconds. Her cheeks hurt from how long she's been smiling. She's breathless as she loops an arm around Miray's waist and stumbles after her to the dressing room. Over her shoulder, she catches a glimpse of Luca, hair shining like copper in the harsh light of the neon tubes, her makeup smudged under her eyes. Florence wants, with an intensity that punches the air from her lungs, to stop, hook her fingers into the belt loop of Luca's black trousers, and pull her into a storage closet. She wants to touch and hold and taste the salty skin at the base of Luca's neck. She wants—

She forces herself to look away.

She just sang to a sold-out arena of eight thousand people. How, after all that, can she still be so hungry?



The hostel room is too warm, and everyone's breathing is too loud. Lying in bed—the top bunk, this time—Florence feels like a live wire. The show is over, but her body is still humming, flooded with adrenaline that has no purpose now.

She lasts two hours before admitting defeat. The rungs of the ladder creak under her bare feet as she clambers down. After staring into the dark for so long, her eyes are so attuned to it that she can clearly make out the silhouettes of Izzy and Toni in the bunk below hers. They're lying in a complicated tangle of limbs, Izzy's forehead tucked into the crook of Toni's neck, her leg hiked over Toni's hip. Their blanket is a heap on the floor that Florence almost trips over as she tiptoes across the room.

Managing to find her way to her bag, she blindly fishes out an old jumper she stole from her mum months ago and pulls it on over her matching pajama set. Then she slides into her shoes, grabs her key card and earbuds from the sideboard, and slips into the hallway.

At just past two a.m., the hallway is deserted, but Florence can make out signs of life from behind the closed doors as she drifts by. The tinny sound of a TV here. Muffled laughter there. A group of teenagers talking in excited voices. The cheap hostel they're staying at is overrun by students on school trips.

The creaky lift delivers Florence to the lobby. The tired-looking receptionist looks up from his phone as she walks past him and into the small seating area, where the glow from the vending machine paints the beaten-up sofas a ghostly blue. There are only two other people here this late, and neither of them pays Florence any attention as she sinks down on the sofa closest to the vending machine.

She has a handful of unread text messages: her mother asking how the show was, a heads-up from her landlord about some construction work happening next week, one of her piano students asking about a song they practiced before Florence left for tour. No emails. No messages from her father, either.

Sinking farther into the sofa—it has a quicksand-like quality—she opens social media. The first post that shows up is the photo Miray took in the dressing room before the show. Because it's late and there's no one else around, Florence allows herself, finally, to *look*.

Luca looks like a fantasy come to life. She's wearing high-waisted black chinos and a black tank top. Her hair is mussed from running her hands through it so many times. In the photo, she's lying back on the beanbag chair, her eyes half-shut as Izzy's tattooed fingers grasp her chin, her head tilted back to reveal the vulnerable slope of her neck. Her posture is looser than it usually is—pinned under Izzy's weight, her usual nervous fidgeting slowed into uncharacteristic stillness.

Florence isn't sure which part of the tableau, exactly, affects her so much. Maybe it's the makeup. Maybe it's the sight of Luca's arms in the tank top. Maybe it's the ease with which Luca handed control to Izzy, as though she had just been waiting for someone to pin her down and take the reins.

It's a heady thought that's followed first by a hot curl of interest in Florence's stomach and then quickly by guilt. She's not supposed to think about Luca like this. It doesn't matter if Florence wishes she were the one straddling Luca's lap, the focus of her heavy-lidded stare. That door closed the moment Luca joined the band.

Perhaps it's some kind of self-destructive punishment that makes her leave the band account and type in her father's name. The top result under #jeffreyblake is a recording of him, aged twenty-three, performing at Glastonbury in 1991. Halfway through his third song, the skies open up. Despite the torrential downpour, Jeffrey Blake keeps singing, voice raw as he belts "Watercolor Eyes," the song that would hit number one in the British charts the following week. Even ankle-deep in mud, the crowd is ecstatic—when he holds the microphone toward the audience, they sing back every single word.

It's a lightning-in-a-bottle, once-in-a-lifetime moment. It's the footage that is probably going to roll when they announce his passing on BBC. It's the video Florence rewatched on VHS, over and over, sitting inches away from the TV in her mum's living room, mouthing along with the words. She knows every note change, every audience interaction, every little move he makes throughout the performance.

She has watched it a million times, dissected it frame by frame, and still she doesn't know how she's ever meant to come close.

A touch on her shoulder makes her flinch. Craning her head back, she finds Luca standing behind her.

"Sorry," Luca says sheepishly as Florence's hands fly up to take out her earbuds. "I said your name four times."

Florence swallows dryly. The racing of her heart has nothing to do with the shock and everything to do with the way Luca looks. She's sleep-rumpled, her hair sticking up in every direction, wearing sweatpants and a ratty T-shirt and . . .

"You wear glasses" is the first thing that makes it out of Florence's mouth.

Luca self-consciously nudges them farther up her nose. "Contacts, usually."

Florence nods dumbly. She feels like someone has struck her over the head, repeatedly.

When nothing else seems to be forthcoming, Luca gestures at the spot beside her. “Is it all right if I sit with you?”

“Sure. Yes,” Florence says. She sounds mortifyingly breathless. In her mind, she catalogs how she must look to Luca: barefaced, her hair pulled into two thick braids, wearing her mum’s old jumper and a pair of striped, baby-pink pajama pants.

The cracked leather of the sofa creaks as Luca settles down next to Florence, keeping a few careful inches of space between them. “I heard you leave,” Luca says.

“Sorry,” Florence says. “I tried to be quiet.”

“I know. I just wanted to check that you’re all right.”

It’s impossible to focus on words while looking directly at Luca, so Florence settles on staring at a poster on the opposite wall advertising a local museum. “I’m fine. Just . . . restless.”

“I know that feeling.” More creaking, as Luca pulls her feet onto the sofa and settles her cheek on one knee. “Tonight was a good show.”

“I thought so too.”

Luca’s attention snags on Florence’s phone. Her earbuds are still in her lap, crackling softly as the video keeps playing. “What were you watching?”

Reluctantly, Florence turns her phone so Luca can see. On the screen, her father—rain-drenched and charismatic and boyishly handsome, everything that Florence can never be—croons another angsty love song.

“Jeffrey Blake?” Luca asks. Her eyes dart back to Florence’s face. “I didn’t think this was the type of music you liked.”

Florence almost laughs. “It’s not.”

“Then why are you . . .”

“He’s my father.”

To her credit, Luca only stares at her open-mouthed for a few seconds before regaining control of her facial features. Her gaze darts between Florence and her father on the screen, the same age that she is now. Florence wonders what she’s seeing. She doesn’t think they look very

similar. She has his brows, maybe, dark and severe. The brown hair and large eyes.

"Is this a thing I was supposed to know?" Luca asks in the careful tone of someone tiptoeing across a minefield.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

"No," says Florence.

"Why not?"

"Because," she says, "I don't want my brand in this industry to be *Jeffrey Blake's daughter*."

Luca's gaze is surprisingly attentive for someone who just stumbled out of bed in the middle of the night. "Why would that be a bad thing? People . . . I thought people liked him."

"They do," Florence says. The bitterness in her voice is impossible to overhear.

She can see the moment something reroutes inside Luca's head. "You don't want it to seem like your success is because of him."

Florence turns her screen off. The quiet crackling of her earbuds dies. "He had nothing to do with any of this," she says. "Genuinely. I didn't even see much of the child support he paid. My mum stuck enough of it in a savings account to cover my education and donated the rest."

"She didn't give it to you?" Luca asks.

"No. It was . . . a pride thing, I guess. She wanted me to learn to get on without relying on his money. Learn how to budget, have a student job. Live like he didn't exist, basically." Florence shakes her head. "Anyway, the point is, his biggest contribution to my music career was gifting me a guitar for my thirteenth birthday, and even that was only because my mother told him I wanted one. Earl was the one who taught me."

"Your father didn't know you wanted one?" Luca asks.

“He left my mum when I was seven and was barely around even before that,” Florence says. “The last time we spoke was his annual birthday call in December. He doesn’t know a thing about me.”

Luca considers this for a moment before saying, “He sounds like a prick.”

Florence wants to laugh, but the lump in her throat feels as big as a walnut. Around it, she presses out a tired, “I hate him.”

It occurs to her only after she’s said it that she’s never spoken that particular sentence out loud. She’s afraid to look at Luca, but when she does, Luca is looking back at her, nothing on her face except quiet understanding.

They’re both silent for a moment. The person on the other side of the lobby has fallen asleep. The receptionist is chugging an energy drink in the pale glow of his phone screen.

“I still haven’t told my parents I dropped out of uni,” Luca says.

Florence turns to look at her. It takes her a second to understand what Luca is doing: reciprocating, balancing the delicate scales of self-disclosure that tipped in her favor. A truth for a truth.

“Why not?” Florence asks.

“I’m not really sure,” Luca says. “I . . . I do that a lot, I think. Avoid things. Decisions. I avoided dropping out too.” She laughs nervously. “I think I knew from the second week that it wasn’t going to work out, but it sounded nice in theory. Studying to become a teacher. It’s what most people in my family went on to do.”

Florence studies her. Somehow this Luca, ruffled and sleep-soft and so *touchable*, is even more of a gut punch than the Luca in the picture. “Why did you drop out?”

“I don’t think it’s for me. Becoming a teacher. It felt like the thing everyone expected of me, so I applied for the degree, but then it just felt wrong. I struggled so much in school, so the idea of being a teacher, of making other kids feel the way I did, with the pressure and the marks and everything . . . and I guess I could’ve tried to change the system from within, but I don’t think I would’ve enjoyed any part of it very much. So I dropped out.” Luca’s fingers twirl the leather bracelet around her wrist, a

familiar fidget. “It’s been almost two months now, and I still haven’t told my parents. Now feels a bit late.”

Florence’s mind races as she tries to piece together the rambling fragments of Luca’s explanation. “Do you think they would be angry?”

“No,” Luca says. Her tone sounds surprised, like she doesn’t know how Florence would ever get that idea. “I don’t think they would be. But maybe they’d be disappointed.”

“And that’s worse?” Florence asks.

“Yes.” The way Luca says it is soft and deeply sincere. “I don’t want them to be unhappy with me.”

Florence studies her. She thinks of Luca in their practice sessions, small and quiet in the background, anxious every time she was asked a question. She thinks of Luca in bed, so eager to please, melting at every bit of praise and caring more about Florence’s enjoyment than her own, and she thinks she understands.

“I’m sure they wouldn’t be,” Florence tells her. “You looked out for yourself. That’s more important, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Luca’s cheek is squished against her knee as she turns her head to look at Florence. “It doesn’t matter. Maybe this is better. If I hadn’t dropped out, I couldn’t have come on this tour.”

There are so many things Florence wants to say. But Luca didn’t press on the bruise that Florence revealed to her, and it feels wrong not to extend the same kindness to her now.

“I’m glad you’re here with us,” Florence says instead, hoping that Luca can tell how much she means it.

Behind her glasses, Luca’s eyes crinkle with a real smile, tired and warm and devastating. “Me too.”

JEFFREY BLAKE

Jeffrey Blake (born March 15, 1968) is an English singer and songwriter who rose to fame with the alternative rock band London Fog in the late ’80s. Consisting of Jeffrey Blake, Earl Creasy, Stephan Yorke, and Martin Dale, the band formed at King’s College and landed a record deal with Misfit Records. They released their first and only studio album *Handle with Care* in 1988. While the band never achieved mainstream success, they garnered a cult following in the UK music scene. Blake left the group in 1990, citing “creative differences.” His solo career picked up speed after

an appearance at Glastonbury Festival in 1991. He has released five studio albums, two extended plays (EPs) and one live concert recording. With his emotional lyricism, captivating stage presence, and raspy singing voice, Blake was named one of the Top 10 most influential rock artists of the twentieth century by *Major Note* magazine. His critically acclaimed debut album *Watercolor Eyes*, with its eponymous lead single, still holds the record for most first-week vinyl sales in the UK.

Personal life

Jeffrey Blake currently resides in Los Angeles, California. His most recent long-term relationship, with actress and model Coco White, lasted from 2008 to 2015. The couple met on the set of the talent competition Star Factory during Blake's time as a judge. In a 2003 interview with *Riot* magazine, Blake alluded to having a daughter, whose identity remains unknown.

17

Amsterdam is about three-thousand degrees. As Luca trudges after Toni and Miray through the stifling thrift shop, she can feel her dark T-shirt sticking to her back. It's only been fifteen minutes since they left the hostel, and she already misses the shower.

"How about this one?" Miray asks, holding up a skirt. It's a dark red, made of some kind of shimmery fabric.

"Looks nice," Luca says. She winces when she realizes that she said the same thing about the last five items Miray showed her. "I mean . . . I like the color. It matches the . . . thing that Izzy talked about."

"Our brand," Miray says, beaming at her. "I think so too." She turns to look at Toni. "Oh! Toni, you've *got* to try that on."

Luca cranes her head to see what Toni has pulled off the hanger. It's a long, light-brown coat. Something feathery lines the sleeves and collar. It makes Luca think of pictures of stars from the '70s.

"I'm going to melt if I put it on now," Toni says.

"Just for a few seconds," Miray says. "It's so *you*."

Toni considers it for a moment longer before holding out her tote bag to Luca. "Hold this?"

Luca obligingly slips it over her shoulder. She and Miray watch as Toni pulls on the coat and turns to face the full-body mirror crammed between the clothing racks.

"You look so cool!" Miray says. "Luca, doesn't she look so cool?"

Luca studies the way the coat hangs off Toni's frame. It matches the high-waisted bell bottoms she's wearing. It looks like it was made for her. "You look like a rock star," she says truthfully.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Toni's lips twitch.

"You should buy it," Miray says.

Toni makes a face. "It's forty euros."

“Still. You know what Flo always says.” Miray clears her throat. In a prim Oxford accent, she declares, “*Appearances are everything.* Imagine yourself in a paparazzi shot wearing this coat.”

“I don’t want to imagine myself in a paparazzi shot,” Toni argues, but her eyes keep lingering on her reflection. “There’s a tear in the sleeve.”

“Izzy can mend it for you. You know she’s good at that stuff.”

“Hm.” Toni takes another glance at the price tag. “If I can’t afford food by the end of the tour, I’m stealing yours.”

“Deal.” The grin Miray throws Luca is pleased and openly mischievous. It’s enough to make Luca feel strangely giddy—like she’s in on a joke, even when all she did was stand there.

“What about you?” Shrugging out of the coat, Toni turns to Luca. “Find anything?”

“Just this.” Luca holds up the shirt she picked up a few aisles ago. It’s white, with ruffles along the front and around the sleeves. “I’m not sure though. It feels a bit . . . dramatic.”

“Our band is dramatic,” Miray says. “Try it on!”

Hit with the full force of Miray’s dimples, Luca has no choice but to shuffle after her to the changing room. She can hear Miray and Toni chattering away outside the heavy velvet curtain while she fumbles with the buttons on the shirt. After a few moments, she steps outside, arms held awkwardly at her sides as she studies herself in the mirror. “I don’t know.”

“Wait,” Miray says, stepping closer. “I think it needs to be . . . Here, can I?” Her piano-playing fingers are much more nimble than Luca’s own as she undoes the top three buttons and tucks the front of the shirt into Luca’s trousers.

The effect is immediate. Instead of looking like an unhappy child in some Edwardian painting, Luca now has to think of the covers of the romance novels Miray reads in bed every night. With her freckled collarbones on display, she looks . . . rakish. Handsome. Like a very lesbian pirate captain.

“Nice,” Toni says, approving.

“Yeah?” Luca asks.

“Hold on.” Toni’s phone camera clicks as Luca runs a hand through her hair. Her own phone vibrates against her thigh a second later. Barely a

heartbeat later, another message lands in their group chat.

Izzy:
florence just gasped out loud lol

Izzy:
buy it

Luca can feel her ears turning pink in real time. Toni looks quietly satisfied. “Buy it,” she says.

Before Luca can protest, she’s already being nudged back into the changing room. While she struggles to free her arms from the ruffly sleeves, she asks, “What are Izzy and Florence up to?”

“I think they’re still at the café,” Miray answers. It’s where they left them two hours ago, when Florence said she wanted to catch up on emails and Izzy announced she didn’t need to spend any more time inside a thrift shop than she already does back home.

“Is it smart to leave them alone for so long?” Luca questions.

Miray laughs. “They haven’t clawed each other’s eyes out yet.”

Once she’s pulled her own shirt back over her head, Luca pushes aside the curtain and follows Miray and Toni to the front of the shop to pay. Toni is buying the coat, and Miray has picked out a black dress with poofy sleeves that would look ridiculous on anyone but her.

They’re stepping back into the street when Toni’s phone rings. “Sorry,” she says, looking down at it with a frown. “I have to take this.”

Miray threads an arm through Luca’s and tugs her along, Toni trailing a step behind them.

“Hey,” she says. “Is everything all right?” A pause. “How is—No. No, our next show is in two days. We have some time off in Amsterdam. I was going to call you later.”

Even though Luca is trying her best not to listen in, her ears can't help but prick up. Toni sounds less composed than usual. Her tone is wary, almost defensive.

"What does that even—Esther. Can we not do this right now?"

Next to Luca, Miray grimaces. *Awkward*, their brief eye contact says.

"I know that. But I—can you let me finish? I *told* you I was going to call you later. Right now is really not a good time."

They're standing at a red light now. In her periphery, Luca can see Toni run a hand through her hair. There's a tension in her jaw that Luca's only seen in the moments before a show.

"I don't get—did you call me just to fight? I was *going* to ask how you were before you—" She draws a deep breath in through her nose. "Esther. I will call you back later."

With that, she hangs up.

The light turns green. By the time Toni catches up with them, her face is wiped of whatever emotion had seeped into her voice.

"Everything all right?" Miray asks tentatively.

"Sure," Toni says, dropping her phone to the bottom of her tote bag. "Let's get back to the others."



Since they don't have a show the next day, they go out for the first time. They start the night at a vegan fast-food place, dip into a club, quickly realize that it's far too hot to dance, stumble into the red-light district, and end up inside a coffee shop. Toni hunts down a table in the back, right next to a jukebox and in view of the two pool tables. Florence and Miray claim the two chairs while Izzy, Toni and Luca squeeze onto the bench running along the wall.

They order drinks first—nonalcoholic—before Toni says, "So. Are we doing this properly?"

Luca doesn't have to ask to know what she means. Her eyes dart to the table next to theirs, where a group of German tourists are passing around a joint. The air is thick with the cloying, earthy smell of weed.

“There’s still two sleeps before our next performance,” Florence says.

Izzy grins, hands drumming on the edge of the table. “When in Amsterdam.” She elbows Toni. “Come on. You know the most about this stuff.”

Toni gets up and follows her to the front, where a guy in a patterned button-down talks her through his selection.

Luca turns back to Florence and Miray, a nervous flutter in her stomach. “Have you done this before?”

“Once,” Florence says, answering for both of them. “At a birthday party.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Miray tells Luca. “No pressure at all.”

“I’ve done it before,” Luca admits. “I didn’t feel much.”

Izzy and Toni come back a moment later. Izzy makes a show of revealing the two prerolled joints they bought. Their names are ridiculous and don’t mean a thing to Luca.

“Florence,” Izzy says. “Would the lady be so kind as to hand over the lighter she stole from me a fortnight ago?”

With an eye roll that looks more fond than annoyed, Florence rifles through her bag until she finds it. “Here.”

“Much appreciated,” Izzy says, handing it over to Toni.

After lighting the joint, Toni passes it back to Izzy. Luca drums her fingers on her thighs while she watches Izzy take a hit—slowly, slowly—and exhale. Smoke drapes over their table. Already, Luca feels a little lightheaded.

Miray is next. She coughs, giving a pink-cheeked thumbs-up when Izzy laughs and pats her head from across the table. “Good job, Tiny.”

Florence plucks the joint from Miray’s hand. Luca can’t tear her eyes away from her as she lifts it to her mouth and tilts her head back, exposing the long line of her neck. Her clavicle glistens with sweat, a few stray curls sticking to her skin where they’ve spilled out of her claw clip.

When she exhales, her eyes are dark and heavy-lidded. Her fingertips brush Luca’s as she hands her the joint. There are smudges of her lipstick on it—it’s the only thing Luca can focus on as she puts it to her own mouth and takes a drag.

All the while, she's aware of Florence watching her. "Slow," she murmurs. "That's it."

Luca's breath shudders out of her. Tearing her eyes away from Florence's suddenly feels like fighting against some great current. Hands shaking, she passes the joint to Toni, completing the first round.

Their drinks arrive while Toni takes a hit. Luca curls her fingers around her glass, feeling the cool condensation against her palms as she focuses on the slow in and out of her breath. After a while, she can feel the tension in her shoulders seep out of her.

"This is nice," Miray says after her second turn. Her smile is a little dopey. Luca laughs at the sight without really knowing why.

Her second hit is even easier than the first. When she's done, she takes a sip from her mocktail, licking sugar from the rim. Florence's eyes haven't left her once in the last five minutes. Luca tilts her head at her. Her smile feels soft and far too open, but she can't really find it in her to care.

"Does anyone want to play pool?" Izzy asks.

Luca nods, just so she has something to do with her hands. She takes her glass with her, balancing it precariously on the edge of the pool table.

"I'm not good at pool at all," Luca says.

"That's fine." Izzy twirls the cue in her hands, the rings on her fingers glittering in the red light from the neon tubes on the wall. "Do your best, Rookie."

Luca does. She really is terrible, but it doesn't matter. At some point, Florence drifts over to them. Her palm finds the small of Luca's back as the other hand holds the half-smoked joint to Luca's mouth in a silent offering. Luca parts her lips and obediently takes a hit. When she sways into Florence, she can feel her body like a long line of heat against her back.

"Are you letting Izzy win on purpose?" Florence asks in her ear. Her voice is low and slightly hoarse. Luca doesn't think she has ever heard a more attractive sound, which says a lot, considering she gets to hear Florence sing every other night.

"Ouch," Luca says, without any feeling.

When it's Luca's turn again, Florence passes the joint off to Izzy and puts her hands on Luca's hips to adjust her stance. Luca leans forward. The cue

strikes the ball with a satisfying *clack*.

"Florence Elizabeth Gibson," Izzy says, betrayed. Her accent is soaking every syllable of her speech by now. "That is foul play."

Laughing, Florence lets go of Luca's hips, leaving Luca feeling strangely bereft.

When the game is finished—Izzy wins, obviously—Luca retreats back to their table while Izzy goes outside to smoke a cigarette. Toni and Miray take over the pool table, leaving the bench free for Luca to drape herself across. She thinks she could fall asleep like this. Her head, for once, feels very quiet. It's like someone poured syrup into her brain, leaving her thoughts all slow and sticky.

"Are you all right?" Florence's voice sounds from somewhere above her.

Luca feels her mouth curving into an easy smile. "I'm great."

The bench creaks as Florence sits down next to her. One of her hands slides to the nape of Luca's neck, lifting her head until it rests in Florence's lap.

Sleepily, she blinks up at Florence. "Oh," she says dumbly. "Hey."

Florence smiles. "Hi."

"Are *you* all right?" Luca asks belatedly.

"I'm fantastic."

Florence's hand is so gentle as it slides into Luca's hair, fingernails scraping against her scalp. Luca thinks she might be melting. She can smell Florence—the lemon perfume, again, mixed with sunscreen and sweat.

Eyes fluttering closed, Luca mumbles, "You always smell so good."

Florence's body vibrates as she laughs, too quiet to hear over the music from the speakers. "Thanks."

"How many perfumes did you bring?" Luca asks, because apparently she's just asking every question that comes into her head now. She's too floaty to be alarmed by this development.

"Six," Florence answers. One of her rings catches on a strand of Luca's hair. The sting of it is nice—it reminds her of the way Florence pulled her hair when Luca went down on her. The memory makes arousal curl in her belly, but it's easy to push aside when she feels like this. Just this is good.

She could stay right here and let Florence play with her hair for the rest of her life, and it'd be enough.

"They're not full-sized bottles, though," Florence says. It takes Luca a moment to remember what they're talking about. "They're just the little testers you get sometimes. Too pricey, otherwise."

Luca hums, nuzzling further into Florence's touch. "How d'you decide which one to wear?"

"It just depends on my mood, I think." Florence's thumb brushes over Luca's temple. "Is there one you like most?"

"No," Luca says. "I like all of them."

Florence makes a quiet, amused noise. "You're sweet."

"Thanks," Luca tells her, and then: "I think I'm really high."

"Me too," Florence giggles.

Luca convinces her eyelids to open just enough to see Florence's face. Her lipstick is smudged, and her dark hair is frizzy from the heat and the humidity, curling at her temples. There's a mole like a beauty mark above the left corner of her mouth that Luca never noticed before. It's like the cross on a pirate's map, pointing at some kind of treasure.

"I think I can see your aura," Luca tells her.

"Really," says Florence.

"Mm-hm." Luca reaches up to touch Florence's cheek. "It's this really pretty blush pink. It's all around you."

Florence laughs, delighted. "Oh? What does the pink mean?"

Luca frowns. She's still pondering her answer when Toni's voice cuts through the silence. "Hey. Do you guys want any more drinks?"

Florence's fingers are still absently petting Luca's hair as she asks Toni to get them both some water. It's nice, Luca thinks. To not have to speak, or move, or do anything at all except breathe and look up at Florence. Upon further consideration, the aura might just be the red neon light haloing Florence's hair in the smoke-filled air. She looks so, so beautiful.

"Florence?" she says.

"Hm?"

"I really wish I kissed you that day."

For just a second, Florence's hand stills. "Yeah," she says softly. "Me too."

Luca nods. Even in this state, she knows it doesn't really matter. It's too late to do anything about it now.

It's still nice to hear it, though.

After a moment, Florence goes back to carding her fingers through Luca's hair. She closes her eyes, and drifts.



It's two a.m. by the time they make it back to the hostel after a meandering, giggly walk along the canals and a brief stop to eat their body weight in chips. When they stumble into their room, Luca changes haphazardly into a fresh pair of boxer shorts and an oversized T-shirt before tumbling into bed next to Izzy. The room is stiflingly hot. Luca dozes off with Izzy's hair tickling her cheek and the scent of lemons still clinging to her skin.

~~If I could go back~~
~~I'd meet you in the downpour~~
~~Stand there til our lips turn blue~~
~~Til I've drowned myself in you~~

18

The venue in Amsterdam feels like the seventh circle of hell. Standing under the bright stage lights, Florence is sure most of her makeup has melted off within the first song. Security has spent just as much time passing out water bottles to the audience, all of whom surely have it even worse.

They're in the middle of "swallow me." Dubbed *the cannibalism love song* by Izzy, it sits right at the intersection of sensual and disquieting—Florence's favorite place to play, as far as songwriting is concerned.

Her voice is at the lowest point of her range for this verse, a raspy growl. Prowling the edge of the stage, she sings, "*Would you let me? / Sink my teeth into your throat / crawl between your ribs / make myself at home inside you / it's the warmest place I know.*"

On the last word, she bends down to pick up the water bottle one of the security guards left on the stage for her. It sweats against her palm as she straightens again, taking a quick sip while Toni's guitar whines plaintively, layering over Izzy's heavy bass line. They both have their own bottles, as does Miray. Florence tries to make eye contact with Luca, but she's somewhere else entirely; for all that she is easily distracted during sound check or band practice, it's almost impossible to break her focus when they're on stage.

"*Don't care who does the biting*," Florence continues, voice sliding higher, breathier. "*Just so long as it ends / with me a part of you / with one of us consumed.*"

Luca's eyes finally meet hers as Florence rounds the drum riser. There's a confused little furrow between her brows as Florence comes up behind her, microphone in one hand and the bottle, uncapped, in the other.

"*Is it hunger or is it love?*" she sings as she leans down next to Luca. "*Oh, I never learned the difference.*" With the knuckles of her right hand, she urges Luca to tilt back her head. Luca blinks at her, eyes dark and

bottomless in the pulsing red light. "*But I am starving, baby.*" Holding her gaze, Florence lifts the bottle to Luca's mouth. "*Swallow me.*"

Luca's lips part, letting in the cool rush of water. Some of it spills, droplets rolling down her throat and soaking the front of the ridiculous pirate shirt that is going to ruin Florence's life. Florence has the dizzying, overheated thought that she wants to follow their trail with her mouth. She wants to rest her fingers on Luca's throat and feel the way it bobs as she swallows. Luca doesn't miss a beat through all of it, and somehow even *that*, the easy, thoughtless competence with which she keeps playing, does something to Florence. She wants . . .

She *wants*.

Of course, she doesn't do anything. When Luca has had her fill, she leaves the bottle at Luca's feet, ruffles her hair, and dances back to center stage to finish the song.

The audience is muffled by her in-ears; she doesn't know if she's imagining it or if the crowd sounds louder than it did before.



The lobby of their hostel in Amsterdam is nicer than the one in Brussels. Next to a bookshelf filled with battered paperbacks sits a handful of armchairs for Florence to sink into. At half past two, there's only a small scattering of night owls around having quiet phone calls or reading or waiting with their luggage for taxis to the airport. The air-conditioning whirs softly.

Tucking her knees to her chest, Florence opens her phone. She's greeted by a flurry of notifications from the post Miray uploaded earlier, but nothing more. Her email inbox yawns at her, entirely devoid of new messages. She hasn't told the others yet, but she's spent the last few months sending demo recordings of their songs to record labels. So far, there's been nothing but radio silence.

Trying to tamp down the welling disappointment, she pulls out her lyric book instead. It's small enough to fit into the pocket of her pajama pants, the leather binding battered from spending so much time at the bottom of various bags. A chewed-up pen marks the page where Florence left off.

Songwriting, Florence has learned, is a fickle thing. She can finish a song in twenty minutes or not write a word for weeks. Ever since the tour started, it's like her brain has forgotten how to string words together. The page she's on is filled with little doodles and fragmented lines filled with so much yearning that even Florence—a veritable yearning expert—flushes looking at them. The last addition was made after they stumbled back from the coffee shop and Florence waited for her turn in the bathroom. It's smudged beyond recognition, but she remembers it had something to do with the sight of Luca lying in her lap, caught in a rare moment of stillness with her hooded eyes fixed unwaveringly on Florence.

Florence jumps violently when someone clears their throat. It's jarring, having Luca standing in front of her after Florence was just thinking of her. She's back to wearing her glasses and an oversized T-shirt that reads, **The horrors persist, but we stay silly**. Below it, inexplicably, is a raccoon in a cowboy hat.

"Hey," she says, cheeks dimpling.

"Hey," says Florence. She closes her lyric book while Luca sinks into the armchair opposite hers. "Are you okay?"

"The room's too hot to sleep, and Izzy is like an oven," Luca says. She runs a hand through her hair. Florence feels her own fingers twitch, remembering its texture, soft and damp with sweat. "Did you want to be alone?"

"No," Florence says, a knee-jerk reaction. "This is good."

At that, Luca settles more thoroughly into the chair, long legs stretched out in front of her. Her fingers toy with the hem of her shirt as she looks around the lobby. Florence wonders if they're going to talk about what happened last night, though she isn't sure what there is to say. The fact that they both want to kiss each other is nothing new. Neither is the resigned certainty that neither of them is going to.

She's relieved when Luca says, "I watched your dad's performance."

Florence makes a face. "The Glastonbury one?"

"Yeah." Luca is silent for a moment. "I don't get it."

"His performance?"

"What everyone saw in him. He's just a guy standing in the rain singing a love song."

Florence would never admit it, but she has spent entire nights trying to figure out the same thing. She hasn't found an answer. "I don't know. I guess he struck a nerve."

"You're a better performer than him," Luca says.

"Luca," Florence says. "You don't have to lie."

"I'm not." Luca frowns. Her right foot is tapping a restless rhythm on the faux wooden floor. "When you step on stage, it's like a switch flips. If I were in the audience, it would be impossible to look away from you."

Florence sincerely does not know how to respond to that. "Luca," she says, helpless.

"I'm serious," Luca says, and she *is*—Florence can tell from the way she's speaking, quiet and determined. "You're so talented. And you don't need any rain or a huge stage to make people feel like they're seeing something special."

It's all too much—what Luca is saying and the fact that she *believes* it, her tone and that earnest look from behind her glasses, for once holding on to Florence's gaze without darting away. It unsettles Florence, sometimes, how freely Luca hands out truths. It's like she's never learned how to lie; her soft underbelly is always on display, right there for anyone to see. "Are you dehydrated?" Florence asks, because she thinks she might cry if she doesn't somehow turn this into a joke. "Did you get heatstroke on stage?"

"You made sure I didn't," Luca says. So sincerely, again, even in the face of Florence being anything but.

Florence has to look away. She wonders how it's possible for her to do all sorts of things in front of eight thousand people, but *this*—sitting in a hostel lobby with Luca in their pajamas while the clock ticks toward three a.m.—makes her heart feel like a skittish thing in her chest.

They spend a few moments in silence. Luca is turned toward the window, watching groups of people drift by on the pavement. Florence is turned toward her.

"Every morning," she hears herself say, "you take pills. What are they?"

Luca looks back at her, surprised. "Oh. They're Ritalin. For my ADHD."

Florence nods.

"Sorry," Luca says after a beat. "I thought that was obvious."

“Is that why you started playing drums?”

“Yeah. I got a drum kit when I was nine. I would shut myself in my room for hours and play until my arms felt like they were going to fall off. I’m pretty sure I drove everyone insane.”

The image of a nine-year-old Luca sitting in her room playing Nirvana songs on the drums makes Florence’s chest feel warm. “You were so much cooler than me at that age.”

“What were you doing at nine?” Luca asks.

“Singing in the children’s church choir.” Florence grins down at her hands. “I practiced my parts for hours every day. I took it very seriously.”

“Of course you did,” Luca says. When Florence looks up, Luca is studying her with *fondness*, of all things.

“Do you think we would’ve been friends? If we’d met at nine?”

“I think,” Luca says, lips twitching, “I would’ve been terrified of you.”

“What?” Florence asks, wounded. “Why?”

“Because you were you,” Luca says, “and I was a hyperactive kid banging cymbals for fun.”

Florence frowns. She *hates* that. She hates the self-effacing smile on Luca’s face and the way she says these things, like they’re universally acknowledged truths. “I wish you’d stop that,” she says.

Immediately, Luca’s smile crumbles. “Stop what?”

“The way you talk about yourself,” Florence says. “You just told me you’ve been playing since you were nine years old. You learned all our songs in the span of a weekend. Luca, you’re incredible at what you do.”

Luca flinches like she’s been struck. “Sorry.”

“Why are you *apologizing*?”

“I . . .” Luca closes her mouth. “I don’t know.”

Florence looks at her. At some point during the last five minutes, Luca has shrunk into herself. Now she’s sitting with her shoulders curled forward, her fingers picking anxiously at her nails. Florence reaches out without thinking, covering Luca’s hands with her own.

“Stop it,” she says softly.

She can actually see the *sorry* form on Luca's tongue before she swallows it down. Her hands drop limply into her lap.

"Let's make a deal," Florence says. "You admit that you are an incredible talent at drums and I . . ." She trails off.

"You admit that you're a better performer than your father," Luca says.

"Fine," Florence says. "Okay. You first."

Luca, looking very much like a kicked puppy, says, "I'm good at drums."

"You are *great* at drums."

"I am great at drums," Luca repeats. It's not very convincing. "Now you."

"I'm—oh, Christ. I don't think I can actually say that."

"Do it." Luca's chin rises a fraction. "Say *I'm a better performer than my father*."

"I'm not, though."

"You *are*."

"Luca—"

"We made a deal," Luca insists, because apparently the only time she feels like quarreling is when it comes to Florence's deep-seated and many-flavored daddy issues.

Florence heaves an aggravated sigh. "Fine," she says, and then, trying to ignore how much it feels like blasphemy, "I'm a better performer than my father."

There's a moment of silence. Luca is peering at her like she's waiting for a meltdown. Florence doesn't think she has the capacity for one—she feels tired and hollowed-out and a little too raw to stand being looked at like that.

"All right," she says, getting to her feet. "Bedtime."

Luca looks up at her for a moment. It seems like she wants to say something else, but then she just nods, silently taking the hand Florence offers her to help her stand.

By the time they're on the lift, the tension between them has dissipated. Florence knocks her elbow against Luca's as she says, "I really meant it, you know."

"Yeah," Luca says, gently knocking her elbow back. "So did I."

Transcript of a social media post by @officialscorpioseason, posted July 2, 2025, at 6:23 p.m.

Miray: Guys, I'm filming a video for social media! Do you want to say hi?

Luca: Hi, social media!

Florence: [*Laughs.*] Hello.

Miray: Do you want to tell them about our day?

Luca: Oh, er . . . Florence, do you want to—

Florence: Go ahead.

Luca: Right. Um. We're in Amsterdam! We're going on in . . .

Florence: About forty minutes.

Luca: About forty minutes. So we're just getting ready.

Florence: Show them your outfit, Luca.

Miray: [*Laughs.*] I thought I was doing the interview!

Luca: My outfit? Well, er . . . we've got black trousers.

Florence: Uh-huh.

Luca: Black loafers.

Florence: Very nice.

Luca: Some rings. This one's Florence's. And we've got the, um. Pirate shirt? It sort of gives pirate vibes, right?

Florence: Yeah. Or . . . maybe a prince? Very dashing.

Luca: *Dashing?*

Florence: Uh-huh. [*Laughs.*] Show them your makeup.

Luca: So you can see, Izzy's done my makeup. We went with some gold on my eyelids. Some green on the, er . . .

Florence: Waterline?

Luca: Yeah! [*Laughs.*] So . . . that's the fit!

Florence: That's the fit! [*Laughs.*] Good job.

Luca: Follow for more fashion content.

Florence: [*Laughs.*]

Miray: See you soon, Amsterdam!

Luca: See you soon!

19

Luca can barely keep her eyes open. They've been on the road to Berlin for thirty minutes now, and she has spent every one of them fighting sleep. Florence isn't any better off; she's almost fallen asleep twice now but startles awake every time her head droops. The third time it happens, Luca catches her chin in her palm.

Florence blinks drowsily at her. Her voice comes out slurred. "Sorry."

Quiet enough to be drowned out by the music on the radio, Luca tells her, "You can lean on my shoulder, if you want. So your neck doesn't hurt."

Florence yawns, eyelids already falling shut again. "Are you sure?"

Instead of responding, Luca guides Florence's head to rest against her shoulder. "Go to sleep," she whispers.

Florence does. Luca closes her eyes, listening to her soft breathing. She's wearing a different perfume today—it smells like oranges and wood and something else, warm and familiar. Luca dozes off before she can name what it is.



She jumps awake again when Miray lets out a yelp that almost has Toni swerving off the road.

"What!" Toni says. "What is it!"

"There's a video," Miray says. In the rearview mirror, her eyes find Luca, which can't be good.

Izzy leans forward, jostling Florence, who blinks her eyes open with a long-suffering expression. "Spit it out, Tiny."

Instead of responding, Miray reaches through the gap between the front seats to hand Luca her phone. Luca almost recoils when she sees herself on-

screen. So far, she's done everything in her power to avoid looking at recordings of their performances.

"Is this from 'swallow me'?" Izzy asks, craning her neck to see the screen.

It is. Luca's mouth goes dry as, in-video, Florence comes up behind her. She's wearing a black dress that cinches tight at the waist, rings glittering on each finger. Her hair is in a complicated half-up, half-down style that Luca watched Miray do before the show. Her voice sounds like velvet even through the phone speaker.

"Oh," Izzy realizes. "This was when you . . ."

Whoever took the video zooms in on the two of them just as Florence puts her knuckles under Luca's chin. Her head falls back easily at Florence's touch, exposing the pale line of her throat as Florence makes her drink. Through it all, their eye contact doesn't break once.

Luca is suddenly overly aware of every spot where Florence's arm is pressing against hers. Next to her, Florence has grown very still.

"Can anyone explain what's happening?" Toni demands.

"It's a video from last night. When Florence gave Luca some of her water," Izzy says distractedly, and then, "Jesus. This looks like soft-core porn."

Luca's laugh is too high, bordering on hysterical. The video ends with Florence ruffling her hair before skipping back to the front of the stage.

"Look at the view count," Miray says.

Luca looks at the view count, then promptly wishes she hadn't.

Florence sucks in a breath, suddenly looking wide awake. "One million? How . . ."

Luca is already scrolling through the comments.

Why was this so hot???? Who are they??? Are they dating??? Please tell me they're dating

ok but what is this song called???

ROCK STAR GIRLFRIENDS!!!!!

I saw Scorpio Season open for Juno Wilde in Brussels! They're so talented and VERY queer. They only have a few songs out, but they're so good!

WAKE UP BABE NEW SAPPHIC ROCK BAND JUST DROPPED

After a few seconds, Luca has to drop the phone into her lap. She's sure her face matches the color of her hair at this point. One million. One million people have seen her and Florence eye-fucking—an awful description, but there truly is no better way to say it—in the middle of one of their most unhinged songs.

Clearly, keeping her distance is going incredibly.

"Oh my God," Florence says. She sounds just as dazed as Luca feels. "We just hit sixty thousand followers. We had thirty thousand last night."

"People really seem to think you two are dating," Miray marvels.

Izzy cackles, delighted. "Oh, this is brilliant."

Luca can't look anyone in the eye, least of all Florence.

"We should use this," Toni says from the front seat. "I think we should release the 'big teeth' demo tonight."

"I'll post an announcement," Miray says immediately.

Luca hands her back her phone before pulling out her own. Her private social media account has more than a thousand follow requests. When she switches to the band account, she finds that their last post—an Amsterdam recap Miray threw together while they were riding back to the hostel—is flooded with comments.

The top comment is, **The third slide?????**

Luca knows what picture it's going to be even before she gets there. It's a photo Miray took of her and Florence at the coffee shop. It shows Luca with her head in Florence's lap, staring up at her while Florence plays with her hair. The expression on her own face isn't one that Luca has ever seen before: soft, unguarded, almost *awed* as Florence laughs at something she must've said.

"Luca?" Florence asks quietly. Her knee nudges Luca's.

"Yeah," she says, strained.

"Hey," Florence says. "It's all right. It's just strangers on the internet."

"I know." She swallows. "This is weird, right? I'm not the only one who finds this weird?"

"It's weird," Florence confirms. "But it's all right. Because it's only strangers, and they know nothing about us."

Luca can't tell if she's trying to reassure Luca or herself.

"There are worse rumors they could be spreading," Izzy says. "We could be Scientologists. Or Tory voters."

"All the best bands have gay allegations," Toni adds.

"Are they really allegations if every single one of us is gay?" Miray muses.

"You know what I mean," says Toni. "Not for *each other*."

Luca melts a little farther into her seat and presses her hands into her eyes until the darkness turns kaleidoscopic. Next to her, Florence chips away at her black nail polish.

The drive to Berlin feels endless. Neither of them falls asleep again.



The first thing Luca does upon arriving in Berlin is go for a run. She's gone for an hour, following the jagged line of the Spree through the city, and only makes her way back when her calendar app gives her a heads-up. The run helps burn through some of the restless energy that built up on the drive, but she still feels high-strung by the time she reaches the hostel.

She checks her phone to see Henry has texted her a link to the viral video, followed up with **keeping things professional is going well, then?**

Luca shoots back a half-hearted **fuck off**.

After dragging herself up to their room, she takes a shower that's hot enough to leave her skin pink and warm to the touch. The video keeps replaying in her mind. She does not look at her phone again.

When she leaves the bathroom, dressed in sweatpants and an old T-shirt, the others are crowded around Toni's laptop on the floor. Pizza boxes are scattered around the blanket nest they've built.

"Hey, Rookie," says Izzy, leaning back on her hands. "Sit down. We're about to release the song."

Tentatively, she nears the huddle of blankets on the floor. Miray scoots over to make room for her. Unfortunately, that leaves Luca sitting right next

to Florence. She looks up when Luca's knee bumps against hers, eyes widening as they drop down to Luca's shirt.

Luca winces when she follows her gaze. The red lettering across her chest reads, **Overworked and underfucked**. "I'm running out of shirts," she says.

Florence nods, ears pink, and turns her attention back to the laptop.

Squinting through her glasses, Luca can make out the interface of a streaming app where Toni is currently setting up their song release. Luca's heart does something strange when she sees her own name in the song credits. It's the first thing Scorpio Season is releasing that features her drumming.

"All right," Toni says. "I think we're good to go. I've already scheduled the video release, so it'll upload automatically."

Right. Luca almost forgot. A few days before leaving for tour, they'd filmed themselves playing the song in their practice basement. It's not the most aesthetic footage, but Izzy said it didn't matter; at least it's authentic.

"I've prepared the social media announcement." Miray holds up her phone. "We're almost at one hundred thousand followers now."

Luca stares at the number. That's almost forty thousand followers in one day, only because of a video of her and Florence fooling around on stage and a fan rumor that isn't really a rumor. She doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Okay." Toni angles her laptop so all of them can see. "'big teeth—demo,' releasing in three, two . . ."

On one, she hits *share*.

Miray follows suit with the announcement post, and just like that, their song is out in the wild. It's a surreal, disorienting feeling that only grows as the first comments come rolling in.

"To 'big teeth'!" Miray says, raising her water bottle.

"To lesbian werewolf songs," says Florence.

"To Flo and Luca's stage chemistry," Toni adds.

Izzy wolf-whistles, loud enough to make Luca's ears ring. Flushing, she looks over at Florence. The moment their eyes meet, the disbelieving laugh

she's been holding in since the car ride tears free from her throat, mixing a moment later with Florence's breathless chuckle.

They put on the video of their performance while Toni hands out lukewarm pizza and overpriced drinks from the vending machine in the lobby. For the first time since that morning, the tension melts out of Luca. Sitting in a circle on the hostel room floor, Florence's knee pressing against hers more intentionally now while the others chatter around them, makes her feel more grounded than even a run could.

She looks around: at Miray, with tomato sauce smudged on her nose; at Izzy and Toni, trading pizza toppings; at Florence, wearing her matching pajama set and a smile that is so utterly, quietly content that Luca stops breathing for a second.

Something warm and blinding settles in her chest as she takes it all in. She can't believe she has only known them for a month.

"Hey." Florence's voice is soft as she nudges Luca's thigh with her foot. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Luca says, and then falls silent because she doesn't know how to put what she's feeling into words.

She doesn't know what she expected a song release to be like. She doesn't know what she expected a *band* to be like. Whatever she imagined, she knows that this is better—just as she knows, with bone-deep certainty, that she never wants to lose it.

This band is the most important thing to me, Florence told her. Luca thinks she finally understands.

Florence Gibson
@scorpioflorence
#bigteeth, our furious little track about female rage and desire and sometimes just really wanting to bite someone, is out now for your listening pleasure 🖤
9:02 p.m. July 3, 2025
2.3K Likes 789 Shares

Izzy Dabrowska
@itzzzizzydab
BIG TEETH BIG TEETH BIG TEETH #bigteeth
9:04 p.m. July 3, 2025
214 Likes 79 Shares

Miray Tezel
@itsmemiray
#bigteeth (demo) is now on streaming!! we’re so proud of this one. i hope you love it too!! 
9:04 p.m. July 3, 2025
368 Likes 167 Shares

Luca Walsh
@lucawalsh19
My drumming is on this one! I love this song a lot :) #bigteeth
9:06 p.m. July 3, 2025
1.2K Likes 892 Shares

Antonia Paredes
@toniwiththetunes
stream big teeth
9:06 p.m. July 3, 2025
128 Likes 62 Shares

20

The Berlin show passes in a frantic, feverish blur. It's one of their biggest venues yet, an industrial-feeling metal-and-glass arena with a labyrinthine backstage area and toilet stalls covered in pride stickers and protest flyers. The crowd here seems louder than in all the other cities. The sound is like a shot of pure dopamine straight to Florence's veins, leaving her buzzing long after they leave the stage. She can't stop grinning as they get changed or as they are led to their seats in the venue to watch Juno. Her set is familiar by now; singing and dancing along to it with the rest of the band holds all the comfort of slipping into a well-worn sweater. Florence's favorite part is watching Luca, eyes shimmering traitorously amid an ocean of phone torches during the saddest songs.

When they get back to the hostel, Florence is too keyed up to even think about lying down. Walking up to Luca where she's crouched on the floor rifling through her overnight bag, she asks, "Are you tired yet?"

"No," Luca says immediately.

"I thought," Florence says, "maybe we could go out?"

"*Out* out?"

"No. Just . . . to go for a walk. You went running by the river yesterday, right?"

Luca is already pocketing her phone and room key. "Okay."

"You two are going out?" Miray asks, poking her head out of the top bunk.

"Yeah." Florence tilts her chin back to look at her. "Do you want to come with?"

Only when Miray shakes her head does she realize she hoped the answer would be no. The thought is disquieting, so she pushes it aside. "I'm just going to read for a bit, I think," Miray says. "You two have fun!"

"We'll try to be quiet when we get back," Florence promises.

Izzy and Toni are in the bathroom, brushing their teeth over the tiny sink. Amid all their bickering seeping through the half-open door, neither of them notices Florence and Luca slip out.

It's only a ten-minute walk from their hostel to the Spree, across a busy intersection and past graffitied remnants of the Berlin Wall. The river glitters in the moonlight. Even though it's past midnight, the air is warm against Florence's bare arms. She never wants this summer to end.

Luca is the first one to break the comfortable silence. "I can't believe we're in Berlin."

Florence looks at her. She can't help but smile. "Yeah."

"Did you ever leave the UK before this?"

"My mum took me to Rome once," Florence says. "You?"

Luca shakes her head. "No. I . . . since the tour started, there have been a few times where I woke up and had no idea where I was, just that I was someplace new." She pauses. "I love that feeling."

Florence's smile widens. "Me too. I love how different every venue we've played so far has been too. And the audience, of course." She looks at Luca. "I never asked. Do you have a favorite song of ours?"

Luca scratches at her neck. "Is it weird if I say 'swallow me'?"

Florence can't help it—she laughs. "I can't believe that's how we go viral. I wasn't even thinking when I did it."

"My brothers are never going to let me live it down," Luca says, but she looks like she's holding back a laugh of her own. There's something different about the way she says *my brothers*—amused, and quietly fond.

"I didn't know you had siblings," Florence says. She tries not to sound too eager. The truth is, she wants to know everything there is to know about Luca, like a dragon hoarding its gold. A selfish desire, maybe, considering how bad she is at giving away anything about herself in return.

Hands in her pockets, Luca shrugs. "It hasn't come up."

"How old are they?"

"Henry is two years older than me," Luca says, "and Mason four."

"You're the nestling," Florence says, inexplicably charmed.

"I guess." They've slowed to a stop. Luca folds her arms on top of the cast-iron balustrade. "You don't have any siblings, do you?"

“No. It’s just me and my mum.”

Luca ducks her head a little so she can peer at Florence’s face. “Are you two close?”

Florence looks down at the water. She isn’t sure how to describe the relationship she and her mother have. What comes out is, “When I brought home a bad mark, my mum would make me rewrite the entire paper at the dinner table and grade me on it. I was only allowed to get up when I scored above a B. She’s an English professor at Oxford, you see.”

Luca turns so she’s facing Florence. It’s strange—Florence is so used to seeing her in motion, it almost unsettles her when all Luca’s focus narrows down on only one thing. Her gaze is startlingly intense.

“Sorry.” Florence looks away. “I don’t know why I said that. That makes it sound like she’s a horrible person. She’s really not.”

“I didn’t think she was,” Luca says. “But . . . it sounds like she had high expectations.”

“She did. She does.”

“How does she feel about all this?” Luca asks. She makes a vague motion that Florence takes to mean her music career.

“I think she would rather I do anything else,” she says honestly. “And I think it hurts her to see me following in my father’s footsteps. I think some part of her is afraid I’m going to leave her as well.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

“Yeah.” Florence’s throat feels suddenly tight. “I can’t really blame her for any of it. At least she was there. Too involved, sometimes. Too overbearing. But there.”

“I really hate your dad,” Luca says. The moment the sentence is out, her hand flies to her mouth as though she can push it back in.

Florence laughs before she can apologize. “God. You don’t know how satisfying that is to hear from someone else.”

“Oh.” Slowly, Luca lowers her hand, face breaking into a sheepish smile. “Good.”

“What about your parents?” Florence asks. “What are they like?”

“They’re both teachers,” Luca offers. “My dad teaches art and PE, and my mum maths and English. My dad’s kind of like me. He’s brilliant at what he does, but kind of all over the place. I think, if people had known more about it back in the day, he probably would’ve gotten tested for ADHD as well when he was a kid.”

Florence can see it all play out like a film in her head: a loud, warm household filled with laughter and bickering and three ginger-haired children constantly getting underfoot. Shared meals at the kitchen table and football matches in the garden. Two tired parents at the kitchen table preparing lessons together while the children watched TV in the next room.

“And your mum?” she asks.

“She’s much more structured. I was lucky she caught on really early that I had attention problems—she had me tested when I was seven and did everything she could to help me get through school.” When Luca smiles, the gap between her front teeth is on full display. “She and I had this point system. Whenever I finished a task—my homework, cleaning my room, whatever—she would give me a little sticker. Once I’d collected a bunch of them, I could trade them in for rewards.”

“What were the rewards?” Florence asks.

“Silly things. Getting ice cream together. Going to the swimming pool. Getting to stay up past nine on a Saturday.” She laughs. “God. I wish I still had someone to give me stickers.”

“It must’ve been hard,” Florence says quietly. “Moving out and having to structure everything yourself.”

Luca shifts. She’s fidgeting with her bracelet again, short fingernails picking at the knot. “A bit. I just . . . I get so overwhelmed sometimes,” she says. “There’s—fuck, there’s laundry and household chores and then there were all these courses that all started at different times, and homework and exams and *group projects*.” She shudders.

“This is a bit like a group project,” Florence points out, grinning.

Luca makes a face. “At least we don’t get graded.”

“No,” Florence snorts. “Only picked apart by the entire internet.”

Luca laughs. Her forehead drops to her arms, still folded on the banister. Her T-shirt—**Everybody loves Italian girls!**—stretches across her shoulder blades. Her hair has grown since Florence first met her, curling a little at the nape of her neck. Florence has to fight the urge to run her hand through it or do something ridiculous like trace her finger along the ridge of Luca’s spine to see her shiver.

“Was it very difficult? Uni, I mean?” she asks.

“It was okay.” Luca props her chin on her arms. “More difficult than for other students, I think, but I was getting better at handling it. I probably could’ve done it, if I’d cared at all about anything I was learning.”

Florence studies her. “But you wouldn’t have been happy.”

“No,” Luca agrees. There’s a moment of silence. The river glitters in front of them. The sounds of traffic are quieter here. Luca’s eyes, tired and lovely in the distant light of a streetlamp, slide over to meet Florence’s as she says, “I love spending time with you after our shows.”

It’s so sweet—so unbearably earnest—that Florence’s heart twists painfully. “I do too.”

Luca’s eyes crinkle with a sleepy smile. They’re standing close enough for Florence to feel her body heat, just a little warmer than the summer evening. Florence wishes she didn’t know what it would feel like to run a hand along Luca’s back and feel her muscles shift, or to thread her fingers through Luca’s hair and hear the soft little noise she’d make in the back of her throat. Maybe then it would be easier to step away.

“We should probably go back,” she says, severing the moment before it can take hold. “Before Miray thinks we’ve fallen into the Spree.”



By the time they get back to their room, the others are already asleep. As Florence changes into her pajamas in the dark, trying to ignore the rustle of Luca’s clothing as she does the same somewhere behind her, her eyes fall on Toni and Miray in the bunk above hers. Toni hates cuddling, but that

hasn’t stopped Miray from tucking herself under her chin and pressing as close to her as humanly possible. The sight makes Florence smile, choked by a sudden surge of fondness.

Behind her there’s the creaking of bed springs as Luca climbs into her own bunk. They’ll be in Warsaw tomorrow. It’s going to be Florence’s turn to share the bed with someone. Probably it’s going to be Luca. There is no reason for it *not* to be Luca.

Florence doesn’t know whether the flutter in her stomach is anticipation or dread. She falls asleep trying not to think of the thousands of followers watching a video of her singing a homoerotically charged murder ballad to Luca in this very instant.

> Soph!!
>
> @sophieblush
>
> the bass line on big teeth is soo yummy i want to eat it #bigteeth #scorpioseason
>
> 12:35 a.m. July 4, 2025
>
> 67 Likes 27 Shares

> blue (is on vacation)
>
> @confirmedchaosgremlin
>
> me all day since yesterday: ’CAUSE WHAT ARE BIG TEETH FOR IF NOT TO BITE!! USED TO TRY AND HIDE THEM BUT THIS TIME I MIGHT!! HOWL UP AT THE MOON, SHOW MY FANGS TO THE NIGHT!! SUCH BIG TEETH, OH BABY, ARE YOU FRIGHTENED NOW!!!!!!!
>
> 5:32 p.m. July 4, 2025
>
> 239 Likes 78 Shares

> daisy allen
>
> @daisydiaries
>
> The urge to gatekeep scorpio season as my little hidden gem vs. the burning desire to tell every single person in the street to stream big teeth
>
> 4:03p.m. July 4, 2025
>
> 1.1K Likes 698 Shares

21

Because the universe has a strange sense of humor, the video of them does not die down overnight. When they wake up the next morning, their follower count has jumped to 130,000, and the "big teeth" demo has hit 50,000 streams; "swallow me," thanks to its role in the video that went viral, has become their most-listened-to song. Luca's phone is flooded with messages from people she met at uni and stupid edits of her and Florence that Henry keeps sending her, showing zoomed-in footage of her and Florence interacting on stage. She makes it through an hour of this before turning on flight mode and going back to playing with her fidget cube.

"Hey," Florence says, taking out the earbuds she'd put in after Toni turned off the radio to focus on Miray's directions. "Are you all right?"

"The internet is a hellscape," Luca says by way of explanation.

Florence makes a sympathetic noise and holds up one of her earbuds. "Want to listen to music with me?"

Luca does. She takes the earbud Florence offers her—they're the kind connected by wire, which, knowing Florence, must be an intentional aesthetic choice. The song that crackles out of it isn't one Luca knows; it's a soft, wistful ballad in French that makes her feel like she's in a movie as she watches the blur of the landscape outside. It's followed first by a classical piece, then by a low, sultry R and B song with a heavy bass, and finally a rap song with lyrics in Japanese. She realizes that Florence must be shuffling through her playlist. It's such an eclectic mix of genres and languages that it's impossible to guess what song will be next; the only common denominator is Florence, who lets the music wash over her while she scribbles in her lyric book, knees tucked to her chest.

"Tell me if you want me to skip anything," Florence tells her at one point.

Luca shakes her head. She feels like she has entered a museum filled with every single one of Florence's favorite paintings. She wants to take her time studying them, to find out why Florence picked them, what she sees in them, how they all fit together.

It’s still a few hours to Warsaw. Suddenly, Luca doesn’t mind the drive at all.



It’s pure chance that they stumble upon the tattoo parlor. It’s in an unremarkable building, tucked away in a side alley a few minutes from their hostel. Luca slows down, sees that it’s still open, and says, without thinking about it, “We should get a band tattoo.”

Next to her, Izzy gasps out loud and grinds to a stop.

“Izzy,” says Florence.

“Come on.” Izzy pushes her sunglasses to the top of her head, her eyes bright. “Toni?”

Toni looks down at her arms, where she has a bunch of tattoos already. “I’d be down.”

Izzy points at her. “Nice. Florence?”

“What would we even get?” Florence asks, peering through the window of the tattoo parlor.

“A scorpion, of course,” Izzy says. “Here, we could do the one that Tiny drew.” Pulling out her phone, she zooms in on the little scorpion in their band logo.

Miray’s eyes widen in alarm. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Sure,” Izzy says easily, which is anything but reassuring.

Luca realizes this might have been a very bad idea, but now that it’s out, she can’t very well take it back. At this point, it shouldn’t be so shocking to her that her actions do, in fact, have consequences. If they didn’t, she would be sitting in a lecture hall at London Metropolitan instead of standing here right now.

Florence considers the scorpion for a moment before nodding. “I’m in.”

“But,” Miray says, “what if we break up? What if something happens and we all end up hating each other?”

“Mate, what the hell,” Izzy says. “Don’t say that.”

“Sorry.” Miray winces and looks to Florence.

“Even if we do,” Florence says, wrapping an arm around her, “I would still look fondly at a souvenir from the best summer of my life.”

“Oh, God,” says Miray, blinking very fast. “Fine. I’ll get one too.”

Izzy looks like she could burst with joy. Rocking back and forth on her heels, she tilts her head expectantly at Luca. “Ready to do this, Rookie?”

“Does it have to be big?” Luca asks tentatively.

“It doesn’t have to be anything,” Toni says.

Florence nods in agreement. “You get to pick the size and where you want it to go. It doesn’t even have to be visible all the time.”

Luca leans closer to Izzy so she can study their logo. She really does like the scorpion. And Florence is right; this *is* the best summer of her life. She has a feeling that this entire tour will feel like a vivid dream the moment it’s over. It’ll be nice to have something to remind her that it was real.

“All right.” She squares her shoulders. “Yeah.”

Izzy’s grin is all teeth as she pockets her phone and gives Luca’s neck a little shake.

The tattoo parlor accepts walk-ins and is half deserted. Luca watches as Izzy chats up one of the tattoo artists, her body language loose and her eye contact intense. By the end of it, the artist is visibly flustered, and Izzy gestures for them to come inside.

“We get a group discount,” she tells them. “Thirty euros each. Should be fine if we don’t eat out for a few days, right?”

“More instant noodles it is,” Miray agrees solemnly.

Squinting at Izzy, Florence asks, “How’d you do that?”

“Raw sex appeal, I reckon.” Izzy nudges her sunglasses farther up her nose. “Are we doing this or what?”

A few minutes and a brief consultation later, Florence slides onto a chair and rests her arm on the armrest. The tattoo artist, Maja—a twentysomething woman with an undercut and a full sleeve of her own—chats to her about the band while she puts down the stencil. Florence is getting her tattoo done on the inside of her arm, right beneath the crook of her elbow.

“Ready?” Maja asks.

“Yes,” Florence says.

Luca carefully watches her face for any discomfort as the tattoo gun is lowered to her skin, but aside from a breathy laugh, she doesn't seem overly affected. She keeps up a steady stream of conversation with Maja—telling her about how the group came together, how the tour has been so far, where they're playing tomorrow—and only takes a quick break halfway to drink a sip of Sprite.

Twenty minutes later, she gets out of the chair with a scorpion on her arm and a new fan promising to catch one of their shows if they ever come back to Poland.

"All right," Maja says. "Who's next?"

After a brief round of rock-paper-scissors with Izzy, Toni is the second one to go. She gets the tattoo done on her sternum, which is how Luca learns she has nipple piercings.

When Izzy notices her flush, she laughs. "Have you never looked while we were changing before bed?"

"No," Luca says, sliding deeper into the sofa. She doesn't tell her that she has made it her personal mission to notice as little about the others as possible. It's bad enough that she could tell them from memory how many tattoos Florence has (six) and where (two on her left arm, one on her right, left shin, lower back, and right above her hip bone).

Miray goes after Toni because she wants to get it over with. She chooses a spot at the back of her neck, where she can hide it under her hair when she visits her grandparents.

"Does it hurt a lot?" Luca asks her.

Cheek smushed against the leather of the tattoo chair, Miray says, "It's fine, actually. It just sort of scratches."

Luca isn't particularly reassured. There's *blood*.

"Are you scared?" Florence asks. The sofa is way too small for the four of them; with the way they're sitting, her thigh is pressed entirely against Luca's.

"A little," Luca admits.

"You really don't have to do this if you don't want to," Florence reminds her.

Of course, this only makes Luca want it more.

Miray gets up a moment later, practically glowing with pride. Izzy drops a kiss to the top of her head—"So brave, Tiny."—before swaggering over to the chair to take her place. There's not much space left on her arms for another tattoo. In the end, she decides on a spot on her ribcage.

"This one might be a bit more painful," Maja warns as she wipes Izzy's side down with antiseptic.

"Bring it on," Izzy says. She doesn't twitch as the tattoo gun meets her skin, but Luca notices the catch in her breath. Her grin widens as she settles into the sensation, eyes fluttering shut. She says something else to Maja in Polish, sleepy and low in her throat. The next few minutes are filled with soft chatter in a foreign language.

It's fully dark outside by now. Luca mentally works herself up for her turn while Toni flips through a catalog of flash designs and Miray takes photos of each of their tattoos to share on social media later.

She doesn't notice her knee is jiggling until Florence's hand settles on top of it. "Where are you going to get it?" she asks.

It's the kind of decision-making that Luca hates. She already has trouble choosing which flavor of protein bar to buy. A choice like this one, consequential and *permanent*, feels overwhelming enough to make her heart speed up.

"I don't know yet," Luca says. She looks helplessly at Florence. "What do you think?"

In her mind, it makes sense to ask her. Florence always knows what she wants. If Luca has spent the last year sitting in the passenger seat of her own life, Florence has been white-knuckling the steering wheel and driving ten miles over the speed limit.

Florence considers her for a moment, eyes trailing up and down her arms. Her rings are cool against Luca's skin as she brushes her knuckles against Luca's bicep. "Here, maybe? That spot shouldn't be too painful."

Luca nods, relieved. A part of her wishes she had someone to tell her what to do all the time. Probably best not to say that out loud.

Once Izzy is finished, it's Luca's turn. Sensing her nerves, Florence trails after her to the chair and gives her input when it comes to the stencil. They redo it twice before everyone is happy with the placement. Luca expects

Florence to go back to the sofa after that, but she stays within reach, lingering at Luca's side while Maja prepares the tattoo gun.

"This is your first tattoo?" Maja asks Luca.

"Yeah."

"Should not be too bad. Tell me when you want a break."

Heart fluttering in her chest, Luca nods. Then Maja is leaning forward, gloved hands taking careful hold of her arm, and the needle meets her skin.

"Relax," Florence whispers next to her. She brushes the hair off Luca's forehead. "It's worst at the start. Your body gets used to it."

Luca rests her head against the back of the chair. It's not as bad as she expected. It really does feel like a scratching sensation, insistent but not wholly unpleasant. The worst part is having to hold herself still.

"Okay?" Maja asks after a few minutes. When Luca glances down, the tail of the scorpion is almost finished. The stark black against the pasty white of her skin makes her stomach swoop.

"Yeah," she manages.

Florence pets her hair. "You're doing so well."

Luca is glad that Maja is taking a short break to wipe off the blood and excess ink; otherwise, the full-body shiver that goes through her would've become a permanent mark. "*Florence*," she says, helpless.

"Sorry." Florence's laugh is a bright, flustered noise right next to her ear. "Forgot about that."

Luca melts as far back into the chair as humanly possible and tries to ignore the way the scratch of the tattoo gun feels a bit too nice all of a sudden.

Florence doesn't move from Luca's side all throughout the process. When Luca feels her blood sugar start to drop, Florence feeds her little sips of Sprite until her hands are warm again. When Luca has trouble sitting still, Florence lets her toy with the rings on her fingers, spinning them in circles around her thumb.

And then it's over, and Luca gets up from the tattoo chair with a scorpion the size of her palm on her bicep. Studying herself in the mirror, she can't hold back a grin. "It looks really fucking cool."

Florence steps up next to her, matching tattoo on display. “This was a really good idea.”

Turning around, Luca finds the others huddled in a half-circle around them.

“Scorpio Season forever,” Miray says, beaming.

Luca brushes her fingers over the wrapping covering her tattoo. “Scorpio Season forever.”



“So,” Luca says, awkwardly shifting on her feet. “Wall or no wall?”

Florence is standing next to her. She’s wearing pajama pants and a white T-shirt; the hostel room is too hot for her matching set. “Um.” She brushes her hair behind her ears. “No wall?”

It takes an embarrassing amount of courage for Luca to pull back the blanket. The bed springs creak as she crawls onto the bed and shuffles over to the side touching the wall. Once she’s settled, she holds the blanket up for Florence to get under. Except, Florence isn’t moving.

“Are you two going to go to sleep sometime today maybe?” Toni asks from the other side of the room.

Florence gets onto the bed with the expression of someone stepping up to the gallows, which would be insulting if Luca couldn’t sympathize. The scent of her—perfume and sunscreen and the skincare products she uses before bed—is overwhelming as she slides in next to Luca. Luca reaches up and turns off the light.

Immediately, the proximity is too much. In the dark, she can feel every point where her body touches Florence’s—which, somehow, seems to be *every single one*. She swears the bunk beds in every other hostel were wider than this one. Next to her, Florence’s breathing sounds unnaturally shallow.

“I,” she begins. Her throat clicks as she swallows. “I can only sleep on my side.”

Luca scrunches her eyes closed. Of course, Florence Elizabeth Gibson is particular about her sleeping position. “Okay,” she croaks.

More creaking as Florence turns over on her side, back facing Luca. The new position opens up a precious few inches of space between them. Except . . .

"Florence," she whispers. "Are you falling off the bed?"

A small, strangled sound. "No?"

Luca drags a hand over her face. This is ridiculous. Everything about this is ridiculous.

Yet more creaking as she turns onto her right side. It really is a very loud bed. From above her, Izzy asks, "What are you two *doing*?"

"Nothing," Florence snaps. "Go to sleep already."

Luca has to bite her fist to stop herself from devolving into nervous laughter. "Florence," she whispers. "Come back. You're going to fall and crack your skull."

"I will have you know that my skull is very sturdy," Florence returns petulantly.

They're not going to get anywhere like this. Luca waits a few more seconds. When Florence doesn't move, she sighs quietly, reaches across the bed, and hooks an arm around Florence's waist to pull her back from the edge, her palm flat against Florence's stomach.

Florence makes a soft, shocked noise in the back of her throat but lets herself be moved so she's once again fully on the mattress—and fully pressed against Luca.

"All right?" Luca whispers.

A tiny pause. Then, strangled: "Uh-huh."

Luca draws in a shaky breath. Okay. This is . . . okay. She's calm. She has shared a bed with a woman before. Not with this particular woman, but —she's calm, is the point.

"Do you think you can sleep like this?" Florence asks. Her voice still sounds strange.

"Yeah," Luca manages, which might be a lie. "You?"

"I think so."

"Thank God," Toni mutters. "Good night."

"Night," Miray echoes sleepily. "Love you, guys."

“Love you too,” says Izzy, half-muffled by her pillow.

The room falls silent. Luca tries to breathe like a normal person. Florence’s hair is tickling her face. Between the blanket and Florence’s body heat, she feels unbearably warm within minutes. She would rather die than move, though—not when Florence’s breathing is evening out, some of the tension finally seeping out of her.

Luca closes her eyes and lets her forehead rest against the top of Florence’s spine. Florence’s words from earlier echo in her head again: *It’s the worst at the start. Your body gets used to it.*

It’s a long while before she finally drifts off.

~~I’m not good at being gentle~~
~~But I’ll try for you~~
~~I’ll get rid of my claws~~
~~And dull all my teeth~~
~~I’ll make sure that when you touch me~~
~~You won’t cut yourself on me~~

22

Luca's hair looks like molten copper in the sunlight. It's late in the morning, or maybe early afternoon. When Florence enters her room, Luca is lying on the bed, her hands resting, palms-up, next to her head. Her shirt has ridden up to expose a sliver of her soft tummy and the faint smattering of golden hair disappearing beneath the waistband of her jeans.

Her eyes track Florence as she walks toward the bed.

"Hey," Florence says, crawling onto the mattress. Her dress inches up as she straddles Luca's thighs. "Were you waiting for me?"

Luca nods. The smile she gives Florence is warm and languid. Florence wants to bite it. "Yeah."

"You look so pretty," Florence tells her. Sliding a hand to the back of Luca's neck makes Luca's eyelids flutter shut. It's so easy to lean down, her hair falling like a curtain around them, and press her lips to Luca's. She tastes like tangerines, or maybe peaches, something summer-ripe and sweet. "What do you want?" Florence asks when she leans back.

Already, Luca's eyes are glazed. Her hands are resting on Florence's thighs, just shy of dipping under her dress. "Anything," she says.

"Anything?" Florence echoes. She runs her thumb along Luca's temple, sweeping the hair from her forehead. "Are you going to let me take care of you, sweet thing?"

Luca's hazel eyes shine like gold in the spill of sunlight she's lying in. "Yeah," she breathes.

Florence leans down again. As she kisses her, there's a nagging voice in her head that says she's not supposed to be doing this. But that's ridiculous. Luca is right here, flushed and wanting, and Florence can't fathom a reason why she shouldn't give her everything she needs.

Anything anything anything.

Slowly, she kisses her way down Luca's neck. Luca tilts her head to give her better access, her breathing shaky in Florence's ear.

Right, Florence remembers fondly. *Quiet.*

As she nips Luca's collarbone with her teeth, the voice returns, insistent enough to make her pause. She's not supposed to be doing this. People aren't supposed to know. She knows she can't leave any bruises, can't mark her up. She just can't remember why.

"Florence?" Luca asks softly.

Shaking herself, Florence looks down at her again. God, but she's beautiful. It feels too good to be true. Nothing Florence craves is ever so easily won.

"Am I allowed to want this?" she asks.

Luca looks at her, face turned into the palm of Florence's hand. "Of course not," she says gently. "But when has that ever stopped you?"



Florence crashes back into her body with a gasp. It takes her a moment to remember where she is. The hostel room looks like every other room they've spent the past two weeks in, shabby and anonymous. It's stiflingly hot even with the hum of the AC. Her hair is plastered to her neck. The confused knot of shame and longing in the pit of her stomach only coils tighter when she remembers who she's in bed with.

Luca is still asleep, her chest rising and falling evenly against Florence's back. Florence bites her tongue to hold back a helpless whimper when she realizes that, somehow, Luca's leg has ended up slotted between hers. Her arm is flung across Florence's waist, like she was afraid Florence was going to fall off the bed in the middle of the night.

The position does nothing at all to alleviate the overly warm feeling. Florence can't remember the last time someone held her like this. Her only long-term relationship fell apart when she was eighteen and moved to London. She's had plenty of sex since then, but she doesn't make a habit of staying over at anyone else's place—somehow, the sharing of a bed feels more intimate than the main event.

This, though . . . it's nice. There's a part of her that wants to melt into the mattress and stay tucked against Luca until their alarm goes off.

But that means risking being seen like this by the others. The idea fills Florence with a vague sense of dread.

She allows herself another minute to soak in the feeling of Luca's body, fitted against hers like they're pieces of a puzzle. Her plan is to detach herself as stealthily as possible—except, when she tries to squirm out from beneath Luca's arm, Luca makes a sleepy noise of displeasure and pulls her back against her chest.

Florence scrunches her eyes shut. Luca's leg between her thighs is giving her body all kinds of unhelpful ideas. The vestiges of her dream still cling to her like perfume after a long day, and she hasn't been able to touch herself in almost two weeks, and if the circumstances were any different, she would roll over right now and do something about the heat simmering beneath her skin.

But they made a promise. The scorpion on her arm itches like a warning.

Gritting her teeth, Florence makes another attempt at extracting herself. Luca is still stubbornly clinging to her, but after a few minutes, Florence manages to writhe out from underneath her arm and sit up. Her heart skips a beat when she turns her head and looks at Luca. Her hair is sticking up in every direction, and there's a small furrow between her brows, as though she's experiencing the same sense of loss as Florence. She looks soft and small and so touchable, Florence has to dig her nails into her palms to keep from reaching out.

In the bunk above theirs, Izzy makes a quiet, sleepy noise as she turns onto her side. Sunlight is filtering in along the edges of the blackout curtains. It's only a matter of time until the first alarm goes off.

Florence gives herself another few seconds to stew in her self-pity. At last, she flings her legs over the edge of the bed and slinks, near-soundless, into the bathroom. Turning on the light, she finds her own reflection staring back at her in the mirror, hair a sweat-matted tangle and cheeks fire-engine red.

She splashes her face with cold water before bracing herself on the sink and whispering, "*Fuck*."

Up until now, her attraction to Luca has felt more like an inconvenience than anything else. But between the dream and her reaction to waking up next to her, the situation is worse than she feared. Somehow, and without

noticing it, she has hurtled down the slippery slope from physical attraction straight into unbridled yearning.

"Get it together," she whispers to her reflection. In ten days, they'll be back in London. After that, she'll have a week to get over whatever this is before they finish the tour in the UK. She can make it that long. She *has* to make it that long.



After a quick breakfast at a quaint little café down the street—although their definition of *breakfast* varies, with Izzy (coffee and a chocolate bar) on one end of the spectrum and Toni (a green tea and a balanced smoothie bowl with plenty of protein) on the other—they spend the remaining hours until the show doing chores. Life on the road isn't as glamorous as Florence once pictured it; four hours before they're expected at the venue, they're in a laundromat, waiting for the dryer cycle to finish. It took them ten minutes to figure out how to work the washing machine.

(Toni: "I thought you grew up here 'til you were ten."

Izzy: "Yeah, well, I wasn't doing the frickin' washing then, was I?"

"But you talk to your family in Polish all the time."

"I know this is hard to believe, but I don't ring my brothers to chat about what program they use to wash their knickers."

"Maybe you should."

"Shut up, muppet. What the fuck is steam clean?")

Florence still isn't confident they haven't shrunken all their clothing to children's sizes.

"So," Miray says. She's sitting next to Florence on one of the white plastic chairs, fanning herself with one of the little paperback books she always carries with her. "I was thinking about Toni's birthday."

"Oh, right," Florence says. "I almost forgot. It's the day after tomorrow, right?"

Miray nods. "We should do something to celebrate. I thought we could go out after the show? Maybe get dinner and go to a bar. She likes karaoke, right?"

“Sounds good,” Florence says. “We could ask Juno and her band if they want to come with.”

Miray’s face lights up. “Yeah. That’d be nice.”

Florence leans back in her chair, adjusting her claw clip to keep her hair from sticking to her neck. The air inside the laundromat feels thick enough to cut, humid and heavy with the clammy scent of wet laundry and detergent. The heat has followed them from one city to another, relentless and oppressive.

“It’s nice how well everyone’s getting along,” Miray says.

Florence follows her gaze out the laundromat’s front window. Toni, Izzy, and Luca are standing on the pavement, laughing over something on Izzy’s phone. Izzy says something that makes the tips of Luca’s ears turn pink and receives a gentle shove from Luca in return.

“She fits,” Florence says, tearing her eyes away when the sight of Luca’s grin makes her stomach lurch in a most unfortunate way.

“Do you think she’ll stay with us after the tour is over?”

They’ve never explicitly talked about it. The idea that Luca might not stay feels like missing a step going down the stairs; wrong, jarring. “I hope so,” she says, trying to tamp down the panicked little flutter in her chest. “I mean. Probably?”

Miray’s eyes are on her, warm and curious. “Did you never ask her?”

Florence shakes her head.

“What do you two do when you sneak out in the evenings, anyway?”

“We’re not *sneaking out*,” Florence protests. “I literally invited you along last time.”

“Okay,” Miray says in a tone that makes it sound more like *If you say so*.

“We just talk,” Florence says, trying not to sound defensive. They *do* just talk. “It’s really nothing exciting.”

Miray hums. Her fingers fiddle with one of the buttons on her denim overalls as she says, “I’m sure she’ll stay. She got the tattoo and everything.”

“Right,” Florence says. She looks down at her own tattoo, still safely wrapped in plastic. After a moment, she directs her attention back to Miray.

“How are you doing? I feel like we’ve barely spoken since we left London.”

“We’ve been busy.” Miray smiles. “I’m good. A bit exhausted. I’m glad we get to have a break in London before we continue.”

“Are you homesick?”

“A little bit?” The plastic chair creaks as Miray shifts. “I miss my family, I think. I feel like I haven’t seen them in ages, even though it’s only been two weeks.”

Florence feels abruptly guilty. Miray visits her family in Oxford every other weekend. Florence could come with her—her mum lives only minutes from Miray’s parents—but she only does so every other month. Truth is, she hasn’t even thought about missing her mum since they left for tour. Then again, they speak on the phone almost every single day.

“How’s Acelya?” she asks.

“She’s good.” Miray’s smile softens the way it always does when she talks about her sister. “Planning for her gap year. Apparently, she’s going to Australia for work-and-travel.”

“Your sister is so cool,” Florence says.

“Hey,” Miray protests. “So are we! We’re literally touring with a rock band!”

“Ah, yes,” Florence says, gesturing at their surroundings. “Laundromats. Living solely off fast food and petrol station snacks. Sleeping five to a hostel room. So glam.”

As if on cue, the dryer chimes in with an aggressive *beep*. Florence launches out of her chair. “That’s us.”

Miray trails after her. “She doesn’t have to know about this part. The pictures from our shows *do* look really cool.”

Together, she and Miray set about folding their laundry. Florence resolutely does *not* blush as she pulls out a pair of Luca’s boxer shorts, or a sports bra that looks just like the one she wore when they had sex, or the horrible T-shirt that says **Overworked and underfucked**. Where does she even get these things?

They’re halfway through the load when the door slams open and Luca bursts inside, Izzy hot on her heels. “*Luca couldn’t help herself,*” Izzy is

reading from her phone. "*She had wanted to do this ever since the show ended. She kissed Florence, hard, their tongues battling for dominance. 'Luca,' Florence gasped. 'Please. I need—'*"

"Florence, help," Luca says breathlessly as she ducks behind Florence, trying to bring distance between her and Izzy.

Izzy keeps going. "*'I know what you need,' Luca said. 'Get on the bed.' Florence was already lying down on the mattress. Luca—*"

"Oh my *God*," Florence says when she understands what's happening. Luca is shaking with silent laughter behind her, her face tucked between Florence's shoulder blades.

"*Luca took her time taking off her own shirt as she looked down at Florence, spread out on the bed.*" Izzy hops on top of the dryer. "*'Have you ever done this before?'*" She meets Florence's gaze. In a ridiculous, breathy drawl, she continues, "*'No,' Florence said shyly. 'Will you show me how it works?'*"

"*What*," Florence demands.

"Shhh. Not done yet." Izzy clears her throat. "*Luca had thought so. Florence was a rock star on stage, but here in the bedroom, all that confidence was gone. Her chest heaved as she watched Luca, every one of Florence's voluptuous curves*—wow, that's a big word—*on display. Luca crawled onto the bed and*—"

"*Izzy*," Toni cuts in. "That's enough."

With a cackle, Izzy lets Toni wrench the phone from her. Luca detaches herself from Florence and stumbles over to one of the chairs, burying her face in her hands to muffle her high-pitched giggles.

"That is absurdly, *insultingly* inaccurate," Florence says.

"That's true," Izzy agrees. "Your curves are really not that voluptuous."

Florence's outraged noise of protest is drowned out by the others' laughter.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Miray gasps, "Where'd you find that?"

"Someone sent me a link," Izzy reports.

"Is there more of this?" Florence asks, desperately hoping the answer is no.

"Yep," says Toni. "Do you want to see?"

“*No,*” Florence and Luca say in unison.

“You have to look at it this way,” Miray says cheerfully, “I think fanfiction means we’ve made it.”

“Great,” Luca says, pained.

Toni looks up from her phone. “There’s more,” she says. “Izzy. Would you like to hear about your hot, illicit affair with Florence?”

This time, it’s Izzy’s face that drains of color. “Come again?”

“Yeah. It’s . . .” Toni’s eyebrows rise as she skims whatever cursed piece of fiction she’s stumbled upon. “Oh, wow. It’s *explicit*. Want to hear it, Iz?”

The haunted expression on Izzy’s face is enough to send them into hysterics again. It’s another thirty minutes before they finally leave the laundromat, drunk on laughter all the way back to the hostel. Florence still can’t meet Luca’s eyes without flushing, but after all that, Luca isn’t any better off.

> Izzy Dabrowska
> @itzzzizzydab
> scorpio season tour stats so far:
> shows played: 4
> parking tickets: 2
> new tattoos: 5
> times luca lost her charger: 1
> times luca thought she lost her charger: 4
> bathroom breaks: 5,300,000 (we have to stop giving miray coffee)
> times i accidentally used someone else’s toothbrush: 1 (my bad, toni)
> strange homoerotic stage moments: 1 (ok florence )
> 10:34 p.m. July 7, 2025
> 390 Likes 213 Shares
>
> > Antonia Paredes (@toniwiththetunes): you used my toothbrush???
> > Izzy Dabrowska (@itzzzizzydab): @toniwiththetunes oops

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Now that they've been on the road for a while, the shows feel a fraction less scary. Luca still feels like her heart is going to leap out of her chest beforehand, but now it only takes one song for her to calm down and settle into the familiarity of it all. Their set rolls by like a well-oiled machine. They play their first two songs. Florence gives a greeting in Polish and introduces each of them. (Luca shivers, a little, at the way Florence looks at her, her voice a playful purr as she says, "Ladies and gentlemen and everyone in between, our drummer Luca Walsh! How are you doing, Luca?") Two more songs. Izzy and Toni mess about, chasing each other around the stage and holding a staring contest during the guitar-heavy parts. The crowd goes wild during "swallow me," even though Florence is nowhere near Luca. They end the set with "alexandria," and then they're stumbling offstage, a tangle of sweaty limbs as Miray bullies them all into a group hug.

Luca could get used to it. *Is* getting used to it. She's never been very good at sticking to routines, but the structure of their tour days is easy to sink into. Here, she doesn't have to triple-check that she set her alarm or obsess over whether or not the entries in her calendar are the right time and date. She's like a little boat bobbing on a stream, carried along by the momentum of the band.

Next up: grabbing dinner, heading back to the hostel, showering, changing into pajamas. And then she's back in the lobby, playing a mindless game on her phone while she waits for Florence. She's finished three rounds of Subway Surfers by the time she hears footsteps behind her. She cranes her neck to find Florence shuffling toward her, hair still damp from her shower.

"Hey," Florence says. Instead of sitting down next to Luca on the sofa, she settles into the armchair on the other side of the little end table.

"Hi," Luca says, dropping her phone into her lap.

Florence slides off her slippers and tucks her socked feet under her thighs. Luca is always fascinated by her transformation—somewhere between getting off the stage and returning to the hostel, she has shed some of her rock star persona. She's softer in the dim lights of the sleepy lobby, without the red lipstick and the jewelry. For the first time, Luca notices the faint green marks around each of her fingers where her rings usually are. Somehow, Luca always assumed they were real gold.

They sit in silence for a moment. Florence uses her phone camera as a mirror while she pulls her hair into two thick braids. She's almost done when her phone chimes with a notification and she sits up straighter.

"What is it?" Luca asks.

Florence hastily tightens her hair tie before grabbing the phone from where she'd propped it up on the end table. A strange look crosses her face as she reads whatever is on the screen.

"Florence?"

"It's my father," Florence says. "He's in the news. He—oh, Christ."

"Is he okay?"

"No," Florence says bitterly. "He's an incurable prick. Just . . . here."

She thrusts the phone at Luca. Her screen is filled with headlines from different news outlets. The top one says, *"Too Gay for the Mainstream": Jeffrey Blake Shocks Fans with Homophobic Comment in Leaked* Star Factory *Footage*.

Luca tactfully does not ask why Florence has Google alerts turned on for her estranged father and says instead, "You don't have to read these, Florence."

"I know," Florence says miserably. "I probably will, though."

"Yeah," Luca sighs, handing her back the phone. She figured as much.

"He's so fucking stupid." Florence buries her face in her hands. "This isn't even the first time he's done something like this. I can't believe he's gone this long without getting canceled into oblivion."

Luca hesitates for a second. "Does he know you're a lesbian?"

Florence lifts her head again. There's a stubborn set to her chin as she says, "If he does, it's because he saw it on the internet, not because I told him. I don't owe him any information about myself."

“You don’t,” Luca agrees. “How do you think he would react?”

“I have no idea.” Florence pauses. “I don’t think he’s truly a homophobe. I think he’s just a moron who’s out of touch with the times and has too big of an audience.”

Luca nods. From what she’s seen of Jeffrey Blake, that checks out.

She didn’t even know that he was touring right now. She wonders if there’s an overlap in their schedules, if they’ll ever be playing in the same city at the same time. She’s certain that Florence knows.

“The worst thing is,” Florence says, “that I actually looked up to him for a while.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. When I was sixteen, I would listen to his music all the time. I would blast it after arguments with my mum. She was overbearing and he was never there, so he was easy to put on a pedestal.”

Luca finds it hard to imagine sixteen-year-old Florence. In her mind, she’s the same as she is now—self-assured, charismatic—only shorter. Maybe it’s just hard to picture a Florence who idolized her father when all she radiates now is spite.

“What changed?” Luca asks.

Florence casts her a quizzical glance. “What do you mean?”

“Why’d you take him off the pedestal?”

“I just grew out of it. I guess I realized that touring isn’t an excuse to never pick up a call.” She sniffs. “Also, he didn’t write a single one of his hits himself, so.”

Luca can’t help the laugh that escapes her at that. “Really?”

“That’s what Earl told me.” For the first time since she sat down, Florence’s lips curve into a grin. “I told you. He’s a moron.”

“But you still want to prove that you’re better than him,” Luca says.

The grin widens. It looks a little bit feral, honestly. Luca is obsessed with it. “I want him to see us rise in the charts and feel stupid for never having seen my potential. I want to run into him at an award show years from now and shove the Best Rock Song award in his stupid little face. I want him to be haunted by my voice whenever he turns on the radio.”

“He will be,” Luca says.

“Oh, yeah?” Florence’s eyes glint with amusement. “Are you going to make it happen?”

“No,” Luca says and then adds, with every ounce of certainty in her body, “You are.”



“Same side as last night?” Luca whispers thirty minutes later.

In the pitch black, she can’t read Florence’s face. “Sure.”

Luca winces at the loud squeaking of the bed as she shuffles back to her side of the mattress. Florence slides in after her. They don’t even bother with the blanket this time, knowing they’ll be drenched in sweat come morning.

“Think you’re tired enough to sleep now?” Luca asks.

Florence shifts. Her foot brushes against Luca’s calf before quickly pulling back. “I think so. It’s always easier after we’ve talked.”

In the dark, Luca blinks at the back of her head. There’s a warm feeling in her chest. She likes that idea so much. “Yeah,” she says quietly. “For me too.”

Florence lets out a breath. Even after showering, she still smells faintly like perfume. Luca wants to shift forward and bury her nose in the crook of her neck. She’s afraid that her body is going to do just that the moment she’s unconscious and unable to resist the impulse.

“Hey, Luca?” Florence mumbles.

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for listening.”

“Thanks for talking to me,” Luca says.

Florence makes a content little sound and burrows farther into the pillow.

Luca closes her eyes. It’ll probably be another hour before she can get her body to acclimatize enough to Florence’s proximity to go to sleep, but she’s fine lying here just like this, listening to the steady in and out of her breathing, witnessing another part of Florence Gibson that no one but her

and the three other people in the room will ever get to see. They're her favorites, she thinks, as she slowly drifts off.

"TOO GAY FOR THE MAINSTREAM": JEFFREY BLAKE SHOCKS FANS WITH HOMOPHOBIC COMMENT IN LEAKED *STAR FACTORY* FOOTAGE

By Natasha Jadhav

Jeffrey Blake has come under fire after exclusive behind-the-scenes footage from the talent competition *Star Factory* surfaced on the online forum *Timeline* earlier this week. In the forty-second clip, the critically acclaimed British rock star is overheard talking to fellow judge Tamara Whitten. When asked by Whitten why he passed on one of the 2012 *Star Factory* season's contestants, Daniel O'Hare, Blake was recorded saying, "I try to be realistic. I want to pick real talent, someone who has a shot at making it after this show's over."

In response, Whitten asks, "You don't think Daniel could make it? I thought his voice was extraordinary." To which Blake answers, "His voice is good. But . . . come on. Did you see the way he walked in? He's too gay for the mainstream. Maybe in ten years, but not now. I think I did him a favor, honestly."

Daniel O'Hare, who went on to be eliminated from the show, reacted to the clip on social media. "I am shocked by the comments Jeffrey Blake made about me. I was a huge fan of him. Meeting him on the set was one of the best moments of my life."

Jeffrey Blake has yet to come forward with a response.

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On the drive to Prague, they hear their song on the radio for the first time. When she recognizes the first chords, Florence yelps so loud, it startles Izzy into smacking her head against the window.

"It's 'swallow me'!" Miray screeches, turning up the volume. "Guys! They're playing 'swallow me'!"

"We can hear that," Izzy grouses, rubbing her temple. She pauses. "Wait. Actually?"

"Holy shit," Toni laughs, throwing her head back. "We invaded the airwaves through the sheer power of lesbian tension. This is incredible."

Florence can't help but grin, even as the reminder of the video that caused all of this makes her stomach swoop.

They're in the middle of a country road somewhere behind the Czech border. Miray turns the radio as loud as it can go while they roll down all the windows. The wind steals the laughter from Florence's mouth, hair whipping around her face as she sends the universe a delirious *Thank you thank you thank you*.



At this point in the tour, they're so sleep-deprived, it's a challenge to convince any of them to get out of bed before ten. They spend the time before the show doing some gentle sightseeing around Prague, strolling through the Little Quarter for a while before they separate, Florence and Miray to the Franz Kafka museum while the other three sit down at a café. When Florence and Miray find them again, standing in the middle of the Charles Bridge, Izzy and Luca are nibbling on some kind of pastry. It's cylindrical and coated in cinnamon sugar, most of which seems to have ended up on Luca's upper lip. Miray hums happily as Izzy lets her try it.

"Want some?" Luca mumbles around a mouthful, offering it to Florence.

Florence leans forward to take a bite. The dough is crispy and fluffy and not too sweet. Covering her mouth with one hand, she asks, “What’s it called?”

Luca adopts a look of utmost concentration as she says, tongue stumbling over the unfamiliar language, “*Tredlník*. Chimney cake. ’Cause of the way it’s shaped.”

“They’re trying to sell it like it’s this traditional Czech pastry,” Toni chimes in, “but it’s not. You can get it everywhere around here, though.”

Florence is only half listening; her eyes are still stuck on the sugar clinging to Luca’s upper lip. She reaches out to wipe it away with her thumb. Luca’s lips part on instinct, and it takes everything in Florence to pull back her hand before she does something terrible like slip her thumb inside the velvet heat of Luca’s mouth.

“All right,” she says, perhaps a little too brightly. “Let’s get to the venue.”



After the show, they pile back into the van and drive to a bar that Miray picked out earlier.

“Fifteen minutes until midnight,” Florence sings, reaching through the gap between the seats to tap Toni’s head. “Are you excited for your birthday, Toni?”

“Mostly, I’m excited for my bed,” Toni returns flatly, but Florence can see her eyes crinkle in the rearview mirror. “Which one of you is driving this baby back to the hostel, by the way?”

“I am,” Miray says.

“Everyone say *Thank you, Miray*,” Florence instructs.

“Thank you, Miray,” the others echo dutifully.

The bar, when they get there, is an unremarkable establishment tucked into a narrow side street. A sign by the door announces that it’s karaoke night; when they enter, two men are up on the small stage in the back, yowling vaguely to the lyrics of “Livin’ on a Prayer.”

Juno and her entourage are already there. Florence spots her two security guards, one posed by the door and the other sitting at the table next to Juno's. Juno looks at ease in a black T-shirt and glasses, her dark hair pinned up. Waving them over to their table, she raises her voice over the noise inside the bar to tell them, "We already ordered drinks. Please, pick whatever you like. Tonight is on me."

"That's really not—" Florence begins, but Izzy pinches her arm before she can finish. "I mean—thank you."

They sit, squeezing around the table. Florence ends up wedged between Toni and Juno's violinist, Luca opposite her.

"Hey!" Izzy shouts, leaning around Toni to catch Florence's eye. "You gonna sing for her?"

"What?" Florence shouts back.

Izzy jabs a finger in the direction of the stage. "You should sing! Happy birthday or something!"

Florence darts her eyes at her phone. It's four minutes to midnight. Chair legs screeching, she gets to her feet and strides over to the guy doing the music. "Hey," she says. "My friend over there is turning twenty-four in a few minutes. Can I . . ."

"Do you need music?" he asks.

"No." She beams at him. "Thank you."

As soon as the next song ends, he shoos the middle-aged group of women off the stage and hands the microphone to Florence. After playing a sold-out show with Juno, it's easy to get up on the tiny stage and shout, "Everyone! Sorry. Hi. Hello. My very good friend Toni over there—" She shields her eyes from the spotlight as she points to Toni, who looks like she would rather be anywhere else. "—is turning twenty-four in a few seconds. I'm going to need you all to help me wish her a very happy birthday, all right?"

Among the cheers that erupt, she can clearly pick out Izzy's and Miray's.

She clears her throat for dramatic effect. An anticipatory hush has fallen over the bar. Her voice crackles through the speakers as she does her best Marilyn impression, batting her lashes as she purrs, "*Happy birthday, dear Antonia*." The cable of the microphone is just long enough to allow her to

sashay over to Toni and drape herself across her lap as she finishes. Toni wraps an arm around her to keep her from toppling over.

"Wow," she says into the microphone, only sounding mildly mortified. "That was . . . something."

Laughing, Florence presses a kiss into her hair. "I love you."

Izzy wraps her arms around Toni from behind before she has a chance to respond, audibly knocking the air from her lungs. It looks more like a headlock than an embrace, but her "Happy birthday" is surprisingly heartfelt. Florence gets up and hands the microphone off to someone else while Miray peppers Toni's face with little kisses and Luca gives her an awkward, one-armed hug. Toni is rescued from the surplus of physical affection when one of the barkeepers appears at their table with a cake.

"There's cake?" Miray gasps.

"I was told you liked matcha," Juno's velvet voice cuts in. Her eyes briefly meet Florence's as she smiles. "Happy birthday."

Toni is by far not the easiest person to read, but as the cake is put down in front of her, the light of a dozen candles washing her face in gold, her eyes look a little shinier than usual. "Thank you."

Florence holds back Toni's hair as she leans forward to blow out the candles to even more cheering. Then Toni is cutting the cake and someone is singing a truly awful rendition of a Britney Spears song and in the chaos of birthday wishes and plates being handed out, Florence finds herself leaning against the wall next to Luca with a piece of matcha cheesecake balanced on a paper plate.

"Taste test?" she asks, lifting the plastic fork to Luca's mouth.

Luca leans down a little to get it. Her hair is mussed and she looks a bit sleepy in that familiar worn-out, postshow way.

"What's your rating?"

"Mmm." Luca takes a second to think about it. "A solid eight, I think. Tastes a bit . . . green."

"A harsh critic, I see." With Luca's eyes on her, she takes her first bite. She nods slowly. "You know what, you're right. That's exactly it."

"Maybe I should switch professions," Luca jokes. "Professional cake taste tester sounds like a sweet gig."

“Absolutely not,” says Florence. “You’re not allowed. I’m keeping you.”

It’s only when Luca’s eyes widen that she realizes she could’ve worded that better. She could’ve said *We’re keeping you* or added *as a drummer*. But before she can say anything to defuse the sudden tension, Luca answers, voice rougher than it was a few seconds ago, “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Florence says after a beat.

Luca takes the fork from Florence. The brush of their fingertips is enough to make her heartbeat trip over itself. Florence abruptly decides she’s too sober for this and tracks down her glass of red wine.

She downs it fast enough that she’s already feeling it by the time Izzy drags her by the wrist onto the stage to sing “Misery Business” by Paramore with her. Izzy cannot hit a note for the life of her, but she makes up for it by putting on a show, complete with air guitar and everything. Florence can’t stop grinning as they jump around on stage together, uninhibited in a way they aren’t when they’re performing for a crowd.

After that, Miray and Toni give a heartfelt performance of ABBA’s “The Winner Takes It All,” and Juno’s lead guitarist and bassist cover “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen. By the time Florence is pulling Luca onto the stage by their intertwined hands, she has crossed the line from tipsy into undeniably sloshed.

“Do I really have to?” Luca asks, stumbling up the steps after Florence.

“Absolutely,” she says sternly.

Luca doesn’t resist as Florence hands her a microphone. She lets Luca choose the song and laughs when she hears the opening chords of “Start of Something New” from High School Musical. Luca’s hands are trembling as she faces Florence in the middle of the stage.

“It was the only karaoke song I could think of,” she says miserably.

Florence adores her so much it hurts. “You’ve got this,” she tells her.

“Shh,” says Luca, squinting at the lyrics on the screen behind them.

Lifting the mic to her mouth, she comes in a second behind her cue. Her singing voice is sweet; it’s higher than Florence expected, warm and shaky with nerves. Florence can’t tear her eyes away from her as she joins in with Gabriella’s part, giggling when Luca dutifully ad-libs Troy’s overlapping *Oooh*. By the time they reach the chorus, Luca looks a little less like she

actively wants to die. She even bobs her head, still looking immensely focused, while Florence dances closer to her. During the bridge, her lips finally twitch into a smile, and Florence feels so light, she could be floating. They've been on tour for two weeks now, but she swears that this—wine-drunk and weightless, singing a song from bloody High School Musical with a pink-cheeked Luca while their friends hold up their lit-up phones in her periphery—is the happiest she has ever been.

The song ends, and Florence gives their audience an exaggerated curtsy before pointing at Luca. "Luca Walsh, everybody!"

Luca hands off her microphone like it's going to bite her, hiding her face against Florence's shoulder as the room explodes into cheers. Izzy wolf-whistles. Florence can feel Luca's high-pitched giggle more than she hears it.

She reaches up blindly to squeeze the back of her neck. "Well done, you."

"Yeah, you too," Luca says, muffled into Florence's shoulder. "Have you ever thought about joining a band?"

Laughing breathlessly, Florence tugs at her hand to get her to move as the next song is queued up.

Their friends are waiting for them as they stumble offstage. "That was incredible," Miray tells them.

"I shed a little tear," says Izzy. She has graduated from sipping a glass of red wine to drinking straight from the bottle, her dark hair disheveled and eyeliner smudged.

Florence cranes her neck. "Where's the birthday girl?"

"On the phone with Esther," Miray says. "I took a video of you two. Is it all right if I post it?"

"Sure," Florence says.

"If you want our followers' ears to bleed," Luca says, but she's smiling, loose-limbed now that their performance is over and she's back to cradling her rum and coke.

"Hey, Iz," Florence says. "Do you have your lighter?"

Izzy pats the pockets of her black trousers. "I'm coming with," she says.

Florence makes a quick detour to their table to grab her cigarettes from her purse—Izzy always rolls hers herself, and Florence currently possesses neither the fine motor skills nor the patience—before following Izzy outside. They find Toni pacing the narrow hallway that leads to the restrooms, her phone pressed to her ear. Izzy lifts her bottle of wine in silent question. Toni nods and tilts her head back as Izzy holds the bottle to her mouth. Florence presses a kiss to Toni's cheek before they leave her and step out into the fresh air.

It's two in the morning on a Thursday, so the street outside the bar is nearly deserted. The red neon light of the sign casts Izzy's face in a crimson glow as they lean against the wall next to the door.

Florence puts a cigarette between her lips and waits patiently while Izzy cups her hand around it and lights it for her. "Very gentlemanly," she says approvingly.

Because she's a menace, Izzy lets her have all of two drags before plucking the cigarette from her fingers.

"Never mind."

Laughing, Izzy tips her head back as she exhales smoke through her nose. She's still holding the wine bottle in a lazy grip and doesn't protest when Florence steals it from her and takes a sip.

"I love being on tour," she says after a moment.

Closing her eyes, Florence leans her head against the wall of the bar. The world spins gently in the darkness. "Yeah," she says. "Me too."

"I want to do this all the time."

"Mm-hm."

"It's not just the music," Izzy says. "It's all of this. All of you."

Florence pries open her eyes. Izzy's expression is surprisingly earnest as she gazes down at the cigarette burning away between her long fingers. It's not often that she lets her guard down enough for Florence to catch a glimpse of sincerity. Now that it's there, open and tender in the warm night air, Florence feels like she's looking at a rare prey animal she doesn't want to spook.

"I really think this could work," she offers.

Izzy looks thoughtful as she says, "Yeah. I think so too."

She takes another drag. When Florence reaches for the cigarette, Izzy bats her hand away. “You’re not supposed to smoke,” she says mildly. “Gotta take care of that angel voice.”

Florence makes a face at her and tips back the last of the wine instead.

“I’m going back inside.” Izzy grinds the cigarette out under her boot. “Coming with?”

“In a minute,” Florence says.

Izzy drops a parting kiss into her hair. She takes the empty bottle with her as she disappears inside.

Alone in the middle of the street, Florence looks up at the moon. It’s almost full. Her fingers are clumsy as she pulls out her phone to take a photo of it. When she unlocks her screen, there’s a new email blinking at her from her inbox. Her fingers move on autopilot to open it, her breath catching in her throat when she reads the subject line.

> From: lnorton@saturnrecords.com
> To: florencegibson22@gmail.com
> Subject: A new opportunity
>
> Dear Ms Gibson,
>
> I hope this email finds you well. I am reaching out to you on behalf of Saturn Records. After following your career over the last few months, we would like to set up a call with you to speak about a potential opportunity. As a recently founded label, we are dedicated to finding new, diverse talent, and we would love to work with you as an exciting new solo artist. Please let me know when you are available to discuss further details.
>
> All my best,
>
> Linda Norton (she/her)

Between her racing heartbeat and the alcohol in her system, it takes Florence three tries to fully grasp the email’s content. When she does, she lets out a slow breath. *An exciting new solo artist.* The words sink like stones to the bottom of her stomach.

With a decisive swipe of her thumb, she closes out of her inbox. She’s too drunk to make any business decisions. She takes a picture of the moon,

texts her mum that she’s going to call her back tomorrow, and goes back inside.

ellie lee

@littleleaflingxo

NO WAY @qu33rraccoon and i just went out for drinks after seeing juno wilde and saw scorpio season at a karaoke bar???? SCREAMING

1:48 a.m. July 10, 2025

234 Likes 145 Shares

ellie lee

@littleleaflingxo

because so many ppl are asking: no we did not take any photos/videos bc that is creepy but here are some observations: 1) florence’s voice melted my brain, 2) i want to put miray tezel in my pocket she is SO TINY, 3) izzy dabrowska could step on me and i would say thank you

2:32 a.m. July 10, 2025

137 Likes 89 Shares

MANDA

@qu33rraccoon

important addition!!!! florence and luca were sooo giggly and blushy!!!! they are in LOVE!!!!!

2:53 a.m. July 10, 2025

89 Likes 27 Shares

25

Luca is the first one up the next day. She didn't drink too much the night before, only enough to get tipsy, but with the exception of Miray, the same can't be said for the others. As she grabs her overnight bag and changes into her running clothes in the bathroom, none of them even stir.

She grabs her headphones from her bed and triple-checks that the key card for the room is in her pocket. Then she tiptoes outside and quietly pulls the door shut behind her.

At half past nine, the air is still mild. Luca runs a trail that retraces some of the streets they walked over the last two days. It always takes a few minutes to convince her body that running this early is a good idea, but after a while, Luca falls into an easy rhythm.

As a hyperactive child that needed to be physically tired out before she could be asked to sit down and do any kind of schoolwork, her parents had her try out every sports program there was to be found in Kent. She played football, basketball, tennis. She went skating. She took swimming lessons. Once, she even went horseback riding. Now that she's an adult, she usually just goes running or biking or lifts weights at the gym. She loves how it feels when she can't hear her own thoughts over her heartbeat and the music pounding in her ears.

She's not quite there yet. As she picks her way through the cobblestone streets, her thoughts return, again and again, to last night: to Florence singing "Happy Birthday" to Toni, radiant in the spotlight. To the way her eyes glinted while she and Luca sang together. To the curl of her lips when she held Luca's gaze and said, *I'm keeping you*.

Luca wipes the sweat from her eyes with the back of her hand and ups the volume on her music, something fast-paced with a heavy kick drum. Her thighs are burning, but she keeps pushing.

The thing is, Luca is no stranger to friendships that feel like this. When she was fifteen, she had a best friend who would call her "babe" and sit in her lap during breaks at school. When she was sixteen, one of the girls in her friend group kissed her at three different parties. They never spoke about it,

but when Luca found her on social media a few months ago, she had a little bisexual flag in her bio. At the beginning of her first relationship, she wasn't sure they were dating until Heather introduced her as her girlfriend to her friends. It never occurred to her to ask.

The point is, Luca is good at going with the flow. She doesn't ask for anything or make demands. She has always been happy to take what she's given.

What she and Florence have doesn't have to be any different. Compared to those other times, this is straightforward: They had sex once, and now they don't. They're friends. They can sit together at midnight and share a bed and maybe flirt a little in the dark corner of a karaoke bar, but none of it means anything. They're friends and nothing else, no matter how strange Luca's heart feels when she's around Florence or how a part of her missed Florence in her bed last night.

It should be a relief, knowing clearly where she stands.

She comes to a stop at a red light, pulse hammering in her ears. There's a bitter taste in her mouth. She can still hear her thoughts.

Her hands fumble for her phone.

Luca:
I'm fucked

Henry:
not literally i hope????? i thought you swore abstinence

Luca:
Have you ever had a friend you spent all day thinking about?

Mason:
This feels like a rhetorical question

Henry:
oh boy, here we go

Luca:
I can’t stop thinking about Florence

Henry:
didn’t we already know that??

Luca:
It was fine before

Luca:
I thought it would get better with time, but it hasn’t. It’s the opposite

Mason:

Looking for another novel?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and start browsing.

Look at it this way. You've already made it through two weeks. In one week you'll be back here.

Henry:
yeah!! not much longer to go

The idea used to be reassuring. It's what Luca clung to: *Just make it through the tour*. But what about after? Already, the others are talking about recording an album, about going back on tour, this time as headliners. Luca thinks she would like to be a part of it, if they'll have her. She doesn't know how to do that, though, when she feels like a time bomb ready to go off and implode the band with her messy, tangled-up feelings.

She slips the phone back into her pocket as the light turns green and runs until she can't feel her legs anymore.



The others are just starting to wake up by the time Luca gets out of the shower. Toni pulls aside the curtains and opens the window, letting in the sunlight and a gentle breeze. Florence is sitting on the edge of her bed, looking on the verge of death.

"Are you all right?" Miray is asking, kneeling in front of her. "Are you going to throw up?"

Florence considers it for a moment before very slowly shaking her head.

"Why am I being punished like this." Izzy's voice is muffled into the pillow she pulled over her face roughly around the same time that Toni

opened the curtains. "'m only twenty-three years old. Is this my fucking prime? It can't be."

Toni gives her leg a mocking pat as she walks by her bed. Compared to the others, she looks downright chipper, already dressed and sipping from her reusable water bottle.

"I think we just need to get a bit of food and water into you," Miray says, smoothing a hand over Florence's hair. It looks a bit like something has nested in it.

"Don't even talk about eating right now," Izzy mumbles.

Miray just barely stifles a laugh. "Look at Luca. She already went running *and* had a shower."

"Yeah," Izzy says. Lifting the pillow, she peers blearily at Luca. "What the fuck is up with that."

"I feel better after exercising," Luca says. Crouching by her bag, she asks, "Has anyone seen my meds?"

"Bathroom," someone croaks, and the room goes silent.

Slowly, Luca turns to look at Florence. "What?"

"You put them in the bathroom," says the voice that is not Florence's. "In the cupboard above the sink."

"Oh my *God*," Izzy says, struggling to sit up. "Why do you sound like that?"

Florence seems to ask herself the same thing. There's something close to panic in her eyes as she puts a hand to her throat. Her voice sounds like she's gargled a handful of gravel as she says, "I don't know."

"All the karaoke, probably." Grimacing, Miray wraps a comforting arm around Florence's shoulders. "And the alcohol. And the cigarettes."

"I barely even smoked," Florence rasps. She looks genuinely distressed now. Luca's own throat closes up in sympathy. "Oh my God. We have a show in two days."

"Which is why you're going to shut up right now," says Toni. She fixes Florence with a stern gaze. "I don't want another word out of you. You're going to drink tea and eat honey and not so much as whisper until sound check. Okay?"

For a brief, horrible second, Florence looks like she's going to cry. She gives a silent nod.

"Okay." Toni takes a deep breath. "Now. Let's find something to eat for those of us not on the brink of death. We have to leave in two hours if we want to make it to Vienna at a reasonable time." She pauses. "Fuck's sake, Izzy. Just go to the bathroom and throw up."

"Okay, Mum," says Izzy, somehow managing to sound condescending even as she drags herself to the bathroom with her blanket still wrapped around her shoulders like a cape.

Luca looks back at Florence. She doesn't know what to say to make this better, so she settles on, "I'll go get you some tea."

Florence gives her a weak thumbs-up before flopping onto her back, defeated.



It's only been three hours of Florence's involuntary vocal rest, and Luca misses her voice already. As they fly down the E50 to Austria, the car is unusually quiet. Izzy is napping with her headphones on. Miray and Toni are chatting softly in the front of the car. Florence is chipping off her nail polish and staring out the window while working her way through a bag of lemon cough drops they got at the petrol station.

"Are you all right?" Luca asks her quietly.

Florence lifts one shoulder in a tiny shrug before pointing at Luca.

"I'm fine," she says reflexively, to which Florence responds with a dim smile. Luca bites down on the inside of her cheek. If the silence is grating for her, she doesn't want to know how Florence feels. Gathering her courage, she asks, "Do you want to listen to music?"

Florence hesitates for only a second before nodding emphatically. Luca hands her one of her earbuds. "Do you want to pick?"

Florence shakes her head.

"Oh. Okay." Luca doesn't know why she's suddenly nervous as she scrolls through her music library. She settles on one of the playlists she usually puts on while she's getting ready for work—it's mostly oldies, the

kind of music her dad blasts around the house on weekends when he's cleaning. The first song is "Vienna" by Billy Joel.

Florence's laugh is a quiet exhale through her nose, audible to no one but Luca. Somehow, the tiny sound makes pride bloom, warm and golden, in Luca's chest.

"Try to sleep some more," she whispers to Florence.

Florence nods. Her hair tickles Luca's arm as she leans her head against Luca's shoulder.

Luca smiles down at her lap. She spends the rest of the drive playing soft acoustic songs and holding herself very still.

26

Vienna is all blue skies and buildings like pastries: tall, regal things in shades of cream with delicate embellishments like carefully piped icing. The city is bright and busy and beautiful, and Florence can't appreciate any of it.

She feels like she's going insane. Her mind is an animal pacing behind the bars of its enclosure. It's hell sitting through dinner with the band without being able to talk and going sightseeing the next day without being able to join in on any conversations. If she has something important to say, she has to type it out on her phone, which takes so long she wants to scream in frustration, which is the opposite of what she's supposed to do.

By the time they get back to the hostel, her nerves are rubbed raw. While the others debate where to go for dinner, she sits on her bed and stares at the wall. Her throat still feels scratchy. The idea of not being able to sing tomorrow makes her nauseous.

"What do you think, Flo?" Miray asks. Her tone is gentle in that way it always gets when she can tell Florence is miserable. "Korean or Italian?"

At this point, Florence doesn't have to suppress the urge to open her mouth and speak. She's aware that her vocal cords can't have atrophied within the last thirty-six hours, but a part of her remains stubbornly convinced that she will never speak again. It will just be this, forever.

God. She wants to claw her way out of her own brain.

She pulls out her phone and texts, **I think I'll just stay in tonight. You guys have fun x**

Miray's brows furrow. "Are you sure?"

Florence nods. She's drained and irritated and irrationally upset. It's probably best for everyone if she just stays in their room and watches a film.

"Want us to bring something back for you?" Toni asks.

No, I'm okay. Thanks.

From the other end of the room, Florence can feel Luca watching her. All day, she has been intensely attentive; she was the one who shushed the others when Florence tried to get their attention, who ordered her coffee and went up to the register to buy the book she picked out at the tiny secondhand bookstore they'd stumbled upon. Florence was grateful for it earlier, but in her current condition, the weight of Luca's gaze makes her skin feel too tight.

"Do you need more tea?" Miray asks.

Florence gives a firm shake of her head. At this point, she feels like she consists of nothing *but* tea. Her blood must be 90 percent peppermint.

"Come on," Toni says finally. "Let's leave her to rest."

Florence shoots her a grateful look. Miray gives her a hug and Izzy pats her head, and then they're gone, leaving Florence alone in the empty hostel room.

She exhales. It's strange to be on her own after two weeks of spending almost every minute with the band. The room is too quiet. She feels, abruptly, very lonely. It's possible that she's been feeling lonely for the last two days. There's a sense of isolation that comes with being unable to speak, and even though she knows it's only temporary, it makes her want to cry.

She doesn't, of course. Instead, she changes into her pajamas and removes her makeup over the tiny sink. She's still in the bathroom when she hears the hostel room door click and freezes, towel in hand.

"Florence?" Luca calls.

The tension rushes out of her at once.

She puts down the towel and shuffles back into the main room. Picking up her phone, she types, **What are you doing here?**

Toeing out of her sneakers, Luca holds up two pizza boxes. "I wanted to make sure you had something proper to eat."

The urge to cry grows even stronger. It's such a simple kindness, delivered to her without asking for anything in return. She doesn't know what to do with it.

"Is it okay if I stay, or did you want to be alone?" Luca asks.

Stay, Florence types immediately.

It must've started pouring while Florence was in the bathroom. Luca shakes her head the way a dog might, sending drops flying, and offers her a lopsided smile. "Okay. Do you want to watch something?"

Florence goes to get out her laptop while Luca sets down the food. She brought two pizzas and two bottles of juice—black currant, Florence's very specific favorite.

They squeeze onto Luca's bed, partly because it's a bottom bunk and partly because, out of the two of them, she's less likely to get upset about crumbs in the bedding. Luca wedges the pillow behind their backs so they can lean against the wall and balance the pizza boxes on their laps. The laptop is at the far end of the bed, playing *Before Sunrise* at a low volume. With the downpour outside, the room has gotten dark enough for them to turn on the little lamp next to the bed.

Florence feels something inside of her settle. It's easy to be silent with Luca, their thighs pressed together as they work their way through their respective pizzas. Every once in a while, Luca will make a comment about the film that makes Florence laugh softly through her nose. She's as fidgety as ever, but Florence has gotten used to it by now.

After they've finished the pizza, they set the boxes aside and stretch out on the mattress. Or, at least, they try; the bed is once again too narrow for both of them to comfortably fit on.

"Hang on," Luca murmurs. She shuffles around a bit and gently urges Florence to lift her head. Florence lets herself be moved and finds herself curled up against Luca, her head resting on Luca's chest and Luca's arm wrapped around her.

"Okay?" Luca asks.

Florence nods. Closing her eyes, she breathes in her scent, sweat and sunscreen and something uniquely *Luca*. She doesn't know when it became so familiar to her. She doesn't know when any of this did.

Before Sunrise keeps playing. Florence doesn't need to open her eyes to know what's happening on the screen; she's seen the film enough times with Miray to know it by heart. Wrapped up in Luca's warmth, she allows herself to drift, only humming out a pleased noise when Luca's hand settles in her hair.

"I miss your voice," Luca says quietly.

Florence's breath hitches. Luca sounds like she spoke without thinking; she's not even expecting a response. Her fingers are still stroking clumsily over Florence's hair.

It's so nice. Everything about it, from the warm rumble of Luca's voice to the sound of her steady heartbeat under Florence's ear. It's nice enough to make Florence's eyes sting.

"Hey," Luca whispers. Her thumb sweeps over Florence's temple. "Don't cry."

Her next breath stutters out of her as more of a sob. She turns her head, hiding her face in the crook of Luca's neck.

It's not just that she can't talk. It's that Luca is holding her and Florence isn't supposed to let her. It's the call with Saturn Records scheduled in three days. It's her father being flayed by the media and her message to him that's been left on read for weeks. It's thousands of strangers thinking she's dating Luca when they haven't even kissed once. It's the dread in her stomach when she thinks about the tour coming to an end and the fact that Saturn Records is still the only label to have reached out to her. It's fleeting touches and too-long glances and learning how Luca breathes when she's asleep. It's two weeks of overwhelming hope and anxiety and confusion and the senseless gnawing *hunger* she's known for years that has only grown stronger now that it has tasted blood.

She has never learned how to want in moderation. If her longing were a well, she would shatter every bone in her body hitting its bottom.

"Florence," Luca says softly. "Look at me."

Florence only burrows farther into the warm crook of Luca's neck. With her skin damp from the rain, she smells exactly as she did the first time they met. The memory makes Florence's chest hurt.

"Please."

Sniffing, Florence lifts her head. Luca's face is inches away from hers. Her hazel eyes are the warmest that Florence has ever seen, and the worry in them only makes Florence cry harder. She bites down on her tongue to hold back the small noise trying to tear itself free.

"Hey," Luca says. Her hands move to cup Florence's face, wiping away the tears on her cheeks while she shushes her and murmurs silly,

meaningless things, like she's comforting an animal, or maybe a small child. "Shhh. It's okay. You're all right."

No, I'm not, Florence wants to say. *I think I made a horrible mistake when I let you join the band because looking at you* hurts. *Because I want you in ways that I shouldn't. Because I know exactly what we could have had, and now I will always miss you even when you're right here.*

Luca gazes at her like she can hear every thought that passes through her. And God, Florence hates the look on her face. She hates seeing Luca sad. Her face isn't built for it.

"I'm sorry," Florence whispers helplessly. She's not sure what she's apologizing for. Everything, probably.

The furrow between Luca's brow deepens. "Stop it," she says.

Her thumbs swipe away even more tears. Florence is far beyond controlling them; they just keep falling, pouring silently down her cheeks. It's mortifying. Florence is about to apologize a second time when Luca leans down and kisses her forehead. It's the faintest brush of lips, but its effect is immediate: From one second to the next, Florence stops crying, startled into stillness by the unexpected gentleness.

Leaning in is the tiniest, easiest movement. When Florence's mouth brushes Luca's, she finds her lips warm and slightly chapped, and she knows she isn't supposed to do this, but Luca is making these quiet, wounded noises, and she's still cradling Florence's face, and for the first time in weeks, that quiet, tugging ache inside of Florence doesn't hurt as much.

She nips at Luca's lip, and Luca whines, soft and low in her throat. Florence has been wondering if she would be able to feel the little gap between Luca's teeth when she kissed her; running her tongue along them, she has the devastating realization that she can.

And then Luca is pulling back, exhaling raggedly. Her eyes are dark and wide. Some of Florence's tears have transferred onto her cheek, glistening like crystals. Like proof.

She sounds pained as she says, "Florence."

"I'm sorry," Florence whispers. They seem to be the only words her brain is capable of producing.

Luca's throat bobs. Florence can almost see her take her own desire and lock it away in some airtight part of her brain. Her touch is unfathomably tender as she smooths over Florence's curls once more, drops another kiss into her hair, and pulls the blanket up to cover both of them.

Florence lets her head drop back onto Luca's chest, fingertips to her lips to chase the memory of the kiss. It feels surreal the moment it's over, more like another dream than something that happened seconds ago.

At the foot of the bed, *Before Sunrise* is still playing. The rain is still pouring. It won't be long until the others get back and Florence will have to crawl into her own bed again. She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to steady her breathing, waiting for the shaky thing in her chest to settle.

Major Note Hot 100—Week of July 12, 2025

26 Thally's Song
Juno Wilde

27 Melancholia
Don't Go Easy

28 Never Needed You
J3remy

↑ 29 swallow me
Scorpio Season

30 How do you sleep?
From Jupiter

27

They don’t speak about the kiss.

When they wake up the next morning, Florence is back to acting like her usual self. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Luca watches her put on lipstick and dab perfume on her wrists, putting herself together before the day begins. It’s almost impossible to find a trace of the trembling, tearful version of her that Luca held last night. The only proof that it wasn’t a hallucination is the way Florence smiles at her over breakfast when their feet accidentally knock together under the table, fragile and nervous in a way Luca has never seen her before. Luca smiles back and goes back to eating her pancakes, ignoring the flutter in her stomach.

The venue is a beautiful old theater that feels much too nice for them to be playing in. Sitting in the plush red seats in the front row, they watch Juno go through sound check. Even though they’ve been touring with her for more than two weeks now, the starstruck feeling from their first day on tour hasn’t completely worn off.

“She’s incredible,” Miray whispers while Juno sings her usual sound check song with the ease of decade-long experience.

“Her breath control is crazy,” Toni agrees, head tilted as she watches her.

Nursing her third tea of the day, Florence nods in agreement. She has one hand on her throat, absently rubbing circles.

A moment later, Juno leaves the stage and their band is called up. Luca can tell Florence is nervous from the way she tucks her hair behind both ears while she takes her spot behind the mic. She did some gentle warm-ups in their room earlier, but she hasn’t properly sung since Prague.

“Some vocals, please,” the sound engineer says.

Florence clears her throat, the tea still clutched in her right hand. The microphone amplifies her shaky intake of breath. “*I’m Alexandria, baby*,” she begins. Her voice sounds raspier than usual. She takes another small breath before she continues. “*You’ll never know my depths*.” Her vocals are firmer on the second line. “*I’ll burn myself to the ground before I let you*

have the answers." The smile that spreads on her face is so relieved, something inside Luca's own chest loosens at the sight of it. "*I'll set myself on fire before I let you know all of me.*"

"There she is," Izzy says approvingly while Miray cheers from behind her keyboard.

From across the stage, Florence meets Luca's eyes, her smile brighter than all the spotlights combined.

There she is.



Now that Luca knows what to look for, it's easy to see echoes of Jeffrey Blake in Florence's performance. It's the way she moves on stage, taking up space like it's her birthright. It's the haughty tilt of her chin. It's the way she overarticulates some words, rolling her Rs and pronouncing her Ts, a dramatic little accent she only does on stage.

Luca wonders if it's intentional. She knows that Florence has watched her father's performances more often than is probably healthy. Maybe she absorbed his mannerisms subconsciously. Or maybe this is another result of the voice in her head telling her she won't make it unless she imitates every step of her father's career.

For her part, Luca prefers the moments when Florence is herself. There's a part in "big teeth" where she spends the entire bridge skipping across the stage in her thrifted cowboy boots, head tossed back as she laughs and twirls, her hair wild and her dress billowing around her. Luca has seen video compilations of Florence's dancing, and of her own face as she watches, soft and awed and entirely too obvious. Still, she doesn't look away.

She's not sure when the chasm between Florence Gibson and *Florence* became so obvious to her. Probably, it has something to do with evenings in hostel lobbies and the fragile weight of Florence in her arms the night before. Probably, she should try to do something about the ache in her chest. But probably, it's too late for that now.



“What’s your favorite song you’ve written?”

“My favorite song?” Florence asks. “God. I hope I haven’t written it yet.”

Luca squints at her. “That’s a cop-out answer.”

“It’s true.” Laughing, Florence tucks her legs under herself. “I don’t know. I like all of them. As much as you can like anything you created yourself.”

They’re sitting in the lobby of their hostel in Vienna. There’s a fake fireplace going next to them and soft jazz music playing over the speakers. Florence is curled up on the sofa next to Luca, close enough for their knees to touch, though Luca tries not to focus on that.

“Is it hard? Writing them?” Luca asks.

“Sometimes. It depends. ‘ballad’ popped into my head like it always lived there. ‘alexandria’ was like pulling teeth.” She pauses. “It depends what emotion I’m writing from, I think. Angry songs like ‘big teeth’ come easy to me. Sexy songs too, I suppose.”

Luca rests her cheek on her arm where it’s slung over the back of the sofa. They’ve been here for an hour already, but there isn’t a single part of her that wants to go to bed. Now that Florence can talk again, it’s like a dam has broken. “Why do you think that is?” she asks.

“Is this an interview?” Florence laughs.

Luca tries to hide her smile behind her knuckles. “Just wondering.”

“Mm-hm.” Florence playfully narrows her eyes at her.

Luca nudges Florence’s shin with her foot. “Go on.”

“I think,” Florence says after a moment’s consideration, “that the common denominator is hunger. Most of my songs are about craving something.”

Something about that answer makes Luca’s face feel warm. She’s reminded of the way Florence looked at her when they slept together: dark, intense, like she wanted to swallow her whole. She still catches that expression on her sometimes.

“You know,” Florence says, unaware of Luca’s small internal crisis, “I don’t think I’ve ever written a love song. I’ve written *about* love, but never in a romantic way.”

Luca’s mouth feels very dry. Her voice comes out scratchy as she asks, “Do you want to?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I think I’m more comfortable with what we have going on now.”

Luca thinks she knows what Florence means. Florence’s songwriting isn’t overly concerned with revealing any hidden, soft parts of herself. If she does, they’re wrapped up in ten layers of symbolism and metaphors and references to myths that Luca has never read. Her lyrics are clever and challenging and aesthetically coherent, one facet of Florence polished to a shine.

Luca thinks of the fake gold rings that leave green imprints on Florence’s skin. Of perfume testers carefully selected for every setting. Of the fake accent that Florence slips into when she’s singing on a stage.

And then she thinks of Florence’s tear-stained face tucked against her neck, of the hurt in her voice when she speaks about her father, of her bright laughter in a dingy karaoke bar and the frustrated furrow between her brows when she isn’t happy with her own performance.

She asks, “Don’t you ever want to show the world something real?”

Florence’s eyes widen. “What?”

Luca bites down on her tongue. It’s not what she meant to say, or at least not the way she meant to phrase it. But . . . they only have the show in Zurich left before they drive back to London. This is one of their last nights together before the break. Yesterday’s kiss has been replaying in Luca’s mind over and over again, and she doesn’t know how much longer she can keep this up. She doesn’t know if she even wants to.

“Florence,” she says. “I’ve been thinking. I feel like we—”

Bzzzz.

The buzzing comes from Florence’s phone, lying face down on the coffee table next to them. Florence blanches when she sees the caller ID.

“Who is it?” Luca asks, deflating.

Florence wordlessly shows her the screen. **Jeffrey Blake.**

There are too many things for Luca to comprehend: the fact that Florence has her father's contact saved under his government name, the fact that he's calling at all, much less *now*, two hours after midnight and right when Luca is about to say something important.

"Are you going to pick up?" she asks. For some reason, she has the urge to whisper, as though Florence's father is some kind of omnipotent being that will overhear if she speaks too loudly.

Florence is still looking at her phone like it's a rattlesnake. Every inch of her body has tensed.

"Flo?" Luca asks softly. Watching Florence's *freeze* response kick in has her own heart speeding up.

"I should probably—" Florence begins, but she breaks off when the buzzing stops and her screen goes dark.

Without it, the lobby seems very quiet. After a moment, Florence begins to laugh. It's not her usual laugh but a terrible, jagged version of it. Luca does not join in.

"Oh my God," Florence says. "I can't believe—right now?"

"Are you going to call him back?" Luca asks tentatively.

"No," Florence says immediately. "No. I've been messaging him for months and he has never once responded. I will pick up when it suits me."

Judging from the way Florence is clenching her jaw, Luca has a suspicion that time might be *never*.

"Anyway," Florence says, dropping her phone back onto the table like it's burning her. "How are *your* parents doing?"

"Fine, I think. It's been a few days since I've spoken to them."

"Have you told them about dropping out yet?"

"No. I was thinking . . . maybe after tour. If this thing keeps going well, maybe I can lead with that. You know, kind of like *I know I dropped out without telling you, but look, we're in the charts!* Or something."

Florence's eyes roam her face in that intense way they do sometimes.

They don't talk about their parents again for the rest of the night, and Luca does not say what she was going to say before Jeffrey Blake called.

They still have one tour stop left before they go back. Maybe she'll be brave enough to say it then.

goodnightsorrow

floluca staring at each other with heart eyes backstage is my favorite genre of photo #floluca #scorpioseason

grabthelighter 2 hours ago

Literally what I came here to say!! The photo the band posted earlier made me shriek a little. They really are in a world of their own :,)

princelinglia 2 hours ago

that photo really has everything omg. florence in cowboy boots. luca in a tank top. florence licking honey from a spoon WHILE HOLDING EYE CONTACT. blushy, nervous luca watching her with the softest expression known to mankind. man i wish scorpio season were real

lightupthenight 1 hour ago

How much do you want to bet that Luca was just sat there imagining tasting the honey on Florence’s tongue? How does she cope???

scorpioooszn 1 hour ago

@lightupthenight you can’t just SAY that oh my god now i have to drop everything and write a fic about this

28

In Zurich, they get recognized in public for the first time. They're having drinks in a beer garden, fresh off a boat tour on the Limmat, when a group of teenage girls appears at their table, shyly asking for an autograph. In the ensuing chaos of everyone scrambling to find a pen, Florence exchanges a giddy, disbelieving glance with Luca next to her.

One of the girls must notice. She looks between them and says, in faintly accented English, "You two are so cute."

"Oh, um," Luca says, flushing.

"Thank you," says Florence.

"Found it!" Miray exclaims, triumphantly holding up a pen.

After a brief back-and-forth about what to get signed, one of the girls hands them a paperback copy of *Carmilla*, the receipt from the bookstore where she bought it still tucked inside. Florence is helplessly charmed and signs her name on the front page with the easy flourish she's been practicing since she was fifteen and scribbling her autograph in the margins of her textbooks.

It feels better than she could've imagined. When she pictured this moment as a teenager, she was always alone. But if that were the case, she never would've gotten to see Toni's awkward half smile when the girls compliment her outfit or Miray's pink-cheeked delight as she dots her *i* with a little heart or Luca's tongue peeking through her teeth as she writes out her name in capital letters, muttering a sheepish apology about not having a cool signature yet.

It's another first to add to her collection from the summer: first sound check, first show, first time on the radio, first fan encounter. Florence doesn't know if it's the beer on a half-empty stomach or the warm July evening or just the head rush of being recognized, but she can't stop grinning, one arm looped around Luca as they all squeeze together for a selfie, feeling Luca's shoulders shake with flustered laughter the entire time.

Something tender and nostalgic wells in her chest at the realization that this part of the tour is almost over. It ebbs and flows all throughout the evening—through finishing her drink and sitting in the beer garden until the fairy lights come on, through eating enough chocolate on the walk back to the hostel to feel slightly sick and resting her forehead against Luca's shoulder on the lift on the way up to their room. In the close, secret space between their bodies, she grazes Luca's knuckles with the back of her hand, a soft breath getting caught in her chest when she feels Luca's knuckles brush hers in turn. It feels a bit like grief, then: the thought that in a matter of days, they'll go back to real life, where they'll only see each other for practice and Florence won't have any excuse to be this close to Luca again.

The doors of the lift open with a *ding*. Florence steps out before Luca, trying to push down the preemptive mourning before it can take root.



"What are your guys' plans for when we're back in London?" Miray asks as they wait in the dressing room the next night. She's perched on the armrest of one of the sofas, her feet in Toni's lap.

"Work on more songs," says Florence.

"Spend time with my girlfriend," answers Toni.

"Sleep," mutters Luca.

"Shh," says Izzy, grasping Luca's chin to get her to look at her. They're sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing each other. Izzy is halfway through applying Luca's eyeliner, her large hand cupping Luca's jaw. The sight still makes something poisonous and green rear its head somewhere deep in Florence's chest. She does her best to hold it down.

"What about you?" Florence asks, turning her attention back to Miray.

"Visit my parents, I think." Miray smiles.

Florence hums softly and darts a look at her phone. Her call with Saturn Records is in five minutes.

"I'm going to go outside for a minute," she says, getting to her feet. "I promised my mum I'd call her before the show."

Her talking to her mother is such a regular occurrence, the others barely acknowledge her leaving. Florence tries to tamp down the guilt that comes with telling a white lie and slips out into the hallway. The venue's basement is lit by a buzzing neon tube that throws harsh light onto the walls, which are covered in stickers and Sharpie markings. Florence follows the corridor around a corner, takes the stairs two at a time, and emerges in the staff parking garage. Leaning against the concrete wall, she stares down at her phone. One minute to go.

She's not sure why she hasn't told the others about this call. She thinks it has something to do with wanting to wait and see what Linda Norton has to say before she gets their hopes up—the same reason why she hasn't told any of them about the demos she's been sending out to record labels. She's the one who convinced them to start a band with her and drop everything to go on tour. If there's positive news, she'll share it. They've made it far enough to get their foot in the door of the music industry; all they need is one *yes* for it to swing all the way open. Until then, what's the use in telling them about the rejections and the radio silence?

Exhaling slowly, she tips her head back against the wall. She can feel the Wheel of Fortune card shift against her skin where she's tucked it into her bra, like she does before every show.

Even though she was bracing for it, she still jumps when her phone buzzes with an incoming call, the sound jarringly loud in the silent parking garage. She waits one second, two—*Don't seem desperate, don't let them know they're your only chance*—before she picks up. "Florence Gibson speaking."

"This is Linda Norton," a female voice crackles through the speaker. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm good," Linda Norton says. Her accent is distinctly American, though Florence can't tell from which state. "I'd like to speak to you about a potential opportunity. Like I said in my email, Saturn Records is a relatively new record label. We were founded five months ago and have since signed half a dozen new artists, with a focus on young, diverse talent."

She pauses, as though to give Florence the opportunity to let the information sink in. With her heart pounding in her ears, she can't think of

anything more clever to say than, “I see.”

“You caught our eye because of your affiliation with Juno Wilde and the recent media attention you’ve been getting,” Linda Norton continues. It takes Florence a moment to understand that *recent media attention* refers to the internet’s obsession with her and Luca’s fictional relationship. “We think that you would make a fantastic addition to our roster. Do you see yourself sticking to the rock genre?”

Florence blinks, overwhelmed. “I . . . yeah. I think so.” She presses the heel of her hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry. Are you offering me a record deal?”

Linda Norton laughs. “I am. What do you say, Miss Gibson?”

Florence feels like she’s stepped into some strange alternate universe. She wants to laugh. She wants to cry. She wants to curl up behind the BMW to her left and have a panic attack.

She asks, “What about the band?”

“Ah.” There’s a quiet squeaking noise on the other end of the line as Linda Norton presumably shifts on her chair. “To be perfectly candid, we are primarily interested in you. We think you have something special, Miss Gibson.”

“So do they,” Florence says.

There’s a beat of silence. Linda Norton’s voice is ruthlessly pleasant as she repeats, “We are primarily interested in you.”

Florence opens her mouth. She feels like someone has poured molasses into her brain, shock rendering her thoughts sticky and sluggish. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t know . . . I’m not a solo artist. I don’t *want* to be a solo artist.”

The pause on the other end of the line feels distinctly judgmental. “How long have the five of you been playing together?” Linda Norton asks.

“Two years,” Florence says. Less, if they consider that Luca only joined weeks ago. In the grand scheme of things, it’s a laughable amount of time.

Linda Norton seems to think so too. She sounds like a primary school teacher gently explaining that eating dirt is bad for you as she says, “I understand that this is a difficult decision to make. How about this: I’m

going to send you the draft of our contract. You review it and let me know by the end of the week. All right?"

Florence's mouth is operating without any input from her brain. "Okay. Yeah."

"Wonderful. I do hope you'll consider working with us, Miss Gibson. I am certain that we could get you into the mainstream within the next year. A talent like yours is just what we've been looking for."

"Thank you," Florence says, dazed.

"We'll be in touch. Have a good day, Miss Gibson."

The line goes dead.

Not even a minute later, an email hits Florence's inbox with a contract attached to it. She stares at it for a moment, eyes catching on the number of zeros next to a dollar sign, before she abruptly locks her phone. She has the ridiculous urge to wash her hands. The scorpion on her arm itches viciously.

Her phone buzzes again, this time with a text from Izzy.

oi muppet

did u get lost in the basement? we're on in twenty minutes.

It takes another moment to remind her lungs how to breathe normally. Finally, she tucks her hair behind her ears and straightens, turning her phone off as she makes her way back to her band.



When she returns to the dressing room, everyone else is fully dressed and wearing their stage makeup. Luca and Miray are sitting next to each other on the sofa with Miray's Nintendo, heads bent together. At Florence's entrance, they look up at her with twin expressions of worry.

"Is everything all right with your mum?" asks Miray.

"Yeah." Florence's voice sounds too high, too breathy. She clears her throat and tries again. "She's fine."

Miray gives her an odd look. "Okay. That's good."

Before either of them can subject her to any more interrogation, Amy appears in the doorway. Clapping her hands to announce herself, she says,

“All right, Scorpios, you’re up!”

Florence hastily takes a sip of lukewarm tea before following the others out into the corridor. Normally, this is the part where her entire body floods with adrenaline and her brain goes into tunnel vision. Today, she feels jittery in a different way instead.

We think you have something special.

She flinches as a hand touches her lower back.

“Hey,” Luca says behind her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Florence throws her a smile over her shoulder. “I’m fine.”

Luca doesn’t look convinced. Quietly, she asks, “Did your father call again?”

Christ. With everything that’s happening, Florence forgot about him for a moment. “No. It was just my mum.”

From the way Luca’s eyes remain on her, she can tell that there’s more she wants to ask. But now they’ve almost reached the stairs leading up to the stage and Florence is distracted putting in her in-ears, muffling all outside noise.

We are primarily interested in you.

The lights seem brighter than usual as they walk on. Florence feels strange and off-kilter as she steps behind the microphone, her own pulse loud in her ears.

Primarily interested in you. Something special. Primarily interested in you.

The sound of Luca counting them in pierces through the fog that has draped over her. The ground feels less shaky with the kick drum humming through the soles of her boots, Luca’s playing like a heartbeat Florence can always trust to remain steady.

Closing her eyes, she shuts out the echoes of Linda Norton’s voice and lets the music drown out her thoughts. One more show, and then she’ll be home for a week. She can figure out what to do then.

29

Tell her, Luca repeats to herself as they make their way down to the lobby. *You have to tell her.*

Every part of this feels so familiar by now. She and Florence find themselves a spot by the windows, curling up on a beaten-up sofa lit only by a small lamp a few feet away. They're out of sight from the reception desk, alone in a pocket of quiet. By now the lobbies of the hostels where they've stayed all kind of blur together in a vague haze of drowsy receptionists and humming vending machines and the tinny, copyright-free music that seems to always be drifting from the speakers.

Florence is sitting cross-legged on the sofa, facing Luca, their knees just barely touching. She's quieter than usual, her eyes distant as her fingers worry at the frayed hem of her jumper.

"Last show before the break, huh?" Luca says.

Florence gives a sallow half smile. "Yeah."

Luca's own knee is jiggling incessantly. She feels jittery, kind of like she used to when she was just starting her medication, before the side effects went away.

"Are you excited to go back to London?" she tries.

"Not really. You?"

"Not really," Luca says. After a moment, she adds, "I like being on tour. I feel like it works better for my brain than being at home."

Just the thought of being back in her flat and having to set an alarm to go to work at the café every morning makes her bones itch. It's not the only reason she's not excited though.

Before she can talk herself out of it, she adds, "And I'm going to miss this."

She doesn't have to explain what *this* means for Florence to understand. She looks down at her hands. At this point, she's in danger of unraveling the whole jumper if she carries on fiddling with it. "Yeah. Me too."

This is where Luca is supposed to say what she's been practicing in her head. She takes a shaky breath, her mouth dry as she gears up to speak.

The thing is: Most of the time, Luca doesn't trust herself. It's the reason why she spent her school years in a friend group with people she had nothing in common with, why she stayed in her first relationship even though it mostly made her feel bad about herself, why she didn't drop out of uni until she had a stomachache every time she thought about her exams. She doesn't think she would've messaged Izzy if Jemma hadn't been there to hold her hand. She would've kept working at the café, stuck it out like she has everything else. Enduring a mediocre situation has always felt less scary than making a decision and finding out it was the wrong one. It never occurred to her that her making a decision could lead to something *better*. But now she's here, and she knows what she wants, and she knows that if she doesn't do something about it, she'll spend the rest of her life regretting it.

Gathering all her courage, she asks, "Are we going to keep seeing each other? When we're in London?"

"Of course," Florence says. "We're in a band. We'll see each other all the time."

"No, I mean—" She swallows compulsively. "Will we *see* each other? Just us?"

Florence shifts. The tiny movement pulls her knee away from Luca's. "Luca, I . . . I don't know if that's a good idea."

Her words drop like stones to the bottom of Luca's stomach.

"It's not that I don't want to spend time with you," Florence says. "It's just . . . I think it might be too confusing."

"Confusing," Luca echoes hoarsely.

"Yes." Florence looks up. "You know, with . . . with the band, and what we talked about. I don't . . ."

"Florence," Luca says. She hates the way it comes out—too raw, too desperate.

It has a strange effect on Florence. While Luca feels wide open, her face shutters. "We agreed we would keep our distance."

"Did we?"

The sight of Florence's frown is so familiar, Luca thinks she could trace its lines in her sleep. "We did. When you first met the band."

Luca's knee keeps going up and down, up and down. Her skin feels too tight over her bones. Her laugh comes out awkward, forced. "I remember you telling me that we had to keep what we had a secret," she says. "I think there's a difference."

The frown deepens. "You're acting like I forced this on you."

"You didn't," Luca says. "But . . . don't you think things have changed by now?"

Florence smooths her hair behind both ears. She looks utterly composed in her matching pajama set. Still in control. Still carefully curating what she wants Luca to see. "I don't think that matters."

Luca feels like a punch in the gut would probably hurt less. Her brain offers up a dozen responses with the potential to hit Florence in the same tender way. She bites down on all of them. What comes out instead is a quiet, pleading, "*You* kissed *me*."

"I know," Florence says, looking away. "I wasn't thinking."

"Maybe you should do that more."

"Luca."

"I just—can't we at least *try*?" Luca's voice cracks on the last word. She feels vaguely pathetic, but she's not ready to let this go. "Toni and Izzy hooked up. That didn't break up the band."

For the first time, something like true irritation flits over Florence's features. "That's different."

"How is that different?"

"Because they weren't—fuck." Florence breaks off. "Luca, I can't do this."

Luca is aware of her heart racing, of her fingers laced together, white-knuckled in her lap. Florence can pretend to be unaffected all she wants, but Luca won't play that game. She will care enough for both of them.

She asks, "What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Yes, you are."

A muscle twitches in Florence's cheek. "You met me six weeks ago," she says tightly. "Do not presume to know me."

It's so perfectly *Florence*—the haughty expression, the crisp Oxford accent, the way she throws up the vocabulary of her private school education like a shield when backed into a corner. Luca wants to take her by the shoulders and shake her almost as much as she wants to kiss her until she can't string words together anymore.

"I do know you," she says doggedly. "I know what music means to you. I know that you hate your dad and also miss him, and that you want to be exactly and nothing like him. I know how you like your coffee and that you always sleep on your right side. I know that your mum's expectations were way too high, and now nothing you do ever feels good enough. I know how hard you work." She pauses and waits until Florence meets her gaze to continue. "I know you didn't mean to let anyone see this much of you. But I have. And I'm sorry if that scares you, but I'm not sorry it happened."

Florence opens her mouth. Closes it. Her eyes are shiny, but Luca knows she would take sandpaper to her vocal cords before crying even a single tear right now. Luca watches helplessly as Florence takes whatever emotion is simmering inside her and squashes it down.

"That's absurd," she says. "This band was my idea. Why would I get up on that stage if I didn't want to be seen?"

"There's a difference between being seen and being known for who you really are," Luca says quietly. "You know that, Flo."

Florence regards her with a cool indifference that would almost look genuine if Luca couldn't see how much her hands are shaking. "I told you," she says. "This band is the most important thing to me. I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that my priorities had changed."

Luca looks at her, disbelieving. Florence looks back at her. It feels like a stalemate, and also like they just went three rounds in the ring. Luca isn't used to caring enough about something to fight for it. She doesn't know what she expected, but it wasn't this hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

In the end, she's the one who breaks eye contact first.

"Yeah," she says numbly. "I'm sorry too."



With an overnight stay in Paris, it takes them two full days to get back to London. Luca spends the time alternating between napping and stewing in the awkwardness between her and Florence. Florence looks just as drained as Luca feels; her face is pale, and there are deep shadows under her eyes, which don't meet Luca's once.

In hindsight, trying to talk about her feelings the night before their return home may have been a spectacularly stupid idea. Then again, Luca doesn't think the results would have been much different if she'd brought it up at any other time. At least now she knows where she stands—even if she would rather stand anywhere else.

They've almost reached the Channel Tunnel by now. It feels like a lifetime has passed since they crossed it in the opposite direction.

"Ready to get back to jolly old England?" Toni asks.

"Not particularly," murmurs Florence.

"I'm looking forward to my own bed," says Miray. She turns in her seat to beam at Florence. "And our cooking evenings. Can we make lasagna when we get back?"

The idea of the two of them laughing together in the kitchen in their shared flat while a home-cooked meal is in the oven makes something inside of Luca's chest ache. Tomorrow, she's going to wake up in her own room. She'll have to unpack her bags and do laundry and clean her dusty room. She'll have to go back to writing grocery lists and setting alarms and remembering to feed herself. The idea of returning to her everyday life makes her feel like she's standing at the bottom of some insurmountable hill with a rock she knows she'll never get to the top.

They cross the Channel Tunnel. Luca wishes it would last longer.

When they emerge on the other side, Toni turns on the radio. For the first time in almost three weeks, they receive the BBC. The first song they tune into is one off Juno's latest album.

"Do you think they're playing our song here as well?" Miray asks.

"They are," Izzy says, looking up from her phone. "One of my flatmates texted me the other day."

“And you didn’t think to mention that?” Florence asks disbelievingly.

Before Izzy can snark back, the song on the radio ends and the familiar voice of the afternoon show host sounds through the speaker. “*That was Juno Wilde with ‘Laika’! What a track. I—like many of you, I’m sure—can’t wait to hear her perform this one live at her London concert in two weeks. And her opening band, of course.*”

“Oh my God!” Miray says, turning up the volume.

“*Scorpio Season have caused quite the stir online. You could almost call their rise meteoric—a month ago, they were playing tiny pubs around London; now their music is all over social media. Recently, though, people have been speculating about the band being industry plants, and as much as I hate that term, in this case it seems it might actually apply.*”

Luca stiffens.

“Wait,” Izzy says. “What?”

“*In an interview on a breakfast show, Jeffrey Blake let it slip that the powerhouse front woman of the band, Florence Gibson, is none other than his daughter.*”

Florence has gone so still, Luca isn’t sure if she’s still breathing. Her knuckles are white where she’s gripping her own knees. The look in her eyes is pure animal panic.

“Toni,” Luca begins. “Can you—”

“Shhh.” Izzy leans closer to the radio.

“*He also revealed his plans to launch a new record label, Saturn Records, with Florence set to be one of their first signed artists. Looks like maybe the band life wasn’t for her. I have to admit, I’m a bit disappointed—with the way things were going, I had Scorpio Season down as one of this year’s breakout groups. On the topic of breakout groups—*”

At last, Toni turns off the radio. The van falls unnaturally quiet.

“That’s such bullshit,” Izzy says finally.

“I can’t believe your dad would go on a breakfast show and just *lie* like that,” Miray says. She twists in her seat, warm-brown eyes latching onto Florence’s. “What does he get out of it?”

“He did lie,” Toni says slowly, “right?”

“Of course he lied,” Izzy scoffs. “All that man *does* is lie.”

Florence still hasn't said anything. Luca feels like she's watching a car crash happen in slow motion. There's a ringing noise in her ears as she looks at Florence and Florence doesn't look back.

"Florence," Luca says, "what did you do?"

The bickering around her abruptly falls silent.

"Wait." Miray's voice is frail and high-pitched with anxiety. "Don't say . . . You aren't really thinking about leaving the band, are you?"

"Of course not," Florence says weakly.

The ringing in Luca's ears grows louder.

"Explain," Toni says. She seems calm in the way that an active volcano might seem calm.

When Florence finally speaks, she does so without looking at any of them. "I didn't know it was *his* label. When I looked it up, it didn't . . ."

"You can't be serious." Izzy whips her head around to look at Florence. "He was telling the truth? You signed with a label?"

"No." Luca doesn't think she has ever heard Florence's voice sound so faint. "I haven't signed anything yet."

"But you spoke to them," Izzy says. "You spoke to them, and you didn't tell us. What is *wrong* with you?"

"Izzy," Luca says quietly.

The inside of the van suddenly feels charged, like hot summer air right before the first clap of thunder.

Miray looks like she's about to cry. "When were you going to tell us?"

"It wasn't like that," Florence insists.

"What was it like then?" Izzy snaps. "You talked to a label behind our back to—what? Swap film recommendations? Chat about the weather?"

Florence averts her eyes. It's as good as an admission, and enough to make Luca feel sick to her stomach.

"Well." Toni's voice is perfectly even; the only sign that she's fuming is her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. "At least the tour's almost over. You won't have to endure too many more shows with us."

Florence says nothing. Luca tries to catch her gaze, but Florence won't look at her. She wants to take Florence by the shoulders and tell her to stop

joking, to tell them what really happened, because Luca refuses to believe this is it. Florence wouldn't do this. The band is the most important thing to her. She told Luca that herself not even forty-eight hours ago—it's the whole reason for all the suffering she's put them both through. If all this is true, then what was any of it for?

Luca desperately needs to hear her say it: *That's not what happened* or *I didn't* or *I would never lie to you*.

But Florence doesn't defend herself. She just sits there, jaw set and shoulders straight. Still refusing to be read. Still clutching every single one of her cards close to her chest, like she'll die if she shares even one of them.

Luca thinks she might hate her a little just then.

After a moment, Toni turns on the radio again. The volume rattles Luca's teeth, but it's still not loud enough to drown out her thoughts.



London is dark when they arrive. None of them speak as Toni maneuvers the familiar streets and double-parks outside Florence and Miray's flat.

The engine cuts off. Florence's lips part like she wants to say something, but all that comes out is a quiet, "Can you let me out?"

With a lump in her throat, Luca opens the car door and gets out. She helps Florence open the trunk and then lifts out her suitcase, depositing it gently at her feet.

"Thanks," Florence says without meeting her eyes.

"Florence," Luca says.

Florence doesn't look at her.

"Luca," Toni calls from inside. "Let's go."

Luca gestures apologetically to the car waiting behind them and gets back into the van. She watches with a sinking feeling as Florence disappears inside after Miray, fading out of view when Toni starts to drive.

30

Because she's tired and a coward and she doesn't know what else to do, Florence gets up early the next morning to avoid facing Miray and seeks refuge at the one place she can think of: the basement of The Hare and Oak.

On some sick, masochistic impulse, she ends up spending the bus ride there watching her father's interview. It's been a while since she last heard him speak and even longer since she's seen him in person. In her mind, he's perpetually frozen at the age he was when he first performed at Glastonbury, fresh-faced and rain-slick and just on the cusp of something. Sitting opposite the breakfast show host, he looks like he usually does: dressed in soft-looking slacks and a sensible brown sweater, his dark hair shot through with gray, his posture easy and relaxed.

It's jarring to hear her name from his lips.

"*My daughter, Florence—you might have heard of her and her band. They're touring with Juno Wilde right now. They're terrific. It's always nice to see fresh young talent coming up.*"

The host leans closer. "*Oh, Scorpio Season? I have seen some clips of them, but I didn't realize Florence was your daughter.*"

A small smile, his warm eyes crinkling behind his glasses. "*I'm actually in talks with her—I would love to get her signed for my new record label. She embodies everything we want to do with Saturn Records.*"

"*What about the rest of the band?*" the interviewer asks.

"*Right now, we are primarily interested in Florence. You know, I was in a band myself once—it can be great to start out, but if she's anything like me, she's going to want her creative freedom. I would love to be the one to give that to her.*"

It's at this point that Florence has to rip out her earbuds and take several deep breaths to keep herself from screaming or, worse, bursting into tears. Somehow, she managed not to cry yesterday; after getting back, she collapsed into bed and fell asleep within minutes, too numb to process how

thoroughly she managed to mess everything up. She refuses to start on the bus.

When she scrolls farther down, the comments on the video are about as awful as she expected.

Industry plants.

Disappointed but not surprised.

Money can't buy talent.

Florence has had nightmares that went exactly like this. There's a reason why she didn't mention her father when applying to be Juno's opening band, why she doesn't follow him on social media, why she goes by her mother's last name. When they made it, she wanted to be sure it was because of the music. None of it matters now; in the public eye, she has been reduced to being Jeffrey Blake's daughter, and short of faking her own death, there's nothing she can do to take it back.

Two years of work, undone in a three-minute interview.

It's almost funny, how she's gotten everything she wanted in the worst way possible. All her life, she craved her father's attention, and now she has it. She wanted to be known, and now all eyes are on her. It's a twisted, funhouse-mirror version of every childhood dream she's ever had.

Her father still hasn't replied to her texts. His label, on the other hand, has called her twice.

So has her mum. Florence knows she has to call her back at some point. She probably wants to know if the rumors are true: if Florence is truly considering signing with his label. It must feel like a betrayal to her. Not just the label, but everything that Florence has been doing: traveling the world and playing shows and not picking up the phone. How is she any better than her father?

The bus rocks to a stop. She jostles her way to the doors without meeting anyone's eyes.

As she gets off the bus, her gaze snags on the bus stop across the street. It's the same one where she met Luca what feels like a lifetime ago. The memory makes her throat constrict in a way that promises tears, but she swallows against the feeling.

At just a few minutes past eight in the morning, The Hare and Oak isn't open for business yet. When she lets herself in with the key that Earl gave her ages ago, she finds him puttering around behind the bar. One of his playlists—a mix of seventies rock and blues—is crackling from the speakers. The air smells like floor cleaner and spilled beer and the ghost of cigarette smoke.

The familiarity of it all nearly brings Florence to her knees. It's like the last three weeks of tour were nothing but an elaborate dream. That is, until her eyes find the newspaper clippings hanging in frames behind the bar counter, next to one of the postcards they sent.

London band opens for Juno Wilde on European tour

From Shoreditch to the big stage: Scorpio Season is a band to look out for

"Florence?"

She flinches at being addressed and finds Earl peering at her from behind his reading glasses.

Summoning a smile takes every ounce of strength. "Hello. I thought I'd drop by." She aims for breezy and ends up in the vicinity of pitiful. Her eyes sting traitorously. "How are you? Is that a new shirt? Did you miss—"

She doesn't get to finish her sentence. Suddenly, Earl is in front of her, and then her face is pressed into his shoulder and his hand is on the back of her head and Florence can't help it—she crumbles. The sob that wrenches itself out of her chest is muffled by Earl's flannel as she sags against him, feeling impossibly small as he wraps his arms around her.

"I hate him," she manages. "I hate him so much."

"I know," Earl replies, clumsily petting her hair. "I know."

They stand there for a few seconds, swaying on their feet a bit, like she's a small child Earl is trying to soothe. Florence can't stop heaving these big, sobbing breaths, her fingers curled helplessly into Earl's flannel, desperate to cling to him in a way she hasn't felt since she was little.

"It was going so well and then I—" Another sob cuts her off. "I went behind their backs. And now they probably don't even want to speak to me —"

“All right,” Earl says, pulling back. “Pump the brakes on the self-loathing train. Have you eaten?”

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she shakes her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Tough,” Earl says, and disappears into the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, Florence finds herself sitting at the counter, picking at a sandwich while Earl goes back to stocking the fridge.

“I never should’ve agreed to speak to a label without talking to the band first,” she says quietly.

“Spilled milk,” Earl says without looking at her. “Et cetera.”

“You’re really bad at this comforting thing,” she murmurs.

“Eat your breakfast,” he returns.

Fighting against the lump in her throat, Florence nibbles at her sandwich. She only manages a few bites, too sick from crying and too full of guilt to stomach more.

“Your father,” Earl says after a moment, “is not a good man.”

She sniffs. “You don’t say.”

“Truly one of the most self-absorbed people I have ever met,” Earl goes on, unfazed. “And that was even before he had the nation at his feet.”

Florence’s eyes drift to the photo taped to the wall behind the bar: a Polaroid of her father, Earl, and the two other bandmates her father ditched the moment he got the opportunity to go solo. They can’t be more than twenty years old, posing against a graffitied wall in leather jackets and shades. In the picture, her father’s arm is slung over Earl’s shoulders, his mouth pulled into a lazy smile around an unlit cigarette.

“I didn’t want to leave the band,” Florence feels compelled to say.

Earl finally turns to look at her. “I know,” he says simply. His face is uncharacteristically earnest as he braces his hands on the counter and studies her. “Florence. Why do you think he did it?”

“What?”

“Why did he do it? Why did he choose right now to tell the world that you’re his daughter, after all these years? Why did he try to get you signed?”

She shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“Have you seen the headlines about him lately?”

Florence thinks it’s safe to assume she has read every single one. “Yes.”

“What do they say?”

“That he’s a homophobic prick who doesn’t deserve a platform.”

“Right,” Earl says patiently. “And what are you known for?”

Her heart sinks as understanding sets in. “Oh.”

“Lucky bastard’s always had a talent for capitalizing on the moment. Your career takeoff couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Florence stares down at her hands, clenched white-knuckled in her lap. She wants to meet him in a fist fight. She wants to call her mum and weep. She wants to untangle her DNA strands and purge herself of everything that can be traced back to her father.

“What does your band think about all of this?” Earl asks after a moment.

“I don’t know.” Mortifyingly, the simple mention of them is enough to make her eyes well up again. “I haven’t heard from them since yesterday.”

“And yesterday?”

“They were angry.” Florence blinks rapidly, trying to hold back the hot sting of tears. The only things worse than Izzy’s open hostility and the cold fury in Toni’s voice were Miray’s hurt and Luca’s quiet disbelief. “They were right to be. I ruined our image.”

Wiping down the counter with an old dishrag, Earl frowns at her. “I think you’re taking a little too much credit there. You can hardly be blamed for being your father’s daughter.”

Florence’s breath hitches as a sob tries to claw up her throat. “I—I feel like he *took* something from me. I know that I’m privileged. I *know* that. Mum paid my tuition and let me take music lessons and I know I could always fall back on her if this doesn’t work, and you let us have the basement and taught me how to play guitar, and I don’t take any of it for granted, I promise I don’t. But *he* didn’t do this. He didn’t teach me how to write songs. He didn’t come to my shows. He didn’t introduce me to his colleagues or explain how this industry works. I made this happen. *We* did. And now . . .”

“Now he hijacked your success to help his own image,” Earl says simply.

There are so many tears, she can hardly see his face through them. “I don’t know what to do when this tour is over. This is all I know how to do.”

Earl’s bushy eyebrows furrow. “Who says you can’t keep making music?”

“I don’t know how to do this on my own. And I don’t think I want to if no one else cares about me.” She presses her hands against her eyes in an attempt to quell the tears that just keep coming. Her voice cracks as she adds, “When people fall out of love with you, there isn’t a lot you can do to change their mind, is there?”

With a sigh, Earl procures a box of tissues from somewhere behind the counter and slides it over to her. “Are we talking about your audience or the band?”

“Both,” Florence manages. She blows her nose. “And also . . .”

“Luca,” Earl finishes for her. “Yes. I saw.”

Her heart feels like it’s clutched in a vise grip as her mind returns to the hostel lobby in Zurich. *I know you didn’t mean to let anyone see this much of you. But I have. And I’m sorry if that scares you, but I’m not sorry it happened.*

In all her determined earnestness, Luca was being braver than Florence will ever be, and Florence thanked her for it by denying everything that happened between them. She told herself she was acting in the interest of the band. What a world-class coward she is.

The worst thing is that even with the horrible way Florence treated her, Luca was unwaveringly kind to her the next day: getting her coffee, carrying her luggage to the van, looking at Florence with a good-natured acceptance that made Florence feel sick to her stomach. Luca might be the kindest person Florence has ever met. Thinking about her waking up only a couple minutes away from the pub makes her chest tighten.

“I miss her,” she says quietly.

Eyes cast toward the ceiling, Earl pinches the bridge of his nose. “Lord give me strength.”

“I hurt her,” Florence adds, almost inaudible. “Badly.”

“Badly enough you won’t be able to fix it?”

“Badly enough that I’m scared to try.”

Earl casts her a meaningful look. It's the one he always wears when he's about to give her a hard-to-swallow pill. "I suppose we'll never find out what could've been, then."

Florence sniffs. "I hate it when you do that."

"Go cry somewhere else, then," Earl suggests.

Florence blows her nose again for good measure. With the tissue crumpled in her hand, she asks, "Is it all right if I stay here for a while?"

"You have a key, don't you?" Earl grumbles and turns back to his fridge. "I can't very well throw you out."

Florence almost manages a laugh, though it sounds decidedly wet. She's still crying, but at least the tears are coming quietly now, streaming down her cheeks in a way that doesn't demand attention. She lets it happen, too tired to try and stop them.

"But Florence?" Earl says.

"Yes?"

Earl reaches across the counter to give her head a pat. It's so gentle he almost sets off another round of sobs. "Call your mum back, yeah? She's been messaging me all morning asking if you've dropped by."

Another sniff. For the first time in weeks, she feels homesick. "Okay."

"Okay," Earl echoes softly before he goes back to wiping down the counter, humming along to his playlist while he wakes up the pub and Florence sips her lukewarm tea.



She calls her mum a few hours later, curled up on the sofa in their practice room while the muffled noises of the pub drift through the ceiling. Her mum picks up on the third ring.

"Florence?"

"Mum," she says. She tries to sound normal, but her voice trembles traitorously even on that one syllable.

"Oh, darling," her mum says. "I'm so sorry."

And that's all it takes to make the tears spill over for the second time that day. Florence presses her face into the dusty arm of the couch to muffle a small sound.

"Are you still at Earl's?"

"Y-yeah."

"Good. That's good." Her mum blows out a breath. After a moment, she asks, "Did he reach out to you at all?"

"No," Florence says. "Not once, Mum. I didn't know the label was his. I wouldn't have called them if I had."

It feels imperative, suddenly, that her mum understands that Florence didn't do this on purpose—that she never wanted to work with her father, that the idea alone is enough to make her feel ill.

"I know, darling. I know." From the other end of the line, there's a small sniff. More tears spill down Florence's cheek at the idea that her mum is crying as well, right there in her office.

"Mum, are you mad at me?" she manages, voice small.

"Mad at *you*? Why would I be mad at you, Florence?"

"I don't know." She presses her eyes shut and tugs her knees closer. She's trying so hard not to make any sounds, but she can't stop the tiny hiccup from wrenching free. "I just—I know you hated that he toured. And now I'm doing the same, and I . . . I'm so scared that he's the reason. That I only did all of this because I wanted to be like him, because I thought it would prove something. I don't . . ." The next hiccup sounds closer to a sob, torn from someplace deep. "I don't want to be like him, Mum."

"Florence," her mum says, and this time her tone is different. This is the version of her mother who did Florence's homework with her like she was running her through drills. This is Kelly Gibson, PhD. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"It is. You're nothing like him. And you aren't doing this to—how did you phrase it? *Prove* something to him." She can hear the creaking of her mum's office chair as she sits up straighter. "Let me tell you something. One of the very first words you spoke, after all the usual ones, was *song*. Once you'd figured it out, you said it all the time. *Song, song, song*, until I turned on the radio." A small, huffed laugh. "You'd try to babble along

every time I sang you a lullaby, right up until you fell asleep. After you got your first CD player, you would spend hours lying on your bed, just listening to the same album over and over. You were writing songs when you were eight years old and performing them for anyone that would listen. That is *yours*, Florence."

Florence is properly crying now, staining the sofa with her tears, shoulders shaking silently.

"You have always wanted this so much," her mum says. "You wanted this since before you had the words for it."

She's right. Florence thinks of the years of desperately pouring her all into the band. The rejections, the doubt. The familiar, stubborn thing at her core that refused to stop trying, flinging herself at a wall again and again in the hopes that it would somehow give way this time. *All you need is one yes. All you need is one person to believe in you and help you get a foot in the door.*

The door was just inching open. She doesn't know what she'll do if it turns out she's ruined it all. She wishes she could stop wanting so much, all the time. She wishes she could be satisfied with smaller, softer dreams: something she might actually reach, something that doesn't feel like constantly flaying herself open for the entire world to see.

She whispers, "I wish it didn't hurt so much."

"I think it's supposed to," her mum tells her softly. "That's how you know it means something."

31

It's strange to wake up alone. At some point over the last three weeks, Luca had gotten used to the sound of four other people breathing, to the disoriented joy of waking up in a new city. To the instinctive glance over at Florence, first thing in the morning.

The blare of her alarm drills into her skull. She gropes blindly around her sheets until she finds her phone and turns it off.

Pale light filters in around the edges of her blackout curtains, spotlighting the piles of laundry on the floor and her unpacked suitcase. The calendar alert on her phone flashes with the time of her shift at the café.

Groaning, she turns over and buries her face in her pillow. It feels like she never left. Already, the feverish thrum of playing in a sold-out venue feels more like something she saw on the telly than something she lived only three days ago.

She wonders how Florence is doing. The thought makes her stomach seize up, so she pushes it away.

It takes her twenty minutes to convince her limbs to move. She feels like she's moving on autopilot as she shuffles around her room, gets dressed, brushes her teeth over the tiny sink in the bathroom. Parker looks up from the video essay on his phone when she drags herself into the kitchen to grab a protein bar from her stash in the cupboard.

"Oh," he says. "You're back."

The smile she pulls together feels stiff and wrong on her lips. "I'm back."

"You didn't get any mail," he says, and goes back to looking at his screen.

The chocolate brownie protein bar tastes like nothing and somehow seems to grow more dense in her mouth as she chews. Luca forces herself to choke it down while packing her bag for work. She takes her meds, makes a half-hearted attempt at styling her hair, and then her phone beeps at her that it's time to leave.

Already, she's so tired. She feels like the last three weeks have burned through all her cognitive resources. If she didn't have a shift today, she knows she'd probably spend the day lying in bed and messing about on her phone in a prolonged state of executive dysfunction.

As she walks to the coffee shop, she wonders if her life has always felt this small, or if she's only noticing how it chafes against her now that she's had a glimpse of how much bigger it could be.



"There she is!" Jemma's voice rises like a bell over the whirring of the coffee machine. "Our local superstar hath returned."

Luca gives a weak laugh and lets herself be pulled into a hug. "I missed you too."

Pulling back, Jemma gives her a once-over. "How are you? You look exhausted. Didn't you only get back yesterday? What are you doing here already?"

"I'm fine. It's good to be back." Maybe if she repeats it enough, she'll start to believe it.

With her hip propped against the counter, Jemma gives her an unconvinced look. "*Are* you fine? I saw what people have been saying."

Luca's stomach lurches. "What are they saying?"

"You know," Jemma says awkwardly. "The industry-plant-nepo-baby accusations."

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"Oh." Luca swallows against her rising nausea. If Jemma has heard about the rumors, that means they must've escaped the music bubble and seeped

into the larger algorithm. Again, her thoughts wander to Florence. It's her name in most of the headlines, her picture next to her dad's like some kind of spot-the-difference game. She can't imagine what that feels like.

"Are they true?" Jemma asks. "The rumors?"

"Which part?"

"Is Florence really thinking about leaving the band?"

Luca busies herself by tying on her apron. Her fingers feel clumsy, like drumming has already replaced the muscle memory of such a familiar movement. Her mind flashes back to a car ride at the very beginning of tour. *I don't think I'd be suited for a solo career. I like knowing someone has my back up there.*

Luca knows Florence's hunger—has seen it in late-night conversations in lobbies and grueling practice sessions in the overheated basement of The Hare and Oak, in the way she looked at her father's Glastonbury performance and prowled their dressing room before every show. There is nothing Florence wants more than this. Luca thinks she would give up a limb for her dream to come true.

Luca doesn't think she would give up the band.

"No," she tells Jemma. "I don't think so."

"Oh, good." Jemma brightens. "I had a whole argument with my boyfriend about this. I just couldn't imagine it. Not when you two are dating."

At that, Luca almost drops the mug she's just taken from the dishwasher. "What?"

"Come on." Jemma laughs. "The videos? It's impossible to miss."

It hurts more than it probably should to shake her head and say, "It's not real."

"What do you mean it's not real? You two are literally—"

"She doesn't want me." The words fall from her mouth like a handful of marbles slipping from someone's hand, a sudden, jarring clatter.

Jemma stares at her, looking stricken. "But . . . I thought . . ."

Suddenly, Luca feels very close to tears. She's relieved when a customer chooses that moment to come up to the counter. Fixing a drink allows her to turn her back on Jemma and will back the horrible burning behind her eyes.

Her last relationship ended a little over two years ago. Heather made a point of listing every single one of Luca's shortcomings: She wasn't a good listener, she was messy, she was always late. Somehow, Luca doesn't think that any of these things are the problem now. Maybe there's a deeper, hidden flaw that Florence found out. Or maybe Luca just can't compete with the music.

This band is the most important thing to me. I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that my priorities had changed.

She doesn't know if she can do it—keep playing in the band and pretend like there was never anything between them. She wants more than the life she's living now, but she doesn't think she can stand being near Florence if an *almost* is all they'll ever be. What does that leave her with?

"I'm sorry," Jemma says when the sudden rush of customers is over. "I didn't mean to pry. It just seemed so obvious in the videos."

"It's all right." Luca offers her a strained smile. "You couldn't have known."

32

Florence spends the night at The Hare and Oak. Sleeping on the lumpy old sofa feels like a fitting punishment for the predicament she's landed the band in. Her back cracks as she gets up. With the thready old blanket she found still wrapped around her shoulders, she drifts upstairs and into the kitchen. Her distorted reflection in the electric kettle shows her looking like a very rumpled, deeply pathetic ghost come to haunt the pub.

Sitting at the bar sipping a severely oversteeped cup of Earl Grey, she turns on her phone for the first time in over twelve hours. The messages that come pouring in immediately make her want to turn it off again, but she forces herself to open her messenger app. Because she's an angel who couldn't hold a grudge to save her life, Miray texted her twice last night asking if she was all right. Florence shoots back a text telling her not to worry and that she's at the pub.

After that, she sets down her phone and takes another bracing sip of tea. Her head is pounding the way it always does after an extensive amount of crying. The shutters of the pub are drawn—with mere slivers of light slanting through the grimy windows and the sounds of the street muffled, it feels like she's in her own safe little cocoon, far away from the world. There's a part of her that wants to stay hidden away here forever. In here, no one can see her and make assumptions and measure her against her father.

Knock. Knock.

Florence almost jumps out of her skin at the sound of someone rapping on the pub's front door. She waits a few seconds to see if she imagined it. After a moment, the knocking starts up again.

Gathering her blanket around her, Florence floats over to the window. A peek through the gap between the shutters shows her a sliver of pavement—and Juno Wilde, dressed in high-waisted jeans and a white blouse and, inexplicably, holding a brown paper bag from the bakery down the street.

She fumbles to unlock the door, certain that she'll open it and find the doorway empty. But Juno is still there, smiling warmly at her as she says,

“Sorry for the ambush. Can I come in?”

Florence can do nothing but step aside. She has to blink a few times to confirm she isn’t experiencing some kind of visual hallucination. Juno Wilde still hasn’t disappeared.

Florence can do nothing but shut the door behind her and follow Juno to the bar. Taking the seat next to her, she is suddenly very aware of her unkempt hair and the fact that she’s been wearing the same clothes for twenty-four hours now.

“Miray told me I might find you here,” Juno says after a few beats of prolonged staring on Florence’s part. “I brought croissants.”

Florence’s eyes dart down to the paper bag. In place of an intelligent response, all she comes up with is a disbelieving “*Why?*”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” Juno says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Opening the bag, she asks, “Chocolate or plain?”

“Chocolate,” Florence answers automatically. “Please.”

“Good choice.” With a smile, Juno hands her a pastry. It’s still warm and smells heavenly. Staring down at it, Florence feels like she has stumbled into some parallel universe.

Juno tilts her head. “How are you doing, Florence?”

“I’m—” she begins before her throat closes up and she falls silent again. She’s already a mess; she refuses to cry in front of Juno Wilde, of all people.

In the face of her helpless silence, Juno’s eyes drift to the pictures on the wall behind the bar. “You know,” she says, “I had my first big scandal when I was your age and the press found out I was pregnant.”

“What did they say?”

“That I was a slut.” With perfectly manicured fingers, Juno plucks a piece off her croissant. “That I was a bad role model.” She pops it into her mouth. “That I was a horrible mother for continuing to make music instead of dedicating my life to raising a child.”

“That’s bullshit,” Florence says without thinking.

“Yes,” Juno agrees. “Just like what they’re saying about you now.”

Florence shakes her head. “It’s not the same. You did nothing wrong. This was my fault.”

“Oh?” Juno asks mildly. “Did you ask the press to run those headlines? Did you ask your father to bring you up on that talk show?”

Florence looks down at her hands and the croissant they’re still cradling. Picking at one of the buttery flakes, she asks, “Did you know who my dad was when you picked us as your opener?”

“No,” Juno says. “I picked you because I like your songwriting and because every time you get on stage, you play like you’ve got something to prove.” She pauses. “Candidly, knowing Jeffrey Blake was your father would have made me less inclined to take you on.”

Relief dissolves in Florence’s veins like honey in tea. Her lips attempt a small, fragile smile. “That’s fair. Have you met him?”

Juno makes a face. “A few times. He’s . . . exhausting, I think is the right word.”

Still smiling, Florence ducks her head. A companionable silence settles. Florence takes a small bite of her croissant—once she does, she finds it almost impossible to stop. She hasn’t realized, until now, just how hungry she is. Apparently, one can only survive off Earl’s pity peanuts for so long.

Opposite her, Juno looks right at home in the empty pub. The expression on her face is thoughtful as she brushes crumbs off her jeans and asks, “Can I count on you to finish the tour with me?”

“Yes,” Florence says. “I mean—I think so. Right now, the others are—we had a falling out. But I’m sure they’ll want to play the last few shows.”

Really, she isn’t sure at all. They’ve never fought before. There were her clashes with Izzy and the odd squabble during tour—about where to eat and where someone’s earbuds had gone and who got to use the bathroom first—but this is uncharted territory.

“It’s a huge advantage,” Juno says after a moment. “Having a band. It really is a built-in support network.”

“I guess,” Florence says. She sets her half-finished croissant down on the sticky bar counter. “I think I’m not very good at letting them support me. I’ve kept things from them that I shouldn’t’ve. I thought I was doing them a favor, but probably I was just being a dick.”

Juno's expression doesn't change; she still looks at Florence in that open, encouraging way, like there's nothing Florence could say that would make Juno think less of her. Florence thinks she would've made an incredible therapist, if the whole music thing hadn't worked out. "It's easy to think that we have to shoulder our problems on our own," Juno says. "But especially in this career, I think it's essential you find the people who will help you carry them. I know it's hard. But you've got to let people in. Florence the artist belongs to the public now. Florence the person should belong to someone else."

"I'm not sure I even know who Florence the person is," Florence rasps. She's been working toward this for so long, she feels like she has built herself around the idea of her stage persona. It's in everything she does: the matching pajama sets she wears even when it's just her in her bedroom, the lyrics she writes in a notebook instead of her phone because that's how her father does it, the way she sings in the shower, never out of tune even when there's no one around to hear her. Even her tearful breakdown in the basement last night felt like it was played up for some invisible camera. Behold: the broken artist weeping cinematically over a dusty keyboard.

She doesn't know if there's a single moment she hasn't been performing for the nebulous voyeur in her head. What if she's like one of those Russian dolls, but it's just masks and facades all the way down? What if there's nothing at the core of her at all?

Juno interrupts her spiraling thoughts with a thoughtful hum. "When was the last time you felt naked?" she asks. Before Florence can respond, she adds, "I don't mean literally. Hm. I guess the better way to phrase it is: When was the last time you felt a little bit too exposed in front of someone?"

The memory enters her mind unbidden: a hostel room in Vienna, her face tucked into Luca's neck on the second night of her vocal rest, needy and tear-stained and feeling unbearably safe in Luca's arms.

"Can you think of something?" Juno asks.

A small nod.

"Good. That's where you start."

Before Florence can say anything else, Juno's phone chimes. "That's my daughter. She's probably waiting for her breakfast." Sliding off the barstool,

she picks up the paper bag with the remaining pastries. “I’ll see you next week, all right? Make sure you eat enough and get some sleep. You look like you need it.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Juno has almost reached the door by the time Florence gathers the courage to call out, “Juno? Is it worth it?”

All of this, she means. *Being known. The headlines and the rumors and the constant performing.*

With her hand on the doorknob, Juno turns around to face her. “That depends,” she says. “What would you do if no one ever heard your songs? If you didn’t have a single fan? Would you keep making music?”

The answer comes from all the way down in Florence’s bones. “Yes.”

Juno smiles, warm and knowing. “Then you have your answer.”

A moment later, the door falls shut behind her. Florence stares blindly at the opposite wall as she plucks at what’s left of the croissant and eats it, flake by tiny flake.

Discussion: Scorpio Season

GeorgieBaby: I just read an article about Scorpio Season’s Florence Gibson being Jeffrey Blake’s daughter and I’m honestly so disappointed :(I love every song they’ve put out so far and was super excited to see them get more popular, but now it seems like Florence is just another industry plant. Also, after the whole Star Factory thing I just really hate Jeffrey Blake. Does anyone else feel this way?

joshh3nders0n: I’m so sick of these posh private school girls ruining rock music. Not surprised to hear they were planted.

milkywayoversurrey: i kinda get what you mean but tbh i don’t feel like this should impact your enjoyment of their music. from what i’ve seen they’re decently talented and seem to genuinely enjoy themselves. i do think it would be a shame if gibson left the band this early on

girlkisser09: 1) Pretty much anyone in music has some kind of connection nowadays and 2) What does hating Jeffrey Blake have to do with Scorpio Season? It’s not like Florence chose him as her dad. We don’t know what their relationship is like, if there even is one.

sammmyyyy: i get what you mean. it feels a bit shady to me how quickly they broke into the charts.

BerlinRetro: so being related to a celebrity automatically negates the value of your art?

TimeMachine72: Oh my God, can we stop it with the industry plant discourse already? I feel like 9/10 times these discussions are aimed at young women. Clearly, the band has worked hard to perfect their craft. I saw them open for Juno Wilde in Warsaw and they were terrific—their lead guitarist is incredibly impressive and Florence Gibson's vocals were on point the whole set. Very clean production, very tight. Personally, I think they have potential to be the next big thing, if the media doesn't tear them apart before then.

pumpkin__dance: lmao i don't believe a thing JB says until i hear confirmation from the band about florence's plans to leave. if i were related to him i would also try to hide any connection to him

daniel_millz_09: i know some of these girls from uni! they've spent the last three years playing pubs around london for a few quid. my mate is renting them his old van for this tour. if they're nepo babies, their nepo parents are neglecting them lol

33

The next day is more of the same. Luca goes to work. She does laundry. She spends three hours scrolling aimlessly through social media, unable to tear herself away. She goes to the gym for a punishing workout that leaves her brain briefly quiet and her entire body aching.

She checks in with Miray, asking if she knows how Florence is doing. Miray tells her that Florence didn't come home the previous night. Luca knows she's at the pub but squashes the urge to show up there and see if she's all right. Florence set a boundary with her; they're bandmates and nothing else. The rest of the band are keeping to themselves, so Luca does the same, even as the distance makes her feel sick to her stomach.

On the second evening back in London, Luca takes the train to Kent.

She hasn't been home since her dad's birthday in May. She told her parents it was because she was busy with uni; in reality, she has spent the last few months desperately trying to avoid having a real conversation with them. She's never been a very good liar.

When she gets there, the rest of her family is in the garden, setting the table and bringing out drinks while Mason oversees the barbecue. Her mum is the first one to spot her.

"Luca!" she exclaims, hurrying toward her with a salad bowl clutched in both hands. Her ginger hair is pulled into a messy bun, and she's wearing denim overalls, stained green at the knees from gardening. "Oh, it's so good to see you. I feel like it's been ages!"

The sight of her dimpling smile makes Luca feel simultaneously safer and closer to tears than she has since coming back. "Hi, Mum," she says as her mum pulls her into a one-armed hug. The plastic bowl presses against Luca's tummy.

Her mum only lets go of her when her dad clears his throat behind her. "Excuse me?" he says in exaggerated exasperation. "Do I also get to greet my child?"

Luca lets out a strangled laugh and goes to him.

Her father's hugs are the best she knows: tight and thorough and the perfect duration. They remind her, a little, of the weighted blanket she bought last year. "Good of you to show your face around here," he says, still in that joking cadence he uses when he's in a good mood. "We were afraid they were keeping you in a little rock star factory to clone you and make a million more little rock stars."

"I'm not a rock star," Luca protests, hiding a small, involuntary smile against his shoulder.

"Yet," Henry says. His greeting is a hand appearing out of nowhere to ruffle her hair.

Last up is Mason. He's slightly sunburnt and wearing a silly apron that says **Kiss the cook**. He gives her a tight squeeze before ordering everyone to the table.

Luca ends up sitting between her mum and Henry at the large wooden table under the old apple tree with a pile of grilled veggies and soy steak on her plate. Green-tinted sunlight dapples through the leaves as a handful of bumblebees buzz in the lavender her mother planted when Luca was little. It's homey and peaceful and long overdue, and all Luca can think about is Florence, shut in a room somewhere, mourning the premature death of her music career at the hand of her own father.

The picture enters Luca's mind unbidden: Florence, sitting at the table next to Luca's dad, sunbathed and laughing as she sips a glass of Luca's mum's homemade rhubarb lemonade. It's completely unrealistic. Still, Luca can't suppress the sharp stab of longing at her center.

"So." Her mum beams at her as she breaks off a piece of bread. "How is the tour going?"

Luca hesitates. How is the tour going? Thrilling. Exhausting. A feverish blur of shows, only broken up by crystal-clear snapshots of her evenings with Florence. "It's been . . . a lot."

"How are the other girls?" her dad inquires. "Are they nice?"

Luca laughs against her will. With the exception of Miray, she doesn't think *nice* accurately describes any of them. "They're . . . eccentric." A vision of Florence, barefoot and with her hair wild, licking honey off a spoon while swaying to Jeff Buckley in an Amsterdam changing room. "And talented." Toni, tuning her guitar by ear in a stuffy hostel room,

fingers dancing across the strings while she chatted with her brother on the phone. “Intimidating. But really lovely when you get to know them.” Izzy’s cool rings brushing Luca’s jaw all the times she did Luca’s makeup, intensely focused while turning Luca’s face this way and that.

Henry sends her a meaningful grin. “And how were things with Florence?”

This might be the worst part: the whole world thinking that Florence is madly in love with her, when they have only shared a single kiss—one that Florence regrets, even if she didn’t say it in so many words. The whole thing feels like some cruel cosmic joke.

She takes a large sip of lemonade before she can get out, “Good. Everything was really good.”

Mason raises a brow at her. “If everything was so good,” he ventures, “why do you look like someone has died?”

All of a sudden, Luca can’t stand to look at him anymore. “Haven’t you seen the news?” she asks her half-eaten plate.

“Those rumors?” her dad asks. “Don’t worry about them, love. Gossip means you’ve made it.”

Luca smiles weakly. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Did something else happen?” Even without looking up, Luca can tell her mum is frowning.

The silence that settles over the table is broken only by the humming of the bumblebees and the chirping of birds and the next-door neighbors’ son yelling something across the garden. Luca keeps staring at her plate, like maybe the splash of ketchup on it will reveal an answer that won’t make her burst into tears at her parents’ barbecue.

Finally, Henry speaks again. “You’re in love with her,” he says quietly. “Aren’t you.”

Luca buries her face in her hands and gives a tiny, terrible nod.

“Oh, sweetheart.” There’s the rustle of chair legs dragging through overgrown grass, and then her mum is there, wrapping her arms around Luca from behind, smelling like soil and smoke and home. “What happened?”

It really doesn't help that every single person at the table already knows who this is about. The whole world has seen her stare at Florence on every stage they've played. The only thing worse than being rejected is being rejected after openly falling for someone with the entire internet as a witness.

"It's my fault," she says wretchedly. "I knew she had different priorities."

I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that my priorities had changed.

Her mum's arms tighten around her. "I just don't understand," she says. "It seemed so obvious, in the videos."

"Yes, well." Luca sniffs. "She is a very good performer."

"What does this mean for the band?" Mason asks.

"Surely, they'll keep playing," says her mum. "Right? You've come so far. It would just be silly to give up now."

"Every good band has a little scandal," her dad agrees.

"And a little relationship drama," Henry adds.

"Besides, you still have the UK shows." Her mum, again. "I've been looking forward to seeing you in Hyde Park all month."

"You've always been so in love with the drums," her dad says. "And now is the perfect time to experiment. Maybe you can even earn a little money on the side while you finish your degree."

Luca freezes.

"Exactly," her mum is saying. "My boyfriend in uni played in a band, did I ever tell you? They weren't very good, not like you girls, but it was so much fun, hanging around those bars, helping him write songs, getting to say *My boyfriend is a music—*"

"I dropped out of uni," Luca blurts.

Silence.

"I dropped out," Luca says again, in case they didn't understand. "Three months ago. I've been working at a café."

Henry is the first to collect his jaw off the floor. "*Now?*" he asks. "We're doing this *now*?"

Against her will, Luca laughs. It comes out sounding slightly unhinged, but she can't stop it as she finally looks up at the incredulous faces of her

parents.

"Luca," her mum says quietly. "Is this a joke?"

"I meant to tell you sooner." Under the table, Luca's fingers lock together tightly enough to hurt. "I didn't want you to be disappointed."

Her mum's arms are still wrapped around her. Luca can feel her exchange a long glance with her dad over her head. "Luca, sweetheart," she whispers. "You could never disappoint us."

"But . . . why?" Her father looks at her. It's always strange to see him unsmiling; the worried frown he's wearing now looks out of place on his face. "You were so excited to go to uni."

"I tried to be." She swallows painfully. "I wanted to be, because you were. You both went to uni, and Mason and Henry, and I . . . I didn't know what else to do."

"Luca," Henry murmurs, stricken.

"I don't want to be a teacher," Luca admits in a low rush. "I don't want to go back to school. When I was little, it made me feel so anxious and just so . . . *small*. When I couldn't sit still and teachers wouldn't let me wear my headphones during exams and I got in trouble *all the time*—and then I went to uni, and all those feelings came back. Like I wasn't good enough for any of it." She sniffs. "I decided after my third exam. I studied so hard. I had a study schedule and everything. And then the exam was handed out and I just froze. I had a stomachache for days before and I barely slept, and I wanted to do well but it took so much effort just to read a single stupid paper, and I—I failed." She exhales shakily. "I know I could've kept going. But I just didn't care about anything I was learning. Not enough to be so miserable all the time."

There's a moment of silence during which Luca tries, desperately, to get her breaths to stop hitching.

"It sounds," her mother says gently, "like you were doing your very best."

And that does it: Luca bursts into tears.

"Oh, love," her father says, and then he too rounds the table to lay a hand on her shoulder, the splay of his fingers a warm weight. "It's all right."

“You looked out for yourself,” her mum murmurs into her hair. “I’m proud of you for that.”

“Me too,” says Mason.

“Yeah,” Henry agrees, awkwardly patting her knee. “You’re much better at drumming, anyway.”

“But my band is falling apart,” she reminds him. Tears are still leaking uncontrollably from her eyes.

“Luca,” her mum chides. “Clearly, you know when it’s time to quit. Does this feel like that point?”

Luca knows the answer without a second’s thought. Uni felt like a giant weight pressing down on her chest. The band feels like the opposite. “No.”

“No,” her mum echoes. “Things might feel unsalvageable now, but it’s only been a few days. In two months, no one will even remember this.” She runs a soothing hand over Luca’s hair, brushing it away from her forehead. “I know you, sweetheart. You’ve never given up on anything that truly mattered to you.”

Luca hangs her head. “Okay,” she says meekly.

“Okay.” One last caress, and then her mum is letting go of her and clapping her hands. “All right. Let’s have some dessert, and then you can tell us all about this girl of yours.”

With a worn-out laugh, Luca wipes at her eyes. Her father drops a kiss into her hair before following her mum into the kitchen to grab bowls and ice cream. The sun is hanging lower now, spilling gold over the garden.

Luca breathes in deep. Her tears dry quickly in the warm summer air. For the first time since she received her certificate of exmatriculation, she feels like she’s setting down some invisible weight.

“If all else fails,” Henry says, nudging her with his elbow, “you can still join another band. Obviously, there’s a market for butch drummers.”

Luca is about to reply when her phone buzzes with a text. On instinct, she pulls it out to check who it’s from. Her heart leaps into her throat when she sees Florence’s name.

Hey. I hope you’re all right. I know it’s late, but I’m at the pub. I’ll be here all night if you’d like to come and see me.



It’s half past midnight by the time Luca makes it to The Hare and Oak. Music pours onto the pavement every time the door swings open, layering over the chatter of the smokers lingering by the entrance. Luca weaves through them with her hands buried in the pockets of her denim jacket and ducks into the pub.

It’s a Friday night, so every single seat is taken. The air is stuffy and heavy with the scent of cider and beer. Earl looks up from the pint he’s pulling just as Luca squeezes past the bar. Catching her eye, he jerks his chin toward the door that leads to the basement.

Palms clammy, Luca lets herself into the stairwell. There’s no light except for the thin glow slanting through the crack in the door to their practice room. It beckons like an invitation as Luca blindly feels her way down the uneven stairs.

She stops right in front of the door. The sound of a keyboard drifts from inside: a lazy, distracted chiming of keys, like a hand is meandering aimlessly up and down two octaves.

Luca tries to tell herself it’s a good sign Florence asked her to come here. Unless, of course, she wants to officially kick Luca out of the band, in which case it would be a very bad sign and Luca will have to find a way to flee the pub without anyone seeing her cry.

Luca runs a hand over her face. She won’t know unless she goes inside. The least she can do is make Florence look her in the eye while she says whatever she has to say.

With a tiny push of her hand, the door swings open. Immediately, the keyboard falls silent.

It takes every bit of courage in Luca’s bones to cross the threshold and close the door behind her. In the dim light of the small lamp on the coffee table, Florence looks pale as a sheet. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and her hair tumbles onto her shoulders in a riot of curls. She’s wearing black slacks and a frayed maroon jumper and an expression so openly miserable, it makes Luca’s heart squeeze painfully in her chest.

Her voice is a thready thing as she says, “You came.”

“Of course I came,” Luca says quietly. Her attention snags on the blanket on the sofa, the empty teacups scattered on the coffee table. “Jesus, Flo. You slept here?”

“I wanted to give Miray some space.” With her hands laced together in front of her, Florence gets to her feet. She looks . . . smaller, somehow. On stage, her presence takes up so much space that Luca forgets, sometimes, that she only just scratches five six. “Thank you for coming. I know it’s late and you were probably—”

“Miray isn’t angry at you,” Luca cuts her off. “I texted her earlier. I think mostly she’s worried.”

“Oh. I thought . . . it would be fine if she was. Angry, I mean. If all of you were. Lord knows I would be angry if one of you went behind my back to speak to a label. Not that any of you would, of course, I just—”

“Florence.” Luca takes a small step closer. “Why did you ask me to come here?”

Florence breaks off. One of her hands comes up to rake through her hair. Some of her curls catch on her rings, but she barely seems to notice. Luca is wearing her glasses, so she can see that Florence is shaking, her breaths coming fast and shallow. “I know I messed up,” she says, and the words sound like she has to wrest each one from someplace deep inside. “I betrayed your trust. I kept secrets from you. I wasn’t honest with you, or with myself.”

Her next breath hitches audibly. “I tried to convince you that there was nothing between us. That I don’t care . . .” Another breath, this one almost like a sob. “That I don’t care about you. That the band is more important to me than you.”

Luca can’t help it: She takes another step, and another, until she’s close enough to Florence to count her lashes. “Hey,” she says helplessly. “It’s all right.”

Despite the tears glistening in her eyes, Florence gives a firm shake of her head. “No, it’s not. You were so brave, and I just threw it all in your face. I hurt you.”

At that, Luca’s own throat threatens to close up. Her hand comes up to cup Florence’s cheek. Thought doesn’t factor into the action; the impulse bypasses her executive functions completely, driven by nothing but the

needy, frightened *want* that's been simmering under Luca's skin ever since Florence texted. "You did," she says quietly, tracing her thumb over Florence's brow.

"It wasn't true," Florence whispers. "I think about you all the time. I dream of what I want to do to you. When you're not around, I think about what you're doing, how you're feeling, who you're with. You've been in every song I've written since we met." Her next breath shudders out of her as she leans into Luca's touch. "I care about you more than I care about the music, which is terrifying because for my whole life the music has been all that ever mattered. I don't think I know who I am outside of it, but I want to find out. So . . . that's why I asked you to come here. Because I wanted you to see me."

And, fuck. Luca does. Standing there, barefoot and trembling in the half-light, there's not a trace of pretense about Florence. Luca feels like she sees more of her than she ever has—more, perhaps, than she did when she saw Florence naked all those weeks ago.

A tear clings to Florence's lashes and falls, streaking down her cheek and then Luca's wrist. "I feel like I've spent the entire summer trying to keep my distance from you," Florence says wretchedly, "but it's just made me want you more. I don't think I can do it anymore. I'm so tired of it."

"Then don't," Luca says. Florence's pulse beats hummingbird-quick where Luca's palm is cupping the side of her neck. "Don't stay away. We'll figure it out—the band and the future, all of it. But don't hide yourself from me. Don't stay away."

The look on Florence's face teeters somewhere between disbelief and cautious hope. Like maybe she expected to have to do more groveling. Like she doesn't know that Luca has been dreaming of this for weeks. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"But—" Florence begins, and Luca truly can't listen to her trying to come up with any more stupid reasons why they shouldn't be together.

"I'm going to kiss you now," she cuts her off.

Florence blinks up at her, puffy-eyed and caught off guard. "Oh," she says. "Okay."

Luca takes her face in both hands and leans in.

At the first brush of their lips, Florence makes a quiet, hurt noise. A heartbeat later, her arms wind around Luca's neck, and there's a hand in Luca's hair, tugging, and it's like something inside of Luca gives way. Every time she's wanted to kiss Florence while they were on tour—every brush of their thighs in the van, every charged glance on a stage, every minute they spent sharing a bed—suddenly crashes into her with all the force of a double-decker bus. She doesn't know how she managed to go without this until now. She doesn't know how she's ever supposed to do anything else, not when Florence is finally kissing her like she means it, hungry and demanding, biting at Luca's lower lip until it stings.

There you are, Luca thinks fondly. Out loud she says, "I missed you."

"Me too," Florence pants. She tastes almost like she did when they kissed in the hostel in Vienna, like salty tears and lingering peppermint tea.

Luca presses closer, a hand slipping under Florence's jumper to rest on her lower back. The skin there is soft and overheated, and Luca is dizzy with the idea that she gets to do this—touch her, unhurried, on purpose. Her palm fits perfectly against the curve of Florence's spine as Florence arches against her.

"Luca," Florence murmurs.

"I know," Luca returns, dazed.

"We could have had this all summer."

"Doesn't matter," Luca says, because it doesn't. She's going to make up for every single missed opportunity, now that she's allowed. The thought makes her laugh, giddy with the realization that there'll be a next time, and another and another and another.

"What is it?" Florence pulls back to look at her, cheeks flushed and pupils swallowing her irises. She's a mess. Luca can't stop grinning.

Smoothing a hand over Florence's hair, she says, "I have a plan."

"Oh?"

"You come home with me." Another off-center kiss. "You take a shower." Kiss. "I cook something for you—" Kiss "—and you eat it." Kiss. "Then we go to sleep and don't set an alarm." One more kiss, soft enough to wrench a small noise from Florence. "And then, in the morning, you stay."

She expects refusal, or at the very least hesitation. Instead, Florence looks up at her, eyes shining in the dim light, and says only, “Yes.”

“Yes?” Luca echoes.

For the first time that night, a tentative smile steals onto Florence’s face. “Yes. To all of it.”

“Oh,” Luca says. “Good.”

Florence pulls away. It takes her a few minutes to find her shoes and stuff her things into an overnight bag. Luca waits by the door, taking the bag and Florence’s hand as they emerge back into the pub. She still hasn’t stopped grinning by the time they slink past Earl, throwing him a thumbs-up behind Florence’s back when he catches her eye and offers an approving nod.

34

Florence has replayed the night she spent in Luca's room so many times that walking back into it now feels like stepping into a memory. Luca lets go of her hand to turn on the little lamps strewn about her dresser and bedside table. Each one lights up another corner of the room, like tiny spotlights pointed at different set pieces on a stage. Here, the unmade bed. There, a laundry basket filled with clothes waiting to be put away. The skateboard leaning against the closet. The sticky note on the door—*Keys? Phone? Meds?*—and the familiar fidget toy on the desk. The plants on the windowsill that Luca's roommate must have kept alive in her absence. The posters on the wall, peeling at their corners. Tiny trinkets Luca collected on tour—a statue of the Eiffel Tower, a sticker from the tattoo shop in Warsaw, a pair of thrifted sunglasses she picked up in Berlin—lined up on the shelf like trophies.

Florence watches as Luca crouches in front of the closet and pulls out a towel and a change of clothes for her. Their fingers brush as Luca hands them to her, and she can't help but laugh, quiet and nervous in the two a.m. hush. "This feels familiar."

Luca's eyes crinkle as she smiles. "Shower, then food?" she asks.

"Okay," Florence agrees, but instead of leaving the room, she steps closer, one hand cradling the towel to her chest while the other curls loosely into the front of Luca's shirt. It only takes the faintest tug to get Luca to lean down, an indulgent laugh muffled against Florence's lips. The kiss is soft enough to make her toes curl. After weeks of denying herself this, the ease with which they fall into each other is dizzying.

It's Luca who pulls away first, ignoring Florence's displeased huff. "Go take a shower," she says, lips pressed to Florence's temple. "I'll be in the kitchen." She laughs again when Florence's eyes dart to the perfectly good bed right behind them. "Come on."

Her fingers thread through Florence's, thumb tracing an absentminded circle on the back of her hand as she leads Florence down the dark hallway.

She opens the door to the bathroom and flicks on the light. “Try not to fall asleep,” she says. “I’m just down the hall if you need me.”

She’s joking, but falling asleep in the shower feels like a real possibility at this point. Florence’s limbs are like lead as she sets the clothes and towel down on the closed toilet lid and moves to take off her jumper. She barely slept the last two nights. Waiting for the water to run warm, she feels herself crash, exhaustion dragging at her as the room steams up.

She steps into the shower, pulling the flower-patterned curtain behind her. For all her resistance, a pleased sigh slips from her mouth as the warm water washes the tension from her neck and shoulders. The water pressure is better than at her and Miray’s place, and definitely better than at most hostels they’ve stayed at. Florence tilts her face into the spray, feeling it wash away the tear tracks and basement dust.

There’s a familiar bottle tucked into the rack on the wall. Florence squeezes some of it into her hands, smiling stupidly at the tiled wall as the shower begins to smell like Luca’s shampoo—that same evasive, woodsy smell that Florence associates with burying her face in the crook of Luca’s neck and falling asleep on the same pillowcase. Florence’s hair is going to be hell to work with tomorrow, but right now she couldn’t care less.

By the time she steps out of the shower, her skin is a tender pink. She feels—not quite reborn, but cleaner than she has since they came back from tour. She towel-dries and finger-combs her hair, slips into the clothes Luca picked out for her, and shuffles back into the hallway.

It smells heavenly, like garlic and herbs. When she reaches the kitchen, Florence catches herself on the doorframe, heart skittering in her chest as she takes in the scene in front of her. Luca is standing at the stove, rocking back and forth on her feet, humming softly to a tune that only she can hear. She must have changed while Florence was in the shower; in place of jeans and a T-shirt she’s now wearing sweatpants that ride low on her hips and a black tank top that shows off the scorpion on her arm. Her bicep ripples as she stirs something in a pan. Her copper hair falls into her tired, lovely eyes.

After a moment she must feel Florence watching her. She turns around with a smile ready on her lips, but it slips off her face as she takes in Florence. Her gaze dips down to Florence’s bare legs before moving up to where they disappear into a pair of Luca’s boxer shorts and then farther,

taking in the shirt hanging off Florence's shoulder and the damp curls sticking to her neck.

Her voice has a rasp to it as she asks, "Good shower?"

"Yeah," Florence says, sounding strangely breathless. It takes only three steps to cross the kitchen and slot herself behind Luca. Her arms wind around Luca's waist as she gets on her tiptoes and peers over Luca's shoulder at the stove. "That smells so good."

"It's nothing fancy," Luca says, sheepish, nudging her glasses farther up her nose. "Do you like vodka pasta?"

At the question, Florence's stomach—which, until now, has made do with a single croissant and more peanuts than any person should probably ingest in a forty-eight-hour period—responds with an audible growl.

Luca's laugh rumbles through her body. Florence reluctantly lets go of her as Luca moves to take the pasta off the stove and gets two bowls from the cupboard.

"I texted Miray to let her know that you're here," she tells Florence over her shoulder.

Now it's Florence's turn to be sheepish. "Thanks."

She eats her pasta sitting on the kitchen counter with Luca crowded between her thighs. They could move to the table, but Florence prefers this; her back against the kitchen cupboard, her ankles crossed behind Luca's back, keeping her close. An intimate silence has draped over the kitchen, the only sounds the clinking of cutlery and the faint humming of the fridge.

"This is nice," she says as she watches Luca eat. There's tomato sauce smudged on her chin. Florence almost stops herself from reaching out to wipe it away before she remembers that she's allowed. Luca instinctively leans into the touch.

"Yeah," Luca agrees, setting her empty bowl down next to Florence. Florence shivers as her hands settle on her thighs.

She keeps eating, savoring the taste of the pasta and the feeling of Luca's attention trained entirely on her. There's still a part of her that worries about what Luca is seeing; she probably looks a mess, wearing clothes that aren't hers, tired and barefaced as she licks sauce off a spoon. But despite the lingering discomfort, it's difficult to be self-conscious when Luca is looking

at her the way she is now, a content little smile on her face, her hands a hot brand on Florence's bare skin.

She doesn't mean to get teary again, but it's hard not to. She's freshly showered and smelling like Luca's shampoo. She's wearing Luca's clothes. She's eating food that Luca made for her. After days of being alone in a basement convinced that everyone in the world hates her, this level of affection is almost too much to bear. She feels very small. Cared for. *Claimed.*

"What's wrong?" Luca asks, alarmed.

"I think I want to stay here forever," Florence says, and oh God, she really is seconds away from crying into her pasta now. She doesn't mean *here* as in Luca's kitchen, specifically; she means *here* in this moment, where there's no one else around and Luca is cupping her face in large, capable hands.

"Then stay," Luca says, like it could really be that easy, and kisses her gently on the mouth.

Florence only just has the presence of mind to set aside her bowl before she's kissing her back, hands slipping under the front of Luca's shirt to map out her soft tummy, heels digging into Luca's lower back to pull her impossibly closer.

Luca groans quietly into her mouth, and the sound is enough to make Florence feel half insane. She buries a hand in Luca's hair and tugs in an attempt to hear it again, but all she gets is a shuddery noise that escapes through Luca's nose. Luca leans back and takes off her glasses so she can kiss Florence even better, both hands on her jaw to tilt her face just so, and Florence sinks into it, drowning in Luca's taste and smell and heat until her lips are sore and the time on the microwave blinks three a.m.

They stumble into the bathroom and then the bed together. As they keep kissing, sleepy and messy and uncoordinated, Florence's brain makes a list of all the things she wants to do to Luca. She drifts off before she can get to the end of it.

35

They forgot to draw the curtains last night, so when Luca wakes up around ten in the morning, it's to sunlight streaming through the tall window. Already, the room has heated up, leaving her feeling overwarm and drowsy. Florence is lying behind her, curled up against her back with one arm slung over Luca's hip. Her soft breathing rustles the hair at the nape of Luca's neck.

Even though there's no one around to see it, Luca turns her face into the pillow to hide her grin. This is so much better than sharing a hostel bed. For the first time, she gets to bask in the warmth rolling off Florence. She gets to thread her fingers through Florence's. She gets to roll over and study Florence's sleeping face, count the birthmarks on her skin and the thick lashes fanning her cheeks.

It's unreal, seeing her in Luca's bed, with Luca's duvet twisted around her ankles and Luca's pillow swallowed up by the flood of her hair. She's still wearing Luca's boxer shorts and **Overworked and underfucked** T-shirt, which has ridden up enough in her sleep to expose a sliver of her stomach. The sight is enough to make Luca's mouth go dry, like she's a little Victorian boy seeing an ankle for the first time. Her hand moves on instinct, settling against the sleep-warm skin, fingertips sliding under the worn cotton to rest lightly over Florence's rib cage.

Florence stirs. Luca pulls back her hand like she's been burned.

"What're you doing?" Florence mumbles. Her eyelids flutter; it takes them a few tries before they stay open, and even then the eyes beneath them remain hazy and unfocused. She blindly grabs Luca's hand and returns it to its spot on her waist.

Ears heating up, Luca asks, "Did you sleep well?"

"Mm-hm," Florence confirms. She stretches, catlike, making the T-shirt ride up even farther. "You?"

"Mm-hm," Luca echoes. Her eyes are still glued to the spot where her fingers are splayed over Florence's side, her pinkie just shy of slipping

under the waistband of her boxer shorts. “Can I,” she begins, suddenly aware of the pulse in her neck, “can I get you off?”

“I don’t know.” Florence’s lips twitch as she opens her eyes to squint at Luca. “Can you?”

Huffing a laugh through her nose, Luca grabs Florence’s hips in both hands and pulls her close. There’s something easy about Florence this morning, as if the tension she was wound with when Luca met her at the practice room yesterday has melted away. At the first brush of Luca’s lips, her eyes drift shut, her own lips parting on a pleased sigh. She arches against Luca when she slides a hand to the small of Florence’s back, shivering when Luca presses a kiss to the sensitive spot beneath her ear. Luca wants every morning to start like this. She wants to learn Florence’s body like an instrument, like a song she can play without thinking, deep and instinctual.

Sliding her thigh between Florence’s earns her a shuddery exhale, Florence’s head dropping to rest on Luca’s shoulder. Her hips grind down, seeking friction, and Luca smiles because she knew they would. Trust Florence to go after what she wants.

She uses the hand on Florence’s lower back to press down, encouraging Florence as she rocks against Luca’s thigh in earnest. Her lips blindly find Luca’s, panting against her mouth. “Luca,” she says. “Come *on*.”

The haughty impatience of the command while she is all but melting in Luca’s arms is so quintessentially *Florence*, Luca can’t help but laugh. When she pulls back, she finds Florence’s cheeks flushed and eyes glazed. The sight makes something inside of Luca ache in a way that has nothing to do with her current state of debilitating horniness. She knows that when they leave this flat Florence will be back to impeccable lipstick and perfectly pressed slacks, but right now—breathless, needy, her hair spilling in wild curls over her shoulders, still wearing that *stupid* T-shirt—she couldn’t be farther from the Florence Gibson she shows to the rest of the world.

Her words from last night echo in Luca’s head again. *Because I wanted you to see me.*

“All right,” Luca says softly. “Here, let me . . .”

Florence helpfully raises her arms as Luca tugs the shirt over her head. The boxer shorts join it on the floor a second later, and there Florence is, naked and impatient on Luca's navy sheets. She looks like something out of a painting: dark curls falling down to her breasts, generous hips, stretch marks along her thighs that Luca has spent the last six weeks very pointedly *not* thinking about. There are faint tan lines along her neck and shoulders from days spent sightseeing around different cities that weren't there the last time they did this.

Luca realizes she's been staring for too long when Florence begins to squirm under her attention. "*Luca.*"

Luca ducks her head and drops her hands to the hem of her own T-shirt. "Sorry," she says. "Got distracted."

Florence laughs incredulously. Luca can feel her eyes on her as she clumsily strips. Once she's finished, she nudges Florence's thighs apart so she can kneel between them. Her hands roam up and down Florence's sides, unsure where to touch first. Looking up at Florence, she asks, "What do you want?"

"What do *you* want?" Florence returns. There's a fond smile on her face as her hand settles in Luca's hair, fingernails scratching her scalp. "I already picked last time."

"I . . ." Luca stops, cheeks warming. "I like it when you decide."

Florence considers her. She's looking at Luca like she wants to pick her brain apart, or study her under a microscope like some kind of specimen. Luca just barely withstands the urge to hide her face against Florence's thigh. "You do, don't you?" Her fingers tighten a fraction where they're still in Luca's hair. The sting of it sends a pleasant prickle down the back of Luca's neck.

"Yeah," she says dumbly.

Florence's thumb sweeps gently across her forehead. "Your mouth."

Luca immediately nods. "Do you want to use a dental dam, or . . . ?"

"I got tested only a few weeks ago," Florence says. "Unless you prefer it with?"

Luca is already dropping to her stomach. After a moment's consideration, she grips Florence's legs and hooks them over her shoulders. Looking up at Florence through her lashes, she asks, "All right?"

“Very,” Florence says.

The next noise she makes is a breathy moan that makes heat curl in Luca’s belly. She answers with a quiet sound of her own. It’s so good: Florence’s taste, the warm weight of her legs on Luca’s shoulders, the hand in her hair, alternating between petting and pulling. This time, Luca has the advantage of knowing how Florence likes it—firm and rhythmical and almost painfully drawn out. She can rely on her muscle memory. She doesn’t have to think at all.

“God,” Florence says. The word sounds punched out as her hips buck instinctively. “You’re so good, sweetheart. So lovely for me.”

Luca whimpers quietly. Florence’s words only make her head swim more. All her thoughts are honey, sticky and slow. She would do this forever if she could.

“Luca,” Florence whispers, and Luca can hear the smile in her voice, can feel it directed at her like the warmth of a second sun. “Luca, *fuck*. I love how much you love this. You should, *ah*—you should see yourself. Your—your *arms* and the muscles in your back and—”

She’s cut off by another moan. Luca can tell that she’s close from the way her breathing changes, turning shallow and quick.

“Don’t stop,” Florence gasps, and then she’s coming, shaking through her orgasm. Luca keeps going, drawing it out, until Florence pulls her back by her hair.

Luca blinks up at her, dazed. Her voice comes out slightly slurred as she asks, “D’you want another?”

Florence laughs. Her fingers tug again, more gently this time. “Come here.”

Luca presses a kiss to the inside of her knee before she shifts, bracing herself with her hands bracketing Florence’s head. The kiss Florence pulls her into is hot and deep and filthy. Forehead resting against Luca’s, Florence murmurs, “The strap-on in your nightstand. I’ve been thinking about it for weeks.”

Luca’s heart does something strange, then. She almost forgot it was there. It was a very optimistic impulse purchase she made during her first week in London. It’s only been used once, with a girl Luca picked up in a bar last autumn. Back then, Luca was the one who wore it. She only realized

afterward that it wasn't at all what she had wanted when she'd added it to her basket. There hadn't been any discussion about it—Emma, a femme with long nails and an intimidating confidence, had taken one look at Luca and determined that was the way to go. It wasn't bad, and if Florence wants it, Luca knows that she'll enjoy it too. It's just . . .

"I, um," she says. "When I bought it, I thought . . ."

"Yeah?" Florence presses a kiss to her jaw, the corner of her mouth. "What were you thinking when you bought it?"

Luca tries to say it and fails. She does the next best thing; she reaches over, opens her drawer, and pulls out the strap-on tucked away in the very back. Holding Florence's gaze, she gently deposits it on Florence's bare tummy.

"Oh," Florence says. There's an unmistakable hunger in her voice as she asks, "It's going to be like that?"

Luca nods mutely. Her heart is hammering like it's trying to evacuate her chest.

"All right." Florence's fingers curl around the harness, possessive. "Let me just figure this thing out."

They switch places, Luca moving to lie against the headboard while Florence familiarizes herself with the contraption. At Florence's instruction, Luca touches herself while she watches, getting herself ready. The sight of Florence sitting up on her knees, the straps of the harness digging into the pale skin of her hips, is almost too much. Her fingers are curled in a loose, confident circle as she coats the black silicone of the toy in lube.

"Flo," Luca says helplessly.

"Shhh." With her free hand, Florence reaches out to pet her hair. The gesture—soothing, gentle, a little distracted—somehow only stokes the need coiling tight in Luca's belly. "Almost there. You're being so patient."

It's an obvious lie. Luca is squirming and gasping and most definitely *not* patient. She feels like she's spent her entire life waiting for this exact moment, which is insane, because ten minutes ago she wasn't even aware this was something she wanted. It's like she's borrowing Florence's hunger, like she's learning how to want from her.

Or . . . no. That's not right. Obviously, Luca has wanted things before—it's just that, before she met Florence, wanting was a passive thing, like

watching a cloud pass by in the sky. Most of the time, she could see its vague shape, but she usually got distracted by something else before she could put a name to it, and the desire moved on. Now, wanting feels like something she *participates* in, conscious and deliberate. Wanting to be with Florence. Wanting to play music. Wanting this, now, Florence inside of her, heady and impossible.

She wonders if this is what Florence feels like all the time. She wonders how she hasn't lost her mind yet.

After what feels like an eternity, Florence shuffles closer. Her hand is wrapped around the base of the toy, almost casually, like she's never done anything else in her life. She looks unreal as she looms over Luca, haloed from behind by the midday sun. "Ready, sweet thing?"

"Yeah," Luca manages.

And then it's happening—Florence is kneeling over her and then she's pressing in, agonizingly slow. It feels bigger than Luca anticipated. She goes lightheaded with it, until Florence takes her chin in one hand and tells her to *breathe, you're almost there, sweetheart, you can take it*.

Luca breathes, and her body yields, bending so easily to Florence's will. Her head falls back against the pillows as her legs instinctively wrap around Florence.

Florence's eyes haven't strayed from Luca's face once, drinking in every minute shift of her expression as she tries to acclimate to the feeling. "How's that?"

Luca can't speak. She's not sure if she's ever known any words at all. The only thing that comes out is a single broken moan.

Florence smiles, soft and a little giddy. "That good?"

Helplessly, Luca nods.

Florence leans forward. Her hair spills around them like a dark curtain, shutting out the outside world as her mouth finds Luca's. Luca kisses her back on instinct, desperate and uncoordinated, panting against her lips.

"I'm going to move now, all right?"

"Y-yeah," Luca agrees, burying her face in the crook of Florence's neck.

The first rock of Florence's hips draws a gasp from Luca; the second has her whining, low and overwhelmed. The pace she sets is slow and deep.

Luca's whole job as a drummer is to keep time, to count out beats in her head, but she loses track almost instantly. Time has no meaning. There's only Florence's mouth and her murmurs and the heat building deep in Luca's core.

She doesn't notice she's been getting louder until Florence says, "You sound so pretty. Is this what it takes to get you to make some noise?"

Luca doesn't answer. Obviously, it is. Luca couldn't stop if she wanted to—at this point, the noises are coming nonstop, tiny little *ah ah ah* sounds that follow every one of Florence's movements. Her vision is blurring with tears. She never wants it to end.

"Sweetheart, are you crying?"

Luca thinks she might be about to. Sooner, if Florence doesn't keep going.

It takes effort to mumble, "Only 'cause of how good it feels."

"God," Florence whispers, picking up the pace again.

With anyone else, Luca might be ashamed, but it's hard to feel embarrassed when Florence is looking at her like she wants to swallow her whole, her eyes alight with something Luca can't quite grasp. To her foggy brain, it looks identical to the expression Florence gets when they step out on stage, but she's not in a state where she can puzzle out the meaning of that particular observation.

"I dreamed of this," Florence says, just as breathless as Luca by now. "I can't believe we get to do this."

It's all too much—Florence's words and kisses and the patient, ruthless way she's taking Luca apart. The tears finally spill over. Florence wipes them away with her thumb before finding Luca's hands. Intertwining their fingers, she presses Luca's hands into the pillow and asks, "Are you close?"

Luca nods, entirely too gone for words.

Florence squeezes her fingers before moving one of her hands down. Luca keens as Florence's fingers find her clit. The heat in her abdomen keeps building, despite the fact that Florence hasn't sped up at all—she keeps grinding into Luca, slow and inexorable, like she wants to keep Luca like this forever, just barely teetering on the edge. The idea makes her eyes well with even more tears, and somehow even that feels good.

“I know,” Florence murmurs nonsensically. Her gaze is fixed on Luca’s tear-streaked face as she says, her voice blurred around the edges, “Wish I could feel you. Bet you feel so good.”

“*Florence*,” Luca sobs, and then she’s hurtling over the edge, one hand still gripping Florence’s, her back arching off the mattress.

It goes on forever, not one big wave but several, each one so intense that Luca can barely breathe through it. She didn’t know it could feel this good. She doesn’t think it *should* feel this good; for one woman to wield so much power is insane. It’s *unethical*.

Just when Luca feels like she can’t physically take any more, Florence stills. She’s still inside of Luca as she leans forward and kisses her, first on the mouth and then on the forehead. It’s so tender, Luca almost tears up again.

“Still with me?” Florence asks softly.

Luca nods, slinging her arms around Florence’s neck to keep her near. The breeze from the open window ghosts across her sweat-slick skin. She can feel Florence breathing in sync with her. Her own body feels warm and heavy, the way it does after a good workout.

“Sweetheart,” Florence murmurs. “Are you going to let me get this thing off?”

The idea of feeling empty again so soon makes Luca whimper in a way that she’s sure she’d feel embarrassed about if she had more presence of mind. As it is, it’s the only way she can think to communicate the instinctive, desperate need to stay close.

Luckily, Florence seems to understand. “All right,” she soothes. “Let me just . . .”

Florence rearranges them so she’s propped against the headboard with Luca sitting in her lap. The change in angle draws a small noise from Luca. She’s shaking, a little bit, the same way she sometimes does after a show, when all the adrenaline wears off.

Fingertips trailing up and down Luca’s spine, Florence asks, “Was it good for you?”

There’s a thread of anxiousness in her voice that has Luca trying her hardest to put together a coherent sentence. “I think you melted my brain,”

she says, muffled against Florence's skin. Not her best work, but it makes Florence relax underneath her, so it's probably all right.

"You did so well," Florence tells her. "Took it like a dream."

Luca smiles, sleepy and pleased. She likes this so much: Florence's heart beating against hers, Florence's mouth kissing lazily down her neck, the drowsiness settling over her like a blanket. She could fall asleep like this, probably, tucked small and pliant into Florence's lap, the weight of Florence still inside her. The idea makes her heartbeat stutter.

"Can we stay like this for a bit?" she mumbles.

Florence shifts, settling more firmly against the pillows. Her tone makes something warm and tender settle behind Luca's ribs. "Anything you want."

Breathing slowly into the dark, safe space between Florence's neck and shoulder, Luca closes her eyes. She drifts like that for a while, Florence's fingers drawing patterns on her skin while Luca mouths mindlessly at her collarbone.

"I think you need to find a new drummer," she says once her brain starts to come back online. "I'm all jelly now."

One of Florence's hands settles lightly on the nape of Luca's neck. "Impossible," she says. "I told you. I'm keeping you."

"Oh," Luca says. Her mouth quirks into a dopey grin. The sunlight is warm and Florence smells like her shampoo and she doesn't have to be at work until three. This might be the best morning of her life. "All right, then."

Major Note Hot 100—Week of July 19, 2025

15 cry about it
popsicle

16 Are you happy now?
Ragebait

↑ 17 swallow me
Scorpio Season

18 3 More Seconds
COSMONAUTS

19 Summer Without You
Jackie Ace

36

“Have you heard anything from your dad?” Luca asks over breakfast an hour later.

Florence snorts into her cereal. “Of course not. Apparently, he only thinks of me when he’s on talk shows.”

It doesn’t come out as bitter as it might have last night. It’s difficult to feel any resentment while she’s sitting in Luca’s cluttered kitchen, the window cracked to let in a rare July breeze as the old radio on the counter plays the third “song of the summer” in a row.

Leaning back on her chair legs, Luca hums thoughtfully. Her hair is mussed and still damp from the shower they took earlier. In a black tank top and loose jeans, she’s almost painfully handsome. Florence’s eyes keep getting caught on her bicep and the stark ink of the fresh tattoo there. “I still don’t get why he did it.”

“Earl thinks he wanted to restore his image. Like having a lesbian daughter somehow negates all the homophobic bullshit he spewed.”

Luca frowns. “If anything, that makes it worse.”

“But didn’t you hear?” Florence asks lightly. “He didn’t mean any of it.”

There’s something oddly satisfying about the eye roll Luca gives in response.

They keep eating their breakfast in silence until, out of nowhere, Luca clears her throat and says, “I told my parents I dropped out.”

It’s sudden enough to make Florence choke on her cereal. Sputtering, she says, “What? When?”

“Yesterday, when I visited them,” Luca says. She waits until Florence has managed to expel most of the oat milk from her windpipe before adding, “It went really well.”

“What did they say?”

“That they were proud of me for looking out for myself.” Luca laughs, a touch embarrassed. “I think I knew that’s how they would react. I don’t

know why I put it off for so long."

Florence cannot conceive of a reality where her mum would tell her she's proud of Florence for quitting something. Her stomach cramps just thinking about it. She supposes that explains a lot about the differences between her and Luca.

Purposefully pushing the thought aside, she reaches across the table to twine her fingers through Luca's. "That's great," she says earnestly. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm so glad I don't have to lie to them anymore. Keeping up that act was exhausting."

Florence nods. She thinks she knows a little about that now.

"So, um." Luca darts a glance at the time on the microwave. "I have to leave for work in a bit. Do you want to come with?"

"To work?" Florence asks, bewildered.

"Yeah," Luca says. Her thumb draws a small circle on the back of Florence's hand. "I thought it might be nice to get back out there for a bit. You know. Acclimatize."

She's probably right. Florence can't keep hiding at Luca's place forever, no matter the fact that she would happily spend the rest of her life here eating soggy cornflakes with Luca. A few days from now she'll have to step back on a stage. There's no use in drawing out the inevitable. "Okay," she says.

Luca brings Florence's hand to her mouth and presses a kiss to her knuckles, one at a time.



An hour later, Florence sits at a table next to a humongous monstera plant. At first, she was tempted to keep her sunglasses on, before realizing that doing so would only serve to make her look like more of a prick should someone recognize her. She's not under any illusion that they've gotten famous overnight, but the glances she's been getting from people on the street have set her on edge. People may not know Scorpio Season, but they do know her father. Thanks to his interview, her picture has appeared in

more celebrity news outlets than she's entirely comfortable with. When she made the mistake of googling her own name, a Wikipedia article linking to Jeffrey Blake's popped up. Even on the internet, they're inextricably connected.

Pressing a thumb into her temple, she forces herself to focus on the notebook open in front of her. She hasn't written anything since being derailed by the interview, which is strange given that songwriting is usually the first thing she turns to when her life feels scary and unpredictable. So far, all she's managed to fill the page with is a bunch of little doodles and a single helpless question mark.

God. This used to be like breathing. She's written songs in less time than it takes her to get dressed in the morning. But that was before she had any eyes on her.

The sound of Luca's laugh makes her look up. Florence hasn't been able to keep her eyes off her since they got here. She loves seeing Luca in her element. There's something incredibly attractive about the confident ease with which she moves, loose-hipped and glowing as she bobs her head to the music from the speakers and keeps up an unending stream of chatter with her coworker and customers. The tip jar on the counter is filling steadily, but if Luca notices that people are flirting with her, she gives no sign of it.

Every once in a while, she'll look over and catch Florence's gaze, and Florence feels a zap of electricity running down her spine. She can't believe that only a few hours ago, she was pressing Luca into the mattress while she cried, overwhelmed and flushed and only for Florence to see.

She wonders idly what a song about that would sound like. Probably not like something she wants her bandmates to hear.

"Hey."

She jumps when Luca's voice sounds from right behind her. Leaning over her shoulder, Luca places a glass in front of her. "Soy milk latte with two pumps of caramel syrup and one pump vanilla, right?"

"You remembered that?" Florence asks, touched.

"'Course," Luca says. "I've seen you order it, like, a hundred times on tour."

Gingerly, Florence picks up the drink and takes a sip. It's disgustingly sweet, with way too much milk. It's just how she likes it. "Thank you," she says, trying to sound normal about it. "It's perfect."

Luca bends down to drop a kiss on the top of her head. Leaning over Florence's shoulder, she has a perfect view of her empty notebook page. "Oh," she murmurs. "Not going well?"

Florence leans back, partly so she doesn't have to look at the notebook, partly so she can feel Luca at her back. "I am never going to finish a song again."

"Yes, you will," Luca says patiently.

"I hate songwriting."

"No, you don't."

"I don't know what to write about."

"What do you normally write about?"

Florence has to think about it for a moment. It usually begins with a metaphor, or maybe a myth. Werewolves, sirens, the Library of Alexandria. Something fantastical. Something flashy enough to keep people's attention.

"I think," she says after a moment, "I write stories."

It's only as she says it out loud that she realizes how true it is. Of course there's a kernel of truth in her songs, but it's buried deep enough that her audience would have to dig to unearth it. She doesn't write about her feelings; she writes around them. It's always felt safer that way.

Juno's words come back to her. *When was the last time you felt a little bit too exposed in front of someone?*

"Maybe," Luca says cautiously, "it's time to write something real?"

Florence cranes her head back to look at her. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Like what you're feeling. Like the things you've told me."

"But then everyone will know," Florence says.

"I think that might be the point." Luca tucks a curl behind Florence's ear. "I still have a few hours left of my shift. I'll swing back around when you need a refill."

"I adore you." It comes out without thinking. Florence only realizes what she said when Luca's eyes widen, her lips breaking into a grin that's so

bright it hurts to look at.

"Yeah," she says. "Just like that."

She presses a kiss to Florence's shoulder. Then she's making her way back to the counter, leaving Florence to her empty pages.

She takes a long, considering sip from her drink before pulling her notebook closer.

Something real.



They fall back into bed the minute they make it back to Luca's place. As Florence scrambles to unbuckle Luca's belt, she wonders how she's supposed to go about her life like a normal person now that she knows she can have this—now that she's had Luca beneath her, trembling and gasping and falling apart at Florence's touch.

"God," she pants against Luca's mouth as she gets her shirt over her head and slides her hands over Luca's freckled shoulders, the muscles in her arms. "You're so hot. I actually don't think you understand how hot you are."

Luca ducks her head, her ears turning a familiar pink. It hasn't even been twelve hours since they last had sex, but Florence already feels starved. She thinks she could spend a lifetime in Luca's bed and it would barely be enough to take the edge off.

"Get on the bed," she says once she's finally gotten Luca naked.

Luca complies immediately. Florence takes a moment to let herself look. She traces her eyes along Luca's bare feet, her shins, her knobby knees. Further up, along Luca's spread thighs, her hips, the softness of her belly, her chest. Her throat, which bobs as she swallows, her parted, bitten lips, the color in her cheeks. Her eyes, already glazed and heavy-lidded as she watches Florence watch her, squirming against the navy-blue sheets.

After weeks of spending every waking minute together, Florence knows the precise shade Luca blushes and the restless energy that simmers under her skin, how badly she wants to be good, to turn off her brain and have someone else take over, to be given an achievable challenge and be told she

did well afterward. Florence thought she was handsome the first time they met, but that was when Luca was still a stranger. Now she loves Luca's body because it's *Luca's*, and that changes everything. She doesn't just want to fuck her. She wants to trace every single one of her freckles. She wants to flip her onto her stomach and massage the tension out of her shoulders. She wants to make her come until she weeps, make it so good she can't stand it, then wash her hair in the shower and cook her dinner.

"Flo." Luca's voice rips her from her thoughts, soft and frayed at the edges. Florence can see how hard she's trying to keep herself still, to let herself be looked at, her fingers curled into the bedding to stop herself from fidgeting.

"You're all right," Florence tells her gently.

She takes her time undressing, letting Luca watch. It's a relief to finally get out of her clothes—the bedroom is even hotter than it was this morning, early evening light filtering in through the gauzy curtains.

By the time she gets onto the bed, Luca has bitten her bottom lip raw. Kneeling between her thighs, Florence leans down to press a kiss to Luca's hip bone. "Tell me what you want."

"I don't know," Luca mumbles.

"Yes, you do." Another kiss, this time to her inner thigh. "Come on. Tell me."

It's interesting: Luca could handle letting herself be studied for five minutes, but the idea of telling Florence what she needs has her flinging an arm over her face, hiding from Florence's gaze. Her voice is a trembly, pleading thing as she says, "You can decide."

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"I know." Florence smiles. "I want to hear you say it."

Luca whines softly, toes curling into the bedding.

“I know you know what you want,” Florence coaxes. “All you have to do is tell me.” A third kiss, this time to the scar on her left knee, before she adds, “There are no wrong answers.”

From her vantage point, she can see the way Luca’s nose scrunches, a bit like it did when Luca started to cry this morning. Florence waits it out.

The words are barely audible when Luca finally says, “I want . . .”

“Yeah?” Florence encourages. “What do you want, sweetheart?”

“Want to ride you,” Luca whispers.

The words hit Florence like a truck. She feels faint, nearly dizzy with desire. “With the strap?”

“No.” Luca takes a small, shivery breath. “Maybe, just—your fingers?”

It’s almost upsetting how hot the idea is. She thinks Luca could have asked anything of her, and Florence would have given it. She leans forward, prying Luca’s arm away from her face so she can kiss her, deep and urgent, swallowing up the little noise she makes.

And then, it’s like some kind of dam has broken. “Please,” Luca pants against Florence’s lips. “Please, can I? Want to ride you, want to work for it, please let me—”

When Florence tells her “Anything you want,” she has never meant anything more.

She uses her knees to nudge Luca’s legs farther apart, trailing one of her hands down between Luca’s thighs while the other rests on her stomach, keeping her in place. They both moan as the first of Florence’s fingers sinks into Luca. It’s one thing to watch the black silicone of the strap disappear and another to feel Luca flutter around her own fingers. There’s no resistance at all, just velvet heat and the unbearable intimacy of being allowed inside.

When Florence looks up at Luca’s face, she finds her looking back like *Florence* is the thing worth marveling at. “More,” she whispers. “Please.”

“I can’t believe you’re real,” Florence breathes.

She takes her time fingering her open, until Luca is teary-eyed and writhing against the sweat-damp sheets. “Flo,” she whines. “’m ready.”

“You’re ready when I say you’re ready,” Florence says, grinning when Luca makes a devastated little noise in response. Her hips are rocking up,

trying to get more than what Florence is giving her.

Florence uses her free hand to flick the inside of her thigh. “Be good.”

“You’re so mean,” Luca pants, her eyes scrunching shut.

“You like it,” Florence says. She sounds unbearably fond to her own ears, but there’s nothing to be done about it at this point. “All right. Up you get.”

Luca is a sight to behold as she gets on her knees and straddles Florence’s thighs. Her hair is mussed, her entire body shining with a light sheen of sweat. She looks like something out of a dream.

“Ready?” Florence asks.

An emphatic nod. “Yes. Please.”

Slowly, Florence slides her fingers back inside. “Go on, sweetheart.” She rests her other hand on Luca’s hip, encouraging. “Make yourself feel good.”

With a shuddery breath, Luca begins to move. Her hips rock forward, just a little at first, a small gasp falling from her lips at the feeling. The angle must be different like this. After a moment, she figures out how to tilt her hips so her clit rubs against the palm of Florence’s hand, and her body moves with more purpose, chasing the friction.

“You look so good up there,” Florence tells her softly.

“Feel good,” Luca says, her voice high and breathy in a way that makes Florence’s mouth go dry.

Florence reaches up to sweep the sweat-damp hair from her eyes. “Yeah?”

Luca nods. She’s panting, her thighs trembling with exertion. “Mm-hm. Love it—*ah*. Love it so much, Flo.”

Her hips are rocking in a steady rhythm, keeping perfect time even now. Florence tries to memorize it for the next time she has her. The idea of a next time makes her heartbeat trip over itself. Even if everything else ends up in flames—the band, her image, her entire stupid music career—she thinks she would be all right if she knew she still had this.

“You’re doing so well,” she says. “So perfect for me.”

With a whine, Luca tips forward to bury her face in the crook of Florence’s neck. Florence can feel the full-body tremors rippling through her. With Luca’s mouth so close to her ear, she can hear every one of her

hitching breaths, the little sighs she probably isn't aware she's letting slip free. Each one feels like a gift, something only for Florence to have.

"Are you getting tired?" Florence asks, carding a hand through her hair.

"Y-yeah."

"You can go on," Florence tells her gently.

The next sound Luca makes is almost a sob. "Okay."

God. She really is so good. So sweet even as she's coming apart in Florence's lap, even as her legs are threatening to give out, even as she's panting hotly against Florence's neck like she can't get enough air into her lungs.

"Do you think you can come like this?"

Luca nods, then shakes her head, like she isn't sure, too overwhelmed to parse what her body is telling her. "Can you—my hair, or—"

Florence understands right away. She slides a hand into Luca's hair and pulls, just enough for it to sting. Uses her hold on it to tilt Luca's head back, to let Florence see her: the glazed look in her eyes, the pained little furrow between her brows, her teeth gnawing at her lower lip. She looks *wrecked*. It feels like another gift, seeing her like this.

"Look at you," Florence whispers, reverent. "So good, asking for what you want."

To drive the point home, she crooks her fingers where they're deep inside Luca. Luca's eyes flutter shut at the feeling, her hips faltering for the first time.

Where other people get more vocal, Luca grows quieter as she gets close. But Florence knows the signs now: the uneven stutter of her breathing, the way her thighs go tense. She crooks her fingers again at the same time that she rakes the blunt nails of her left hand down Luca's thigh, and it's that, the unexpected flash of pain, that makes Luca tip over.

Her features go lax as she comes, her mouth parting on a sighed-out "*Oh*" that feels specifically designed to haunt Florence for as long as she lives.

Florence lets her ride it out, moving her palm in little circles against her until Luca is trembling. Eventually, Luca slumps forward, her head

dropping heavily onto Florence's shoulder. Slowly, Florence pulls out her fingers.

"You're okay," Florence murmurs when Luca whimpers at the loss, using her free hand to pet soothingly at her hair, her neck. "You did so well, sweetheart. Perfect."

Luca shivers at the praise. Lifting her head, she stares down at the five red lines running down her thigh. Her expression is awed as she brings her own hand down to trace them and says, her voice raspy and faint, "I think that's the hottest thing that has ever happened to me."

"Agreed," Florence says earnestly.

Luca laughs, a tired, pleased little sound, before she finally lets Florence take her full weight, unable to hold herself up on her knees any longer. She's pliant and blissed-out as Florence cradles her face in both hands and kisses her, swallowing up her quiet moans. Florence feels like she just had a religious experience of some kind, like she's been fundamentally remade. It's a new feeling; she's had lots of hot, fun, objectively good sex, but none has ever ended with her heart suddenly feeling too large for her ribcage to hold.

Pulling back, Luca asks, "Do you want me to do something for you too?"

Florence pauses. Somewhere between unbuckling Luca's belt and now, she's lost track of her own body in favor of focusing on Luca's. Her own desire has quieted to a low thrum—still present, but easy to ignore. There's no urgency in it; she knows she can wait. She thinks that, maybe, it will be even better that way.

That's new too.

"I'm all right." She presses a kiss to the corner of Luca's mouth. "Let me make you dinner, first."

"Are you sure?" Luca asks.

"Yeah. What do you want to eat?"

Luca thinks about it for so long Florence feels like she should probably come up with an idea of her own. But then—

"I think," Luca says hesitantly, "maybe curry?"

Florence's answering smile is so broad it hurts. "Anything you want."

From: lnorton@saturnrecords.com
To: florencegibson22@gmail.com
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: A new opportunity

Dear Ms. Gibson,

As I have not heard from you since our call, I'm reaching out to ask if you have made up your mind re: the offer made by us. Have you been able to review the contract I sent over? Let me know.

All my best,
Linda Norton (she/her)

From: florencegibson22@gmail.com
To: lnorton@saturnrecords.com
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: A new opportunity

You can tell my father that I'm not interested. I think I'm just too gay for the mainstream. He's probably better off with someone who actually has a shot to succeed.

Best,
Florence Gibson

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They spend another night together, and then another day. It's the easiest thing in the world, being with Florence. After weeks of living in each other's pockets, they know each other's quirks and routines and how to be silent together. The only thing that's different is that now when Luca wants to touch her, she's allowed.

They're lying in bed in their pajamas—Luca playing a game on her phone, Florence playing with Luca's hair while her head is resting in her lap—when Florence suddenly says, "I think I finished the song."

It takes a moment for the words to register. Between the late hour and Florence's fingers carding through her hair, Luca is so sleepy she feels like she's melting into the mattress. Setting down her phone, she tilts her head so she can peer up at Florence's face. "Really?"

"Yeah. Earlier when you were in the shower." Florence's fingers toy with the hair curling at the nape of her neck. "I think I like how it turned out."

This is another thing Luca loves: the way they talk before they go to sleep, like a natural continuation of all their nights in hostel lobbies. Florence is always at her most honest a few minutes after midnight.

"What's it about?" Luca asks.

"My father."

Luca turns her head a little so she can brush her lips against Florence's thigh. She waits.

"I think I'd like to play it in Hyde Park," Florence says at last. There's an unfamiliar nervousness to her voice. "If the rest of the band agrees."

"Do you think we have enough time to learn it?" Luca asks carefully. The Hyde Park show is in five days.

"It wouldn't have to be anything fancy. Just me and my guitar. Maybe a few piano chords, if Miray . . ."

She trails off. Luca isn't certain how the sentence ends in Florence's head. *If Miray wants to. If Miray is up for it. If Miray isn't angry at me*

anymore.

Luca presses another kiss to her thigh.

Florence draws a shaky breath. “I’m going to ask the others to come over to my place tomorrow.”

“Not the practice room?”

“I’ve spent way too much time down there this week.” Florence’s eyes drift over to the window. “Maybe it’s silly, but I thought it might be symbolic. No one except Miray has been in my room before.”

Luca understands. It’s the same thing as allowing Luca to see her cry, as letting Luca see her barefaced and wearing clothes two sizes too big on her. “It’s a good idea,” Luca says, sitting up.

Florence still looks anxious. Now that her hands aren’t in Luca’s hair, they’re fidgeting in her lap. They only still when Luca catches them in her own.

“It’ll be all right,” Luca says.

“It might not be.”

Luca leans forward and kisses her, slow and sweet. “It’ll be all right,” she says again. And then: “Can I see your song?”

Florence hesitates. Something like fear flickers over her face before she gives a small nod. “Okay. Yeah.”

She offers Luca her notebook, which Luca cradles carefully in her hands. The leather binding is supple and cracked in places, with grooves where Florence’s fingers usually rest. She feels like she’s just been handed Florence’s heart, or maybe a live grenade—not like there is much of a difference between the two. Florence picks at her nails while Luca deciphers her sprawling, looping handwriting.

She doesn’t know what she expected. She knew it would be different from their other songs, but this feels like it was written by a completely different person. It’s candid and specific, almost like a diary entry. As she reads, she can hear Florence’s voice in her head, singing the words, and she shivers at the idea of hearing this song echoing around Hyde Park, of what it could be with the right instrumentation.

She loves it immediately.

“Can you please say something?” Florence asks, and Luca realizes she’s spent three minutes reading the lyrics over and over.

“I love it,” Luca says, looking at her. “So much.”

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“Really? It’s not too . . .”

“Too what?”

“I don’t know. Personal?”

“It’s perfect,” Luca says.

Florence gives her a look. “No, it’s not.”

“It’s the first song of yours that I can feel your fingerprints on,” Luca amends, which is really the same thing.

“I don’t know if I can sing it to so many people,” Florence admits, looking down at the open pages of the notebook.

“Then don’t,” Luca says. “Pretend you’re singing it to me.”

Florence thinks about it. Her eyes trace over Luca’s face, bottomless in the low light of the bedside lamp. Luca tries not to fidget. She knows that even two weeks ago, everything about this moment was impossible. That Florence is doing this at all—that she showed Luca these lyrics, unedited and written in her own messy hand—is a show of trust that makes Luca’s chest feel tight.

“Okay,” Florence says finally. The smile that settles on her face is sweet, almost surprised at herself. “I’m going to write the sheet music tomorrow morning. So the others know what it could sound like.”

“Oh.” Luca ducks her head. “I, um. I’ve been meaning to tell you. I never learned how to read sheet music.”

Florence blinks at her. “What? But . . . when you joined the band, how did you . . .”

“I just played it by ear.” She shrugs. “’s not that hard, once you’ve found the rhythm. I just copied what I was hearing.”

“Luca. You mean to tell me you learned four songs in one weekend without any sheet music?”

“Well. Yes?”

Florence laughs, then, bright and disbelieving. “I never want to see another *shred* of self-doubt from you about your drumming again, Luca. I explicitly forbid it.”

Luca bites her lip to hide a stupid grin. Tapping Florence’s lyric book, she requests, “Sing it to me now?”

Florence looks at her. There’s a glint of something in her eyes as she asks, “What do I get in exchange?”

“Anything,” Luca says.

“Anything?” Florence echoes, drawing out the syllables. She shuffles closer on her knees until she’s clambering into Luca’s lap, arms winding around her neck. “You would do *anything* to hear me sing?”

Luca lets herself sink back into the mattress, pleasantly trapped under Florence’s weight. “You know I would.”

“Mm-hm.” Florence leans down to press a kiss to her lips, then another to her jaw. She’s grinning when she leans back. “That’s right. Because you like it when I decide.”

Something about that reminder makes heat shoot into Luca’s cheeks. “Only after you sing it,” she says doggedly. She isn’t *that* easy. Probably.

Florence laughs, like she knows exactly how little it would take to make Luca fold. “All right. Because you asked so nicely.”

Heart skipping in her chest, Luca settles back against the headboard and watches as Florence crawls to the other end of the bed to retrieve her notebook. It’s dizzying—the knowledge that she’s about to be the first person to hear this song, the only one who gets to see Florence like this, rumpled and pink-cheeked in Luca’s overwarm bedroom.

“Here it goes.” Florence clears her throat. “The world premiere.”

With her back straight and her legs folded primly beneath her, she begins to sing.

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When they get to the flat at 3:55 in the afternoon, Miray is already waiting for them in the stairwell. At the sight of her, Florence freezes so abruptly Luca almost runs into her. A heartbeat later, Miray is flinging herself at her, both arms crushing Florence to her, and it's all Florence can do to hug her back. The familiar scent of her—of *home*—makes her throat feel tight.

"I can't believe you," Miray says. "I was so worried when I woke up and you weren't there. It was just a fight, Flo! You didn't have to immediately move out!"

Florence teeters a little on her feet. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" She cuts herself off. "I was so scared you hated me."

It sounds incredibly stupid as it leaves her mouth, and the look Miray sends her as she pulls back conveys the same sentiment.

"We've known each other since we were eleven years old," she sniffs. "You'll have to try harder than that to get rid of me."

Florence is so relieved, she could cry. With her arms still wrapped around Miray, she leans down to press a kiss into her hair. Before she can say anything else, she's cut off by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. She manages to detach herself from Miray's arms just as Izzy and Toni make it to the landing.

Toni fixes her with an unreadable stare. "Hello."

"Hey," Florence croaks.

There's a moment of unbearable silence during which Luca fidgets silently and Florence conveniently forgets every word she's ever known.

Finally, Izzy jerks her chin toward the door to the flat. "Gonna let us in or what?"

"Yes!" she says, too loud. "Of course. Come on in."

One after another, they shuffle inside.

The reason why Florence has been staying with Luca until now is so she wouldn't be able to change anything about her room before the band sees it.

No tidying it up. No curating it. She regrets that decision as she pushes open the door, hovering near it while the others survey her bedroom.

Everything's just as she left it the day before tour, with the exception of her unpacked suitcase standing next to the bed. She tries to see it through her friends' eyes. Her furniture is an eclectic mix plucked from flea markets and antique stores, and art prints and vintage postcards hang above her bed. Stacks of worn paperback novels line the walls. The ghost of incense still lingers on the air.

"You can sit anywhere," she says stiffly, picking at her nail polish. "Would anyone like some tea?"

"I'll take some," Toni says. Luca nods.

Florence turns on her heel and darts into the kitchen. She can hear the low murmur of the others talking while she puts on the electric kettle and hunts down five clean cups. When she returns with a small tray, the others are scattered around her room: Miray and Luca sitting on the floor, Toni on the edge of the bed, Izzy leaning back in Florence's desk chair.

Florence busies herself for a moment, setting down the tray, handing out cups, opening the window. The heavy air promises a thunderstorm. Florence uses a match to light the candles on the desk and bedside table so the room isn't as dark. She's moving toward the lamp on her nightstand when Izzy says, "For fuck's sake. Can you just sit down?"

Out of habit, Florence wants to snipe back at her, but she bites her tongue when she remembers that this isn't why they're here. She sinks down next to Luca on her little thrifted rug. "I. Um. I want to apologize."

Across from her, Toni crosses her arms over her chest.

"There are things I've been keeping from you," Florence continues. Already, her palms are sweaty, her hair sticking to the back of her neck in the muggy heat of her room. "Three things, to be precise."

"Three!" Izzy echoes incredulously.

Again, Florence has to bite her tongue. "I'm sorry for going behind your backs to talk to Saturn Records," she says, forcing herself to look at each of her friends in turn. "They reached out to me while we were in Prague. They said they were looking to sign me as a solo artist. I should have told them right away I wasn't interested but . . ." She swallows thickly. "I . . . I guess I thought I could negotiate with them, get them to sign all of us. I didn't want

to leave the band. I know there's no way to prove that but, I swear, I have *never* wanted to leave the band. I love playing with you. I don't want to do any of this on my own."

In the silence that ensues, she focuses hard on the feeling of Luca's knee pressing into hers. Her white curtains billow in the ominous breeze that precedes a storm.

It's Miray who speaks first. "I believe you."

Toni studies Florence, her gaze intent enough to make Florence squirm beneath its weight. "Did you really not know it was your father's label?"

"I didn't," Florence says. "But I am sorry for dragging all of us into this mess. I never wanted our image to get tangled up with his. I wish I—"

Izzy cuts her off. "Shut up," she says, but Florence notes with some relief that there's no real heat behind it. "Are you going to apologize for being born as his daughter next?"

At that, Florence abruptly shuts her mouth.

"So you're sorry about talking to a label without us," Toni summarizes. Florence still can't read her face for the life of her. "What's the second thing?"

This is where things get even more uncomfortable. "Saturn Records," Florence says, looking down at her hands, "wasn't the first label I was in contact with. Over the last few months, I've been sending out demos of our songs to every label that accepts unsolicited submissions."

The furrow between Toni's brows deepens. "What?"

"A few months?" Miray echoes. "You mean . . . since before we went on tour?"

"Why didn't you tell us?" Izzy asks, bewildered. "We could've helped."

Florence digs her nails into her palms hard enough to hurt. She's been asking herself the same question. The answer occurred to her last night, when she was lying awake in Luca's bed thinking of what to tell them. "I didn't want to let you down." Mortifyingly, her eyes are starting to sting. She has shed more tears in the last week than she thinks she has in the rest of her years combined. "I founded this band. I wrote the songs. I thought . . . if they weren't good enough, then it would be my fault. I

wanted to deal with the rejections alone. Best case scenario, I could surprise you with an offer."

"I'm guessing there haven't been any offers," Toni says.

Florence shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck that," Izzy says, and this time she actually sounds angry. "This isn't the fucking Florence Gibson Show. We *all* are a part of this. Our success isn't just because of you. And neither are the rejections. That's what being in a band means, you muppet."

"Izzy's right," Miray says. "You wrote the songs, but we played them together. We edited the lyrics together. We did the arrangements, *together*. If the labels don't want them, then that has to do with all of us."

Florence flushes. She was expecting anger, but this is . . . not that. This feels less like a punch in the face and more like a well-meaning slap to sober someone up. "I think," she says haltingly, "most of all, I was afraid of failing in front of you. I realize that is stupid and something I should probably unpack."

"Probably," Toni says dryly.

"Yeah, yeah. Enough groveling," Izzy says. Long legs stretched out in front of her, she spins on Florence's chair. "Can you just tell us the third thing and get it over with?"

For the first time since they sat down, Florence dares to glance over at Luca. The single second of eye contact is enough to make her blush. "We . . . um."

"We're together," Luca blurts.

It shouldn't surprise Florence that this is the news that gets the biggest reaction.

"*What*," Toni demands. "Are you serious? The internet was *right*?"

"I *knew* it!" Izzy crows. "Oh, this is incredible."

Florence blinks. "It . . . is?"

"Since when?" Miray asks, her eyes wide as she looks between Florence and Luca.

"So, er . . . funny story," Florence says awkwardly. "We actually met the day we got the call from Juno."

"We had a one-night stand," Luca supplies.

“It was supposed to be a one-time thing, but . . .”

“Then I joined the band.”

“So that first band meeting was the first time you saw each other again?” Toni asks disbelievingly.

“Florence, you naughty minx,” Izzy purrs. “That explains the look on your face when you saw her. I fucking *knew* she was your type.”

Luca perks up, her eyes bright with glee as she looks at Florence. “I’m your type?”

Florence buries her face in her hands. “Obviously.”

“But,” Miray cuts in, “why didn’t you two say anything?”

“I asked Luca to keep it a secret,” Florence says. “We really weren’t dating during the tour. We kept our distance because we . . . Because *I* thought it would be better for the band.”

Toni frowns. “Who asked you to do that?”

“Well—I just thought—what if it doesn’t work out and we break up and everything is awkward? Then it’d be our fault if the band fell apart.”

“What if Izzy breaks her hand and can never play bass again?” Toni asks. “What if one of us gets sick? What if someone wakes up one day and realizes that the music thing isn’t what they want to do after all?”

“Those are all horrible scenarios,” Florence points out.

“They’re all things that could happen,” Toni shoots back. “Bands *are* fickle, everyone knows that. But right now, none of that is happening, so what use is there in worrying about it?”

Florence doesn’t have a good answer to that. She knows better than to try to argue with Toni.

“I just can’t believe this,” Miray says. “You’ve really been having this . . . clandestine, Romeo-and-Juliet love affair all throughout the tour?”

Florence gives a miserable nod.

“No offense,” Izzy snorts, “but that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. How is pining dramatically over each other any less distracting than just boning it out?”

Florence hates that Izzy is right—on principle, but especially when the matter concerns her own love life. They *have* wasted a ridiculous amount of

time and effort acting like there was nothing between them. It all feels very silly in hindsight.

She would rather die than admit to that, though, so she says instead, with as much dignity as she can muster, “I would prefer it if you didn’t reduce the complexity of our relationship to *boning it out*.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Izzy looks at Luca. “Jesus wept. Is she like this in bed as well?”

“Excuse me?” Florence gasps.

“Izzy, *no*,” says Miray.

Luca only laughs, quiet and flustered, and asks, “So is there anything new with you guys?”

“Oh, come on, I was just—” Izzy begins, but Miray, bless her, immediately cuts her off.

“I’ve spent the last week sleeping ten hours every night.”

“That’s nice.” Izzy stretches a little, making her spine crack. “I was mostly working.”

“Same here,” Luca says.

“Esther broke up with me.”

Abruptly, the room falls silent.

Toni is staring intently at a spot somewhere on the wall. Florence tries to catch Izzy’s eyes, then Miray’s. She’s not sure what the appropriate response to this news is. Toni hasn’t seemed particularly happy for a while now—on tour, most of the calls she had with Esther ended with Toni testy and quiet for the next fifteen minutes. With anyone else, Florence would go over and offer a hug, but Toni reacts to physical affection the same way a disgruntled cat reacts to taking a sink bath.

She’s surprised when Luca, of all people, is the first person to say something. “I’m sorry, Toni,” she says earnestly. “When?”

“Pretty much the moment I came home.” Toni studies the callouses on her hands. “Apparently, I have *the emotional availability of a brick wall*.”

“That’s not true,” Florence objects.

“Okay,” Toni says.

“Do you want to talk more about it?” Miray asks gently.

Toni's response is instant. "Not at all."

There's a moment of silence. Outside, the rain has started, filling the air with petrichor. The candles flicker as the wind picks up.

"So," Izzy says, "where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," Florence admits. "I thought . . . I was *hoping* we'd have signed with a label by the end of the tour." It sounds embarrassingly naive in hindsight. "I suppose the first thing we have to do is decide if we want to keep going."

"Do *you* want to keep going?" Izzy raises an eyebrow. "You're the one who could easily go off and have a solo career."

Florence tries to imagine it: Standing alone on a stage, singing a song that only she had a hand in. Long grueling drives across the continent spent all by herself, or perhaps with employees on some label's payroll. Coming back to the hotel after a show and falling asleep in an empty room.

Living the kind of life her father chose: sex and money and drugs, and no one at all to share it with.

"I don't want to do this on my own," she says. "I want us to keep playing together. Even if it's just in Earl's basement. Even if it's weddings and pub nights for the rest of my life."

"That sounds fucking *bleak*," Izzy says. "I'm in."

Toni nods. "Me too."

"I've always liked playing weddings," Miray says.

Florence turns to look at Luca. "And you?"

"I've never wanted anything more," Luca says. The smile she meets Florence with is warm and wide enough to make her eyes crinkle at the corners. Florence laces their hands together, giddy at the realization that she can do that now, in front of the band and everything.

"Then it's settled," she says. "We keep going until we can't anymore."

"What about the album?" Izzy questions. "Is that still happening?"

Up until now, Florence has been too scared to think that far ahead. "It won't be easy without a label," she admits. "We'll have to find people to work with us and pay for studio time. And that's without even thinking about marketing and promotion."

“It’s not impossible.” Miray takes a thoughtful sip of tea. “We’ve been doing okay on our own so far.”

“We’ve been doing more than okay,” Izzy cuts in. “Just look at our streaming numbers and follower counts. Look at the outcry about the whole disaster with Florence’s dad. We’ve got eyes on us now that we didn’t have before tour. That’s way more than most bands just starting out can say.”

For the first time that evening, something behind Toni’s eyes comes to life, like a pair of shutters being flung open. “Izzy’s right. We’re in a good position. We can figure out the logistics along the way.”

“We can use the streaming revenue to pay for studio time,” Florence says. “And I’ll take on more shifts at the pub. Maybe find a few more kids to give piano lessons to.”

“I’ll ask for more hours at the café,” Luca says.

“We could design merch,” Izzy adds, looking at Miray. “Add an online store to our website.”

Miray immediately lights up. “Oh, good idea! We could do T-shirts with our scorpion logo, maybe some tote bags—”

“A ‘swallow me’ T-shirt,” Luca says.

Izzy gasps. “Brilliant.”

As the others keep brainstorming, Florence curls her fingers around her mug and swallows against the bittersweet taste in her mouth. On paper, this is her worst-case scenario: They’re unsigned, without a manager, and the subject of unwanted internet drama. Still, somehow it doesn’t feel that way at all. As she looks from Luca talking excitedly with her hands to Toni taking notes on her phone, the feeling in her chest isn’t worry; it’s that same blinding, reckless hope that hummed between them the day they got the call about Juno’s tour.

The Wheel of Fortune, her brain echoes fiercely. *Trust the Universe.*



They talk until it gets dark, until the thunderstorm has rolled in and then past, until the candles have burned down and Florence can’t even remember what she was so afraid of when she hid from her friends for days.

At ten in the evening, they eat pasta with pesto and drink the cheap wine left over from Miray's birthday out of mismatched coffee mugs. Slightly tipsy, Florence sits on the windowsill and sings them the song she wrote. When she's finished, the room is quieter than it has been all night.

"I know it's a bit different from everything we've done so far," she says when she can't stand the silence anymore. "We don't have to do it if you guys don't like it."

Izzy looks at her, her dark gaze intent from where she's sprawled on Florence's bedroom floor. "Sing it again."

Florence sings it again, shaky and fragile like it's her very first show. It feels like being caught in a state of undress; like peeling away layers until she's stripped down to her bones. She thinks she understands now what makes Juno's songs so special.

Just like last night, Luca's eyes cling to Florence's lips like she has never heard anyone sing before. Just like last night, Florence doesn't look away from her until the last note has faded.

"Florence," Miray says when she's done, and then she's on her feet, crossing the room to pull Florence into a breath-snatching hug. "I love it. I love it so much."

"Tell us how you want to play it," says Izzy. There's a new kind of urgency to her voice that has Florence's heart beating quicker.

She hesitates for only a second before grabbing her acoustic guitar from the wall and handing it to Toni.

By the time they've figured out an arrangement, it's well past midnight. They're too tired and tipsy to go home, so Florence and Miray gather every blanket in their flat and build a nest of them on Florence's bedroom floor.

The window is still open, letting in the smell of rain and a gentle, beckoning breeze. Miray's hair is tickling Florence's cheek. Luca is a warm outline curved around her, one arm slung around Florence's waist, the soft hair on her legs tickling Florence's bare calves where their limbs are tangled together. She didn't know how much she missed this until she's lying in a dark room again, listening to the breathing of her band getting slower.

Tomorrow, they're going to have breakfast and then head to the practice room to spend the day relearning their set. In three days, they're going to

play Hyde Park. In two weeks, tour will be over, and they will keep going —whatever that looks like.

Florence lets out a breath and allows her body to sink deeper into the blankets. She falls asleep with Luca's fingertips on the inside of her arm, tracing the lines of her scorpion tattoo.

VERSE
I hear your voice and I'm five
Sitting on the living room floor
You fill up the screen, larger than life
You're singing in the downpour
It makes my mum cry, but I don't know why,
Guess you just have that effect
I ask when we'll see you again and she says,
"Please, can we watch something else?"

CHORUS
Oh, pretty songbird
The country loves you so
Oh, pretty songbird
When are you coming home?

VERSE
I hear your voice and I'm eight
Your things are not here anymore
You're touring the world and sometimes you call
But never pick up when I do
My mum doesn't cry, now she's just cold,
so I only cry in my room
But now and again I see you sing in the rain
And Earl still has you up on his wall

CHORUS
Oh, pretty songbird
The country loves you so
Oh, pretty songbird
When are you coming home?

VERSE
I hear your voice and I'm twenty-three
On tour in a place I don't know
I watch that recording, and I see myself,
In every note, in every move
The way you laugh around minute four is the same way that I laugh too
Same hair and same eyes, same parlor trick smile,
Despite my new scorpion tattoo

CHORUS
Oh, pretty songbird
The country loves you so
Oh, pretty songbird
I don't think you're ever coming home

OUTRO
Made me in your image, then forgot you made me
God, I wish I could forget you too
And the question still haunts me, do I sing like myself
Or am I just an echo of you?
Mmm
Am I just your echo?
Mmm
Am I just your echo?

39

On the day of the Hyde Park show, there's a weather warning.

"Heavy rain starting at eight," Amy reads from her phone. She casts a glance at the sky while Luca tilts her head back to do the same. It's been a moody gray all day, but now the clouds are turning an ominous lilac color.

Next to Luca, Florence shifts nervously. Izzy looks down at her bass, probably calculating the chances of it coming out of a downpour intact. They're sitting around a picnic table in the backstage area outside the trailer where Juno and her band are getting ready.

"Don't worry," Amy tells them. "Most of the stage is sheltered, and you're going on at seven. With any luck, you'll finish your set before the rain starts."

Florence gives a tight nod. Clearly, the rain is the least of her concerns.

Lacing her fingers through Florence's, Luca murmurs, "Are you okay?"

"I think," Florence says, "I'm going to be sick."

"Hey," Luca says. "It'll be all right."

Florence doesn't seem to register her words. She's gripping Luca's hand like it's a lifeline as she says, "I'm going to get up on stage and throw up and they're never going to let us play anywhere again. I shall henceforth be known not as Jeffrey Blake's daughter but as the girl who threw up in front of thousands of people at Hyde Park. Oh *God*."

"If you can still use the word *henceforth* in a sentence," Toni says without looking up from her phone, "then it can't be that bad."

Luca glances over at her. Toni has been quiet all day—all week, really. Whatever she's doing on her phone has her shoulders in a tense line.

"Make her sing one personal song and she crumbles," Izzy sighs. "You know, I've never seen anyone have a physical reaction against honesty."

"I'm going to show you a physical reaction," Florence says darkly.

Izzy cackles, pleased as always to get under her skin. "I'd like to see that."

“It will be fine once we’ve finished the first song.” Miray offers Florence a reassuring smile. “It always is.”

Florence doesn’t look comforted.

In an effort to distract her, Luca taps Toni’s shoulder and asks, “What are you doing?”

“Looking for flats around London that I could rent without certain financial ruin,” Toni answers.

At that, Florence abruptly comes back to herself. “You’re moving out?”

“Have to.” Despite the unhappy curl of her mouth, Toni’s voice is completely level. It reminds Luca of the way news presenters sound, droning on in a monotone while they announce the most terrible things. “Esther gave me until a week after tour to find a new place.”

“*What*,” Izzy demands. “She can’t do that.”

“Yes, she can,” Toni says, setting down her phone. “She was renting the flat alone before I moved in. Ninety percent of the furniture is hers. Her name is on all the insurance stuff.”

“So she’s just kicking you out?” Miray asks disbelievingly. “You were together for two years!”

“There’s no way you’ll find a decent flat in three weeks,” Luca says, wincing when Toni shoots her a glance that clearly reads *No shit*.

“You can have my sofa,” Izzy says.

“Or crash at ours,” Florence offers.

Toni looks like the idea of anyone’s charity physically pains her. She’s about to reply when Juno appears from the trailer. Glancing between them, she asks, “Is everything all right?”

“We’re fine,” Toni says. It would probably sound more convincing if she didn’t look completely dead inside. “It’s just personal stuff. I’m looking for a flat to move into after the tour.”

“Oh?” Juno sinks down onto the free spot next to Miray. “Are you leaving London?”

“No. I just—”

“Her ex-girlfriend is kicking her out,” Izzy cuts in.

If looks could kill, Izzy would drop dead on the spot. Instead she only jumps slightly at the audible *stomp* of Toni's foot coming down on her boot under the table.

"Like I said," Toni says. "Personal stuff."

Juno considers her, a thoughtful furrow between her brows. "When do you need to move out by?"

"In three weeks," Toni says reluctantly.

"Three weeks," Juno echoes. "That's not a lot of time."

"It's fine," says Toni, who is very obviously not fine. "I'm sure I can crash at a friend's place until I find something. The others have already offered."

"Or . . ." Juno begins. Luca can almost see the wheels behind her eyes turning. "I have a spare room. It's nothing grand, but it does have its own bathroom."

Toni looks at Juno like she isn't sure she heard her correctly. Luca isn't entirely certain herself. The idea that her audio processing has somehow gone faulty seems worlds more likely than the idea that *Juno Wilde*, three-time Grammy winner and world-famous singer, just offered Toni a room at her place.

"Sorry," Toni manages faintly. "W-what?"

"I own a home in Hampstead," Juno explains. "You'd be more than welcome to move in until you've gotten your bearings, if you think you can endure paparazzi and sharing a space with an occasionally moody teenager."

For the first time since Luca has known her, Toni looks at a loss for words. "Your daughter would be fine with that?"

"I'm going to ask her, of course," Juno says, "but you wouldn't be the first person to live in the guest room for a while. I've had a bunch of collaborators and friends stay over while they're in the city. It feels wrong to have so much living space and do nothing with it."

"Can I . . . is it all right if I think about it?"

"Of course." Smiling, Juno gets to her feet. "We still have the rest of the tour to get through. You just let me know when you've decided."

With that, she disappears behind the trailer to find Amy.

“Oh my *God*,” Florence says the minute she’s gone. “I can’t believe—”

“She’s like a fairy godmother,” Miray whispers.

“Come on, mate,” Izzy says. “You’ve got to say yes.”

Toni is still staring at the spot where Juno sat a few seconds ago, her mouth slack and her expression dazed.

“Toni?” Luca questions.

“I’m fine,” she says automatically.

“*Yeah*, you are,” Florence laughs. “You just got upgraded to a fancy celebrity home in Hampstead.”

Toni looks like she’s on the verge of a full internal meltdown, but with only twenty minutes to go until their set, there’s no time to spiral. Their preshow rituals are the same as they’ve been all tour: Miray does Florence’s hair, Izzy does Luca’s makeup, Toni checks again and again that her guitar is tuned.

When Luca is done, she sits in the grass and watches the others get ready.

Florence sinks down next to her a moment later. Smiling, she leans over and gives Luca a soft kiss, careful not to smudge her lipstick too much. “You look so handsome.”

“You too,” Luca returns. It’s an understatement. In a puffy-sleeved white dress and a brown corset with flowers embroidered on it, Florence looks like something out of a fairy tale. Her lips are painted a deep wine color, some of which has probably transferred onto Luca’s own mouth.

“Are you nervous?” Florence asks, bumping their shoulders together.

“Not as much as in the beginning,” Luca answers. It helps to know that there are people she knows out there. A few minutes ago she received a selfie from her family waiting in the VIP tent. Jemma is also there, along with a few other coworkers from the café.

Florence takes her hand and turns it over so she can trace her thumb along the lines in Luca’s palm. “I really want to kiss you on stage,” she says. “Can I?”

Luca stills. They both know that Florence isn’t just asking to kiss her; she’s asking to confirm the rumors that have been following them since the beginning of tour. The idea makes Luca feel so giddy she can hardly breathe. They’ve kissed a thousand times since that first night at Luca’s

place, but not like this. Not for the entire world to see. “Yeah,” she says. “Yes. Of course.”

“I’ll come over to you during ‘swallow me,’” Florence says, ghosting her fingers over the inside of Luca’s wrist.

Luca grins. “Can’t wait.”

“All right, Scorpios!” Amy chirps. “You’re almost up! If you’d follow me to the stage entrance, please?”

“Here we go.” Luca gets to her feet, pulling Florence up with her.

They fall into step as they trail after Amy toward the enormous stage. Up until now, Luca has done her best to tune out the crowd waiting on the other side, but the closer they get to the stage, the louder it gets: the sound of sixty-five thousand people waiting for a show, an electric hum in the air that Luca can feel in her chest.

At the bottom of the steps that lead to the stage, they gather in a circle, arms slung around shoulders and heads bent together for Florence’s speech.

“A few days ago,” she begins, “I honestly wasn’t sure if we would make it here.”

“Please don’t make me cry,” Miray says, already sniffing.

Laughing, Florence presses a kiss to her temple. “I just wanted to tell you how grateful I am to be here with you all. This has been the best summer of my life. Whatever happens next, I will always be so, so thankful that I got to do this with you.”

“Fuck *off*,” Izzy groans.

Luca closes her eyes and focuses on the steady in and out of her breath, the heat of Izzy’s body on her right and Florence’s on her left, the now-familiar rush of adrenaline that comes before every show.

“This is the biggest stage we’ve ever played,” Florence continues. “It might be the biggest one we ever get to play. So . . . let’s make the most of it, all right?”

They’re about to break apart when Luca gathers the courage to add, “I wanted to say thank you as well. I’ve had a bit of a shit year so far, with my . . . dropping out of uni and everything. A few months ago I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life at all. So . . . thank you for giving me something to want. I love you guys a lot.”

“We love you too,” Miray says, blinking rapidly. “Scorpio Season forever.”

“Scorpio Season forever,” the others echo.

“Two-minute warning!” Amy announces, and they all scramble to put in their in-ears.

The last seconds feel like they drag on forever. Luca rocks back and forth on her heels, drumsticks clutched in her sweaty palm while her heart thrums eagerly against her ribs. When they at last get the sign to walk on, she grins so wide her cheeks ache. They’ve already seen the sprawling meadow stretching in front of the stage during sound check, but nothing could have prepared her for the sight of the crowd when she steps out.

“Holy shit,” she says. She tries to find her family over in the VIP section, but there are so many people. The noise is deafening even through her in-ears.

On autopilot, she moves toward the drum set while the rest of the band take their familiar spots. As she sits down, she chances another look at the sky. The clouds are bruise colored now. She tries to place what the sight reminds her of, and shivers when she realizes.

Glastonbury, 1991.

Later, Luca only remembers the show in snatches. The sight of Florence, the wind tearing at her hair as she twirls and prowls and drops to her knees. Toni playing her guitar solo with grim precision, like she has something to prove, and Izzy whispering something to her afterward, a soft touch to Toni’s shoulder. Miray smiling like a fool as she spots someone over in the VIP section, the kisses she blows her family between songs. Florence climbing onto the drum riser during “swallow me,” cupping Luca’s face in both hands as she pulls her into a kiss that tastes like honey, a giddy laugh getting lost in the crush of their mouths.

The moment when Florence steps forward, fingers curling around the mic stand, and says, “This next one is a song we only finished a few days ago.” Toni comes to a halt next to her, her electric guitar exchanged for an acoustic. “It’s called ‘my eyes, your eyes.’”

The first chord rings out across Hyde Park, sweet and softly melancholic. Luca can feel Florence’s nerves from all the way across the stage. She wonders if Florence is thinking of the same thing: the two of them in Luca’s

bed five nights ago, the first time anyone heard this song. *Pretend you're singing it to me.*

A second chord, and Florence turns around, eyes holding on to Luca's for the span of one breath. Her smile is blinding. With her hair wild and the crowd at her back, she looks larger than life, and Luca knows right then that Florence was wrong: this won't be the last time they're on this big of a stage. It can't be.

Florence begins to sing. At last, the skies open up.

Soph!!
@sophieblush
THEY KISSED #scorpioseason
7:14 p.m. July 25, 2025
1.6K Likes 700 Shares

official scorpiHOE
@scorpioszn
scorpio season's set at hyde park really had it all omg. floluca confirmation kiss. rain. florence putting jeffrey blake on blast in a new song. i love them so much holy shit
7:47 p.m. July 25, 2025
2.3K Likes 1.3K Shares

LAILA
@lalalaila83
jeffrey blake singing watercolor eyes in the rain in 1991—> florence gibson singing my eyes your eyes in the rain in 2025????? the PARALLELS I'M GOING TO BE SICK
10:29 p.m. July 25, 2025
700 Likes 514 Shares

opinionated village hag
@xauburnwavesx
can you even be considered a nepo baby if you hate your dad's guts #scorpioseason
8:12 p.m. July 25, 2025
488 Likes 123 Shares

Jared <3
@bloomingggpink
jeffrey blake's daughter outing him as an absentee father in front of 65,000 people in hyde park was not on my 2025 bingo card

1:37 a.m. July 26, 2025
1.3K Likes 898 Shares

Nick Harrison
@nickharrison_12
If #scorpioseason are what industry plants sound like, keep on planting ’em
8:27 p.m. July 25, 2025
903 Likes 228 Shares

abby alvarez
@sapphicsaltlamp
huge day for lesbians with daddy issues #scorpioseason
11:48 p.m. July 25, 2025
234 Likes 72 Shares

Mercury
@thegreatschemeofmerc
HELLO why is no one talking about the fact that they literally used the same chord progression as Jeffrey Blake in Watercolor Eyes??? THEY’RE CRAZY #scorpioseason
9:34 p.m. July 25, 2025
2.3K Likes 1.3K Shares

Miray Tezel
@itsmemiray
floluca forever 🖤
7:56 p.m. July 25, 2025
3.4K Likes 2K Shares

Epilogue

THREE WEEKS LATER

Luca's hair looks like molten copper in the sunlight. It's midday, or maybe early afternoon, when Florence enters her room to find Luca lying on the bed, her hands resting, palms-up, next to her head. Her shirt has ridden up to expose a sliver of her soft tummy and the faint smattering of golden hair disappearing beneath the waistband of her jeans.

Her eyes track Florence as she walks toward her.

"Hey," Florence says, crawling onto the mattress. Her dress inches up as she straddles Luca's thighs. "Were you waiting for me?"

Luca nods. The smile she gives Florence is warm and languid. Florence wants to bite it. "Yeah. Miray let me in." She tucks one of Florence's curls behind her ear. "Did you have a good morning?"

"Mm-hm," Florence confirms. Leaning down, she captures Luca's lips in a soft kiss. "I had three piano lessons, and Toni and I went out for coffee in between."

"Yeah? How is she?"

"I truly could not tell," Florence admits. "She wouldn't really answer when I asked. We mostly talked logistics."

Florence has no idea how Toni is feeling about moving in two days, or about the breakup in general. They didn't speak about it at all during their last weeks of tour, and when she saw her today, Toni appeared as unruffled as ever. Beyond a little tightness around her eyes when she talked about the painstaking business of divvying up the household between her and Esther, there wasn't a single crack in her composure.

"Did she say if she needed any help moving her stuff?" Luca asks.

"She says she's all right," Florence reports. She focuses on Luca again, using her thumb to gently brush the hair out of her eyes. "What about you? How was your morning?"

“Missed you when I woke up. I didn’t even hear you leave.”

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Florence says apologetically. “How was your shift?”

“Fine. Boring.” Luca stretches, spine popping, before her hands come to rest on Florence’s thighs, absently toying with the hem of her dress. “Any news on when we can start recording?”

“Eager.”

“Not as eager as you,” Luca returns.

Florence’s heart thumps a little harder at that. She loves this. Luca’s tone, gently teasing. Seeing her so excited about something, her own desire reflected back at her. “We need to have a few songs first.”

“I know you’ve already started writing them,” Luca says. “I’ve seen you scribbling in your notebook.”

“Did you now?” Laughing, Florence leans down to press a kiss to the corner of Luca’s mouth, then another to her jaw. Her thumb finds the bruise she left on Luca’s neck last night, mottled purple, placed with intention well above any shirt collar. A tiny bit of pressure has Luca’s breath hitching in her throat, her head thumping back against the pillow.

“Pretty,” Florence murmurs, thumb skirting the outside of the bruise. “Did anyone ask about it?”

This time, Luca’s laugh comes out sounding breathless. “Don’t need to, do they? Pretty sure everyone knows who it’s from.”

Florence has to bite her lip to hide her grin, inordinately pleased. She ghosts her fingertips along Luca’s shoulder and then down her arm, until they meet the lines of the tattoo there.

She’s tracing the scorpion’s tail when Luca asks, “What were you working on yesterday morning?”

Yesterday morning: sitting on Luca’s bed while Luca got ready for work. Watching the ripple of her back muscles in the golden nine a.m. light, the freckles dusted down her shoulder blades, the sleep-mussed riot of her ginger hair. Witnessing Luca deliberate with earnest thoughtfulness over which of her silly shirts to wear. Straining her neck for a see-you-later kiss and finding a new melody in her head, brighter and softer than usual.

“Yesterday morning?” she asks. “I wasn’t writing then.”

“Yes, you were. You get that look, right here.” Luca taps a finger next to Florence’s eye. “What was it?”

Florence is quiet for a moment. It still frightens her to be seen so clearly—to have parts of her exposed that she never intended, parts she never even knew about before Luca picked them up and turned them over, like toying with her fidget cube.

Weeks ago, it would have sent her running. But Luca’s hands are on her, steady and grounding, and the truth comes easy in their well-worn silence.

“Something different,” she says, resting her forehead against Luca’s. “A love song, I think.”

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Lots of love,

Maisie <3

About the Author

Maisie Bell was born in Lower Saxony in Germany, where she studied clinical psychology and psychotherapy. She loves peppermint tea, ’90s rom-coms, and messy queer characters. *Scorpio Season* is her New Adult romance debut.

Content Warning

(and spoiler warning!)

This book contains potentially triggering content. This includes

homophobia
recreational drug and alcohol use
explicit sexual content



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