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GARFINKLE

the
Band
Finding
Love

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the Band

finding love

DEBRA GARFINKLE



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THE BAND: FINDING LOVE

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Summary: When rock band Amber Road is invited to play at a major music festival in Berkeley, California, Tracie's parents forbid her to go, Sienna has big plans that weekend with Carter, and Lily is waiting to hear about a solo record deal that she has not discussed with the other members.

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one

Lily Bouchet looked in her mirror to make sure she didn't have anything weird in her teeth, dabbed on some lipstick, grabbed her purse, and dashed out of her bedroom. It was Friday night and her boyfriend, Mark Carrelli, had just sent her a text message saying it was very important she meet him at the club a half hour earlier than usual.

She stopped in front of her twin brother Aaron's room and tapped on the door. They hadn't seen each other since school that day, but she was pretty sure he was in there with a girl. "Aaron, I'm going over to Waves," Lily said loudly. "I might not be home 'til late."

“Hold on a sec!” he shouted.

“I’m kind of in a hurry,” Lily said.

He opened his bedroom door slightly, then came out and shut the door behind him. He wore the red silk bathrobe their mother had bought him when she was filming in China last year.

“You off to the club?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Lily said. “Have you heard from Mom and Dad? Wasn’t Mom supposed to be back from Puerto Vallarta by now? I thought she was flying in this morning.”

“Who can keep track of Mom and Dad and their travels?” Aaron said. “Who would even want to?”

Lily would. She really wished her parents would cut back on their traveling. But Lily didn’t tell Aaron that. “Do me a favor,” she said. “When Mom comes home, will you remind her that she promised to come listen to me at Waves tonight?”

“Sure. *If* she comes home.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lily asked.

Aaron shrugged. “It’s just that she’s not the most reliable person in the world. And Dad e-mailed me last week from New Zealand. Said the movie shoot is taking longer than expected. Surprise, surprise. He said he probably won’t be home until August—which we both know really means at least September. And Mom could be anywhere on the planet right now.”

“Yeah, but she promised she’d come to Waves tonight. She’s never heard me sing. Not in public, anyway.” She wasn’t

sure her mom had ever heard her sing in private either. "I bet she'll like it."

"Anyone would like hearing you sing. You have a great voice. I just don't want you to get hurt, that's all," her brother said.

"Aaron?" the girl in his room called out.

"I'll be in soon, babe. Stay right there," Aaron called over his shoulder. Then he grinned at Lily. "She's so demanding."

Lily rolled her eyes. "I have to go meet Mark. Have fun."

"Mark." Her brother shook his head. "Feel free to break up with that loser boyfriend of yours."

"Knock it off."

"One day you'll come to your senses," Aaron said. "And you'll realize that your stupid boyfriend's stupid band is bringing you down. You're better than Mark. Hell, Lily, you're better than everyone in your band combined."

"You're wrong. Amber Road is a great band," Lily said. "And the people in it are my friends."

"You are so deluded. Don't you know you have the talent to be out there on your own?"

"Look," Lily said, "I don't have any plans to ditch Amber Road."

"You'd be crazy not to," Aaron told her.

"I have to go." Lily checked her watch. "I'm late." She walked to the front door and rushed out of the house.

Lily arrived at Waves at the same time as Sienna Douglas, the band's bass player.

“Hey, Sienna, what are you doing here?” Lily asked, surprised to see her.

“I got a text message from Mark, telling me to come early,” Sienna said. She nodded at the Volvo belonging to Tracie Grant’s mom, which was pulling up to the curb. “We all got Mark’s message, I guess.”

“I wonder what’s going on,” Lily said.

“I would have thought you knew,” Sienna said.

If there was a barb in that, Lily ignored it. Things were still a little tense between her and Sienna. After all, Mark had dumped Sienna to go out with her. But ever since Sienna and Carter Branham had fallen for each other, the tension between Sienna and her had eased.

Lily watched as Mrs. Grant got out of the car and opened the trunk, taking out a set of crutches.

“I’ll get Tracie’s guitar, Mrs. G,” Sienna offered, and grabbed Tracie’s beloved Strat from the trunk.

“Need help?” Lily asked Tracie.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, taking one crutch from her mom and gingerly easing herself up and out of the car. Tracie had been on crutches since she got into a DUI accident the month before, banging herself up and destroying her parents’ Beemer. Just yesterday, she’d exchanged her hard fiberglass cast for a walking cast.

“Man!” Sienna exclaimed. “Look at you!”

“You look fantastic!” Lily agreed.

Tracie wore a peach rose in her blond hair, as she always did when they performed, but almost everything else about her hair was different. It was short and spiky now, and a lighter shade. It was almost platinum, like the color of white corn. She wore a soft, tight ivory sweater and a wrap skirt, and giant gold hoop earrings with a heavy gold necklace. She also had on more makeup than usual.

Tracie's mother stood in front of the passenger door of the Volvo, her arms crossed, one eyebrow raised.

"My mom thought I looked really sweet before," Tracie explained. "She thinks the new look—the new me—is trashy."

"I never said that," her mother objected.

"Not in so many words."

"You look hot," Lily said. "Like a blond gypsy. I don't think you look trashy at all."

Sienna seemed to bite back a grin, another thing Lily ignored. Lily was dressed in her usual style—a tight tank top with no bra, a miniskirt that barely covered her ass, and very high heels. Though Sienna had never actually said it to her face, Lily would bet money that Sienna considered Lily's look total trash.

Sienna's look, on the other hand, was totally preppie with her polo shirts and knee-length skirts.

Tracie waved good-bye to her mother. "Thanks a lot for the ride."

Mrs. Grant remained standing in front of the car.

"We need to go into Waves," Tracie said.

"I want to see you perform tonight," her mother said.

Tracie winced. "You don't trust me."

"No, I don't, to be honest." Mrs. Grant frowned. "Not after all that's happened lately."

"Are you ever going to let me out of your sight?" Tracie asked.

"Don't worry, Mrs. G. We'll keep an eye on her." Sienna's voice sounded reassuring.

"Not that she needs keeping an eye on," Lily added. "She's really a good person."

"Thanks, but I think I'll look after her myself," Mrs. Grant said.

Tracie sighed. "Mom, this is a nightclub. Most of the music they play is rock—contemporary, not your '70s and '80s stuff. You're not going to hear any Neil Diamond or Duran Duran songs. Besides, you'd probably be the oldest person there."

"Not if I bring your father."

"Please, Mom. No," Tracie begged.

Lily cleared her throat. "Well, my mom is coming tonight, and she's about your age, Mrs. Grant, even though she hates to admit it."

"Really? Your mom's coming?" Sienna asked.

Lily couldn't help smiling as she nodded. Finally, she would have a chance to show her mother the one thing she was good at, the one thing she really loved to do.

"Mom, feel free to go home and relax for the night," Tracie said.

"I will, and then I'll be back in time for your show," her mother promised as she got in the car.

"Wonderful," Tracie mumbled.

"You really do look terrific," Sienna said to Tracie as Mrs. Grant's car pulled away. "But I almost fainted when I saw you get out of the car tonight. Your hair's been shoulder-length forever. And you've never dyed it, right? And those clothes! You look so different now. In a good way, don't get me wrong. But what in the world got into you?"

"It's the new me!" Tracie held out her arms and grinned. "I just got sick of moping around so much. I've spent the last few months with drama and trauma. It got old. I'm moving on, baby!"

Lily and Sienna laughed. "Did you meet a guy or something?" Lily asked.

"No!" Tracie said. "I'm through with guys."

"Bite your tongue," Lily joked.

"I'm through with guys *temporarily*," Tracie said. "At least until college in August, anyway."

"Saving your energy for those college men?" Lily teased.

Tracie shook her head. "I'm saving my energy for *me*. I was with Carter for most of high school, and then I went out with Aaron. I need to just be with myself for a while, you know?"

"Sounds like a good plan," Sienna told her. "Be with yourself, and your friends, of course."

“Speaking of our friends . . .” Lily pointed to the entrance of Waves. “We should go. You know how Mark gets when anyone’s as much as five minutes late.”

The three girls walked into the club together. The warm-up band, made up of four Mesa College guys, was already playing. The girls waved at them as they walked behind the stage to the dressing room.

Mark was there with George Yee, Amber Road’s drummer. Mark was scanning a song list and George was taking a set of drum sticks out of a zippered case.

Mark’s eyes lit on Lily as they walked in. “Thanks for showing up early,” he said, then pulled her into his arms for a hug.

Lily let herself relax against him. Being part of the band felt great. Being with Mark was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

“Whoa!” George pointed at Tracie. “Who is that fun-loving, crazy girl? And what has she done with sweet little Tracie?”

Tracie giggled.

“Hey, you got a haircut or something?” Mark said, releasing Lily.

“Mark!” Lily rolled her eyes. “Tracie’s got an entire new look, and you ask if she got a haircut or something.”

Mark shrugged. “At least I noticed. You look good, Trace.”

“Thanks,” Tracie said. She sniffed the air. “Has someone been smoking? Yuck!”

Sienna and Lily started sniffing too.

"I smelled that as soon as I got in here," Mark said. "Maybe another band sneaked some cigarettes in here tonight."

Sienna pointed at George. "It's you. The smell is coming from you. Since when did you take up smoking? No offense, but you reek."

"Thanks a lot," George said sarcastically. "I don't smoke. Never have, never will. For one thing, I'm too cheap to blow five or ten dollars a day on cigarettes. For another, getting lung cancer would be kind of a bummer."

"Then why do you smell like a walking ashtray?" Mark asked him.

"It must be Crystal," he said.

"What?" Mark and Sienna asked at the same time.

"Not *what*. *Who*. She's the new girl I'm dating. She's really nice, and pretty, and, well, just about perfect in every way."

"For a walking ashtray," Sienna said.

"She obviously has a huge smoking problem," Tracie said.

"Well, yeah." George shrugged.

"So, Mark," Tracie asked, "why did you have us come in early?"

"I have some news—some pretty incredible news."

"Spill," Sienna urged him.

"Okay. Our excellent manager, Steve Guyda, told me something really exciting."

"Which is—?" Lily asked.

Mark smiled. "Have you heard of the Berkeley Blowout that starts next weekend?"

"Of course," George said. "It's that new music fest everyone's talking about. The hottest bands are all supposed to be there. I want to drive up and check them out if I can scrounge together enough money for the admission and gas."

"Oh, right," Lily said. "I just saw something about it on the Net. It's supposed to be amazing."

"Well, Guyda's been bugging the organizers to let us play there," Mark said.

"Us? Play there?" George sounded as if he were in shock.

"Yes, us play there," Mark said. "It's during our spring break, so it's perfect timing."

Lily couldn't believe it either. "Did Guyda actually say they'll let us play?"

"No. Not yet. But there's a scout from the festival coming to hear us perform."

"When?" Sienna asked.

"Tonight," Mark said.

"Tonight? Oh, God." Tracie clapped her hand over her mouth.

This is it, Lily thought, Amber Road's chance to break out.

"Cool!" George's eyes were bulging. "Going up to Berkeley with you guys would be a blast. And then performing there would be, I don't know . . . incredible!"

Mark smiled. "I told you I had incredible news."

Tracie looked even paler than usual. "I think I'm getting bad stage fright," she murmured in a small voice.

"Relax," Mark said. "We know these songs and we know how to play them. All we have to do is go out there tonight and kick it. We'll rock the house down."

"But I still have this cast on," Tracie said. "I look like such a nerd in it. I don't want to ruin things for you guys."

"That's why I didn't mention the scout being here before tonight," Mark said. "I didn't want you to get all crazy-worried."

Lily touched her arm. "Tracie, you look really good."

"No one's even going to notice your cast," Sienna said. "Besides, people are here because of our music, not our legs."

"That's what they say, but I know they're really here for my legs," George said, extending one slightly chubby jeans-clad leg. "They're irresistible."

Tracie laughed. "Sorry to act all paranoid. I'm just nervous."

"Here's something to take your mind off being nervous," Mark said. "The Berkeley Blowout could be a major move forward for Amber Road. It's good P.R., for one thing. And we would be on the same bill as some excellent bands. Maybe they'll think of us if they need an opening act. Plus, there should be all sorts of people from the music industry—radio station managers, reporters, maybe even record producers."

"Well, that really helped calm me down. Not," Tracie said.

Me either, Lily thought. The idea of her mom finally showing up at one of her performances already made her nervous. Now everything seemed to be on the line. They had to be brilliant tonight. Absolutely, totally brilliant.

“We’ll burn up the stage,” Mark promised.

“Literally, if George’s chain-smoking girlfriend is here,” Sienna joked.

Everyone laughed, even George.

“Once we’re onstage, we have to be totally focused on our music,” Mark said. “We have a talent scout to astound.”

“Right. Total focus.” Lily took a deep breath. She wondered if her mother had arrived yet. And if she had, would she like her singing? What if she didn’t?

Her chest felt sharp and tight. She wished she could just bail on the whole performance. She shut her eyes briefly as she realized what was happening to her.

For the first time in her life, Lily Bouchet had stage fright.

two

"Mark, we didn't really need to come a half hour early," Sienna said. "Now we're just sitting backstage trying not to be nervous. But looking at everyone else's nervous faces just makes me *more* nervous."

"Tell me about it," Tracie said. "In fifteen minutes, I'll have to impress the talent scout with a high-energy performance while trying not to frighten my parents by strutting around onstage."

Sienna grinned at her friend. "The way your parents are, just seeing you onstage in a club will frighten them. They'll be all worried about you tonight no matter what you do, so you might as well go all out."

Tracie nodded. "Good point."

"At least I don't have to worry about that," Lily said. "My mom's an actor. She knows you have to give your all when you perform. She'll love seeing us strutting around."

Sienna held back an eye roll. If Lily wasn't going on and on about how great it was to have lived in Paris and England, she was bragging about her mom being an actor. And it wasn't like her mom had ever starred in a big movie or won an award. But the way Lily talked about her, you'd think her mom had the talent of Meryl Streep and the box-office draw of Julia Roberts.

"Why are you glaring at me?" Lily asked her.

"Huh? I didn't mean to. I wasn't even thinking about you, Lily," Sienna lied. "I'm just nervous about the show tonight."

She had to get out of here. Maybe Carter had gotten to the club by now. She'd be much better off with her boyfriend than in this room listening to Lily bragging and Tracie freaking out. "I'll be back in a few," Sienna said, and walked out the door.

Though Waves was packed tonight, she spotted him right away, like she had Carter-radar or something. He and his friend Drew were near the front, standing against one of the side walls. Carter looked so good tonight, wearing a sleeveless plaid shirt that showed off his broad swimmer's shoulders and biceps, and black cargo shorts that revealed his

rock-hard calves. When he saw her walking over, his eyes sparkled, making him look even better.

Carter said something to Drew, pointed to the back of the club, and met her near the exit. He threw his arms around her. “Lucky me. I didn’t think I’d see you ’til after the show.”

“Lucky me too,” Sienna said, and kissed him, right there in the club. She used to hate PDAs, but Carter had changed things for her. She’d kiss him anywhere. Feeling his warm mouth and luscious tongue on hers made her forget where they were and who was watching them.

The kiss lasted a long time. Then, as he held her in his strong arms, he asked, “You ready for the show?”

She smiled. “Actually, before I came out here and got some TLC, I was kind of panicking. There’s going to be a talent scout here tonight. If we do really well, he might book us for this music festival in Berkeley.”

“That’s awesome! I know you’ll do really well. He’d be an idiot *not* to book you guys.”

Sienna laughed. “I’m sure you’re not being biased at all when you say that.”

Carter ran his finger down her cheek. “Not at all. Anyone would know Amber Road is a fantastic band, and its bass player is—and I’m being totally unbiased here—the most phenomenal musician alive.”

She pretended to pout. “So you don’t think I’m the most phenomenal musician who ever lived?”

“Can you ever forgive me?” he joked. “Yes, of course, no doubt. You’re the most phenomenal musician who ever lived.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I like that. I’m right up there above Bach, Beethoven, and the Stones.”

The warm-up band announced their final song. “You should get backstage, shouldn’t you?” Carter said.

“Yeah. Mark is probably frantic by now, pacing the room, checking his watch every ten seconds, panicking about where I am. He’s so intense about band stuff. You should have heard him yesterday when George told him our website was down. He acted like it was the biggest catastrophe ever.”

“Oh, I fixed that for you guys. When he was updating the site, George put some weird code in there by mistake.”

“Really?”

Carter grinned. “What a great boyfriend you have, huh?”

She put her head on his chest. “I do. Not only am I the most phenomenal musician who ever lived, I’m also the luckiest girl who ever lived.”

She didn’t really believe the first part, but right now she believed the second part. She practically skipped back to the greenroom.

three

As Lily sang the lead on Amber Road's newest song, "Tomorrow," she studied the audience. Waves was packed. Luckily, her stage fright had disappeared the moment she started singing.

It was great that they'd been bumped up to Friday nights after having started out playing on Thursdays. But it wasn't just the weekend night that made the club crowded. Amber Road was building an audience. Every day they were getting more friends and downloads from MySpace, more hits on their website, and more e-mails from fans. At least half the audience looked as if they'd heard them before and had come back for more.

When Lily had joined Amber Road less than a year ago, she never imagined that as high school seniors, they would be headlining at one of the best clubs in San Diego. After tonight's show, they could very well be invited to perform at the Berkeley Blowout. *Smile*, Lily told herself. *You've got it made.*

But as she searched the crowd and couldn't find what she was looking for, her smile became harder and harder to maintain.

She tried. The other band members were playing so well tonight, she didn't want to disappoint them. Despite her bad leg, Tracie had ignored the chair put onstage for her, and instead stood next to Sienna. She and Sienna had been perfect so far tonight—Tracie ripping through her guitar solos with full-on passion and Sienna playing the bass like she owned every note. Mark showed that the keyboard was high art and sang with intensity yet control. And George was crazy on drums, as if he was having the best time of his life. *He probably is*, Lily thought, *while I can barely remember the song lyrics.*

She told herself to appreciate what she had, not what she didn't have. She had a wonderful boyfriend and a role as lead singer in a band she loved.

Next to her, Mark crooned, "Tomorrow I'll wake up next to you, gazing at your sunshine face, your silky curves, your giving lips." He had written the song for her. He reached out and stroked her hair as he sang.

She smiled, smiled, smiled as she searched the audience. She still couldn't find her mother. As much as Lily told herself to be happy, she just couldn't tonight.

She came in for their final duet. "Today next to you, tomorrow next to you, always my love next to you." She felt Mark looking into her eyes, but she couldn't meet his gaze. She needed to search the crowd one more time. Her mother had *promised* to show up. Lily had not only talked to her about it two weeks ago, she'd put "Lily performs at Waves, 9:00" on the wall calendar with a red pen. Yesterday, she'd even sent her mother an e-mail reminder and a text message. Lily had thought this time would be different.

But she hadn't come, after all.

"Tomorrow," Lily sang to close the song. But tomorrow wouldn't be any different for her. Her mother would still be more interested in her travels and parties and acting gigs than in her daughter.

The crowd applauded wildly. Lily nodded to them, all the while thinking, *I don't deserve this. I was far from my best tonight. If I was really great, my mother would have been here. She likes whatever's hot and buzz-worthy, so I guess this means I'm neither. The audience is being too nice.*

She peered at them once again, recognizing a lot of faces from school and from other shows, but not the one face she really wanted to see. *We need to hit the big time*, Lily told

herself. *Once Amber Road gets really famous, Mom will come to our shows.*

Then Lily felt her stomach go into free fall as she saw another face, a familiar face.

What was *he* doing here?

four

Tracie waited backstage in the greenroom with George, Mark, and Sienna. She could still feel the energy from the crowd. Amber Road had played a great set tonight, and everyone knew it. The Berkeley scout would have to invite them to the festival.

But as the minutes ticked by, and Mark kept looking at the cheap plastic clock on the wall of the little room, his brows creased and his smile disappeared. “I can’t believe Lily isn’t here,” he finally said. “What could be so important that she can’t celebrate with us for a few minutes, and find out whether we made it into the Berkeley Blowout?”

“Well, it’s not like any of us have heard yet,” George said.

Tracie ran her hand through her hair, still loving the novelty of having a spiky, short hairstyle. "I hope Guyda shows up soon with good news."

"I wonder who the talent scout is," George said. "Maybe he'll come by and tell us the news himself."

Mark looked at the clock again. "Where's Lily?"

Someone knocked on the door. *God*, Tracie thought, *please don't let it be my parents*. Every time she'd glanced at them in the audience, their arms were crossed. They obviously weren't into the music at all. They were there solely to watch over her, as if she were going to start drinking alcohol or stripping off her clothes onstage. When would her mother and father learn to trust her again?

"Come on in!" Mark shouted.

Brandon Cunningham opened the door. Tracie tried to focus on the sodas and glasses of water he carried on a tray. She glanced at his large hands, and then at his forearms, and then his muscular biceps before making herself look away.

"You guys played great tonight, as usual," Brandon said. "And, Tracie, your guitar solo on 'Rock It Like a Rocket' was outstanding."

"Thank you," she said, staring at a cigarette burn on one of the chairs. She was not going to think about Brandon.

"It's like you had all this pent-up passion that got spent tonight when your fingers tackled the guitar," Brandon continued.

Tracie sighed. He was right about her having a lot of pent-up passion. But, unfortunately, it hadn't been spent tonight.

"You okay, Tracie?"

"I'm fine." She looked into his eyes to pretend she was sincere, but seeing his dark, long-lashed eyes just made her blush.

"I have to get back to bartending," Brandon said. "Why don't you hang out with me, Tracie? Pull up a barstool and sip a soda? I'll tell you some jokes to cheer you up. Believe me, when you work at a bar, you get good at cheering people up."

"I can't. My parents are here. If they see me hanging at the bar, they'll freak out even more than their usual freak-outs these days," Tracie said.

Brandon frowned. "Well, can I talk to you alone, just for a minute or so?"

"Okay. Sure." Tracie followed Brandon out the door of the greenroom. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes," she called to the others. "Watch my guitar for me, okay?"

"You really look good tonight," Brandon told her as soon as they were out in the hallway. "I like your new hairstyle and your clothes. Not that you didn't look good before. Anyway, sorry for pulling you away from your friends."

"Don't apologize." She smiled at him. "You're my friend too."

He smiled back. "I was hoping we could be more than friends. Would you go out with me? Maybe tomorrow night? Or next Saturday?"

Tracie looked away. A few yards from them, a couple was leaning against the wall, making out. "Oh, Brandon. I can't go out with you," Tracie said. "For one thing, my parents would kill me if I dated an older guy, especially a bartender. No offense."

He was frowning. She obviously *had* offended him.

"Plus, I have so much homework and studying to do now," she added. "I barely have any free time."

"Even on the weekends?"

She made the mistake of looking at him again. His eyes were gorgeous, dark and shiny like the ocean at night. She quickly turned away again. "I bailed on a lot of my schoolwork the last few months. I used to have one of the highest GPAs in the senior class. I wrecked any shot I had at being valedictorian, but at least I want to try to get back my good grades," she said.

"Don't you do anything for fun, besides playing with Amber Road?" Brandon asked. Obviously, he didn't give up easily.

Tracie shrugged.

"We don't have to go out drinking on our date," Brandon said. "How about a movie? A nice restaurant? Maybe both."

Tracie shook her head. "I'm sorry, Brandon. You know I got all messed up the last few months. I need to put my life back together. First, I want to get to know myself, without a guy to make me feel good. Does that make any sense?"

He sighed. "Yeah, I guess it does."

"Brandon, I hope you know it's not you. It's me."

He smiled ruefully. "That sounds like one of those classic breakup lines."

"We can't break up if we never went out in the first place," Tracie said.

"Exactly. Why don't you give me a chance?"

"No," Tracie said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, we can be friends, right?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Brandon." A very tall girl with dyed black hair and a skimpy dress pushed past Tracie. The girl wobbled. She looked wasted. "You remember me from last night?" she asked.

Brandon smirked. "How could I forget? You were dancing on my bar."

"That was wild. The way I like it." She licked her lips.

"Hello, Tracie." Her mother was suddenly standing there, frowning as her gaze went from Tracie to Brandon to the girl with the skimpy dress. Oh, God.

"Mrs. Grant. How are you?" Brandon said smoothly.

"Right now? Truthfully, I'm concerned. Very concerned," her mom said. "Tracie, you shouldn't be hanging around clubs with bartenders and . . ." She stared at the tall girl's sleazy outfit.

"Tracie's not drinking or doing anything like that," Brandon said. "She's just talking to me, strictly as a friend."

"What time you get off work?" the girl asked Brandon, slurring her words. "You want to hit a bar?" She laughed.

"We need to get out of here. Now," her mother said, grabbing Tracie's arm.

"But, Mom, my guitar's still backstage. And we're waiting for our manager to tell us whether we got this gig."

"We're not waiting around for anything. I'll get your guitar. You stay here, Tracie," her mother ordered her. "You can call Sienna or Mark tomorrow and find out whether you got the *gig* or whatever it's called. Your father is already in the car. It's time to go. And not a moment too soon, I see." She pointed at Brandon. "I hope you realize my daughter is only seventeen years old."

"Mom!" Tracie protested, but her mother had already disappeared backstage.

Seconds later, her mother rushed out of the greenroom with the guitar. Tracie waved good-bye to Brandon and followed her mother toward the exit of Waves.

Just before they got to the front door, a huge guy with a shaved head, two nose rings, and a large tattoo on his neck stepped in front of Tracie, blocking her way. "Kickass show tonight," he said.

"Thank you," Tracie said. Her mother was staring at the guy and scowling.

"I couldn't take my eyes off you the whole time you were playing. You rocked on guitar, and you're so hot too. Sexy! I have an intense feeling we're meant for each other."

Oh, God, her mother was probably dying right now. Tracie glanced at her. Her mother's mouth had dropped, her eyebrows raised, and the scowl had grown bigger. "Tracie, let's go," her mother said sharply. "Your father's waiting for us in the car."

Tracie smiled at the guy and said, "Thanks for coming to the show. I'm flattered."

"Now!" her mother shouted.

She followed her mother's fast, hard footsteps out the door. She had never seen her mother in such a terrible hurry. She knew there would be a lecture on the way home. Lately, there were always lectures. Her parents had developed a steady rotation of them: the dangers of drinking, safe driving, and focusing on school. Tracie wished she could drive herself home.

Once they were in the car, her father said, "I never should have let you perform here. This is a bad environment for a seventeen-year-old girl."

"You should be doing more appropriate things than hanging out in bars with guys with pierced noses and gruesome tattoos on their necks," her mother said.

"Oh, Mom," Tracie said. "It's not like I'm drinking at Waves or going out with those guys."

Her father stopped at an orange light. "Your mother and I need to discuss whether you should be doing this anymore. I don't like what I saw in there."

Tracie felt short of breath all of a sudden. She couldn't believe what her parents were telling her. She forced herself to

respond without screaming. "You know I've been having a hard time lately. But it's been my fault, completely. I really screwed up, and it had nothing to do with Amber Road."

"I don't know about that," her father said as the light turned green. He slowly drove through the intersection.

"Please, listen to me," Tracie begged. "I've lost my boyfriend, my driving privileges, and your trust. And losing your trust has been devastating. About the only thing I have left now are my friends and my music. And your understanding. At least I thought I had your understanding. Since most of my friends are in Amber Road with me, forbidding me to perform with the band would just about take away the only things I have left."

"Oh, Tracie. You're always so dramatic," her mother said. "You can still be friends with Sienna and Mark and the others. You don't have to be in the band for that. We don't want you staying out late in those sleazy environments."

"I can handle it, Mom. You saw for yourself. I turned down both guys who asked me out. Besides, my friends need me on guitar."

"Well, we'll see," her mother said. "I hope your grades aren't suffering."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm keeping on top of my schoolwork. I'll maintain my A average," Tracie promised as they arrived at the house.

But the truth was, she wasn't on top of her schoolwork. She had let things go when she was seeing Lily's brother, Aaron,

and afterward when she'd been drinking and feeling sorry for herself. And lately she'd been incredibly busy with Amber Road—rehearsing, promoting, and performing more and more often. She hadn't been doing the reading and practice pages for precalculus, or researching her Vietnam War paper, or studying for her AP tests. She had a lot of catching up to do.

Tracie didn't even check her e-mail or her phone messages when she got home. Instead, she went straight to her room and sat down at her desk with her precalculus book. She read through a chapter. This was hard stuff, and she was tired. It would be a long time before she got through all the chapters she'd missed, but she knew that if she didn't bring her grades up and her parents found out, they would definitely tell her she couldn't play with Amber Road anymore.

She stared at the textbook, but her mind wasn't on math. She wondered what Brandon was up to. He was probably hooking up with that girl in the bar. Who would want to wait until August for her, anyway? And by August, she'd be 3,000 miles away at Yale.

She made herself focus on the text. She started with the easiest problem on the page. If $x = 72$, and $y =$ the sum of x and $2z$, and $z = 2x$, then what does y equal? "Beats me," she said aloud.

She pictured Brandon, smiling boyishly, and then the huge guy with the neck tattoo who had asked her out tonight. She shook her head. If she spent her time thinking about guys, she would never pass the precalc test.

She picked up a pencil and figured out the answer. $Y = 360$. That wasn't bad, but there were nineteen more problems just on this page in the math book, and they got progressively harder.

She yawned. If only she could go to sleep and forget about all this schoolwork! Maybe she should. She'd never be able to catch up anyway.

Her bedroom door swung open suddenly. Her mom stood there.

God! "Could you knock first?" Tracie asked.

"Just making sure you're all right."

"I'm trying to study," Tracie said. "Are you ever going to trust me again?"

"We wish we could," her mother said before walking away, leaving the door ajar.

five

The crowd at Waves was filing out, but Lily could see Aaron as she made her way to the back of the club. Where was Joel Matthews? She was certain she'd spotted the record producer just a few moments ago, and now he seemed to have vanished.

Aaron saw Lily approach, walked toward her, and gave her a hug.

"I didn't know you were coming tonight," she said.

"I felt bad about Mom not showing. I thought seeing my goofy face might cheer you up a little," he explained.

"It did. I appreciate it." Her voice broke. "Do you know why Mom's not here?"

"She called tonight and said the commercial shoot in Mexico was really tough, so she decided to stay a few days longer to wind down at a spa."

"So she's still in Mexico? Nice of her to inform us, like, twelve hours *after* she was supposed to be back."

"She apologized, at least. You know Mom," Aaron said.

"Unfortunately." Lily shook her head. "So I guess Mom's going to blow off your motocross race too tomorrow."

"It's okay." His eyebrows furrowed. It obviously wasn't okay with him.

Lily gave her brother a hug.

Aaron hugged her back, hard. "Sorry about Mom."

"Yeah, me too," Lily murmured.

"Well, at least Joel Matthews came by to hear you play again," Aaron said. "I think he was here only for the last couple of songs, like I was. But you did good. Let's go find him and see what he thinks."

The record producer had shown up at one of Amber Road's earlier gigs, after Aaron sent him a CD of Lily singing. She hadn't heard from Matthews since then and had figured he wasn't interested.

Now Lily's heart raced, but she shrugged and tried to look blasé as she followed her twin.

Joel Matthews was finishing up a conversation with the club's owner when they found him. He turned to Lily with a smile and stuck out his hand. "Great to see you," he said as he shook Lily's hand. "You sang beautifully tonight."

"Thanks, but it really wasn't my best performance," she said. "Mark Carrelli, the keyboardist, wrote most of the songs we played. Aren't they terrific?"

"You could probably sing the phone book and make it sound good," Matthews said.

Lily smiled at him, determined to direct the conversation back to her bandmates. "It's easy to sound good with Amber Road. Everyone in the band is so talented."

"Maybe," Matthews said. "But you're the one who could be the breakout star. I'd like to take you to lunch, talk about the possibility of working together."

"Take us all to lunch? Everyone in Amber Road?"

He shook his head. "Just you, Lily. How does tomorrow at noon look?"

"On Saturdays, I usually go over to Mark's—"

Before she could say *Mark's house*, Aaron interrupted with "I'm sure Lily's free. Just tell her where to meet you."

"How about Marston's in Rancho Santa Fe?" Matthews asked at once.

Lily nodded, unsure of how she felt about this.

"I don't know if you've ever been to Marston's. There's a piano there," Matthews said. "You could even play a song or two if you'd like. It would be great to hear you solo."

"Hey, Lily." Mark walked over. "I waited for you backstage." He put his arm around her.

"This is Mark, my boyfriend, the guy I was just talking about who wrote most of those fantastic songs," Lily

told Matthews. "Mark, meet Joel Matthews." They shook hands.

"Lily, why aren't you backstage?" Mark asked. "Everyone's there, waiting for Guyda and the talent scout. Don't you want to find out whether we got the gig?"

"What gig?" Matthews said.

"The Berkeley Blowout. Maybe," Lily said. "Bye." She hurried away and Mark followed her.

Just outside the greenroom, Mark tugged on her arm. "Wait a minute," he said. "Who's Joel Matthews?"

She shrugged. "Just a fan."

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"You seem nervous or something now, and tonight you seemed a little off. It was like you were lost in your own world or something. You sure you're okay?"

"Positive." Lily forced a smile again, and opened the backstage door.

Her bandmates' smiles seemed genuine as they greeted Mark and her. "After a long, tortuous fifteen minutes or so apart, Amber Road is together at last," George quipped.

"And forevermore," Mark joked. "United we stand."

Lily kept her smile planted on, even as her mind echoed with Matthews's words: *You're the one who could be the breakout star.*

six

Steve Guyda, Amber Road's manager, came backstage a few minutes after Tracie left and Lily came in. His smile said it all. But just in case there were any doubts, Guyda put his thumb up and said, "It's a go."

"Yes!" Sienna yelled. Everyone cheered and hugged. Sienna wished Tracie were here to share the good news. She'd text her as soon as she could. "I can't wait to go to Berkeley!" Sienna said. "How many shows do we get to do? How are we getting there? Where are we staying? What bands are going to be on our bill?"

Guyda held up his hand. "We're still discussing all the details. Gabe, the scout from the music festival, is going to come

in any minute now to meet you guys and hopefully answer some of your questions.”

“Most important question,” George said. “How much do we get paid?”

Guyda shook his head. “Unfortunately not much more than the cost of the gas getting up there and two hotel rooms. “You’ll be on a tight budget. Wait ’til you make it big, then you’ll get the royal treatment.”

“We could use my folks’ old bus to haul us and our instruments up to Berkeley,” George said. “A few years ago, they did day care in our home, and used the bus to pick up the little squirts after school. Now it mostly stays parked in front of our house, pissing off the neighbors. The thing’s old and ugly, but it’s big and free.”

Mark patted him on the back. “I like big and free.”

“That should really help the budget, George. Thanks,” Guyda said. “Most bands don’t do the Berkeley Blowout for the money. The real value here is in the experience and the contacts. You’ll be performing outdoors mostly, hopefully three or four times throughout the four-day festival. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. Then you’ll head home Tuesday. And I’ll try to make sure the right people see you—other bands that might need an opening act on tour, radio execs, record producers if we’re very lucky.”

Oh, crap. Sienna suddenly realized she was supposed to go to a banquet with Carter on Saturday night. It was a big,

fancy dinner being given in his honor for a scholarship he'd won. They'd really been looking forward to it. She hated to disappoint him.

Someone knocked on the door. "That must be Gabe," Guyda said, opening it.

A young African-American guy entered the room. He was very handsome, with green eyes and a well-built body. Sienna thought he looked familiar, but couldn't place him. He looked right at her and smiled.

She recognized that smile. "Gabriel!" she shouted. "Wait! You're Gabe, the talent scout?"

He nodded. "Great to see you, Sienna. I didn't know you were in the band until I saw you onstage tonight."

"You guys know each other?" Mark asked.

"Just about all the African-Americans in La Jolla know each other," Gabriel said flippantly.

"You mean *both* African-Americans in La Jolla." Sienna laughed. "We met in church. Gabriel used to be pretty active there, until he ditched us for a silly little thing like an education at UC Berkeley." She winked at him to show that she was joking.

He winked back at her.

He didn't think she was flirting with him, did he? She wouldn't do that. All of her flirting was reserved for Carter. She said politely and a bit distantly, "How's university life been treating you?"

"I graduated last year," Gabriel said. "I worked my butt off in high school, so by the time I got to Berkeley I had so many AP credits I was able to finish in three years."

"That's impressive," she admitted. "I didn't realize you were out of school already." He was four years older than she was, so it wasn't as if they had interacted that much.

"So how long have you been in this band?" he asked, giving her that smile.

Objectively speaking, he had a great smile. Anyone would say so. It emphasized the deep dimple on his right cheek, and showed off his sexy lips, and the cute little gap between his two front teeth. And, holy crap, he'd gotten totally buff since she'd seen him last! He had muscles like a weightlifter's. He must be working out a lot.

"Sienna?" Gabriel tilted his head.

Jeez, had she been staring at him?

The rest of the band was staring at her.

She blinked her eyes fast. "I was trying to figure out what's different about you," she lied. "I just realized. Your hair is a lot shorter than it used to be." He used to have a long, wild afro, but now his hair was short, like a businessman's. "Um, did you ask me something before?"

"Never mind," he said.

"So you're a music scout now?"

"At Berkeley I majored in philosophy, which—big surprise—doesn't lead to a lot of high-paying jobs. But if you ever want to

know about the historical development of existentialism, with special emphasis on the French philosophers, I'm your man." He laughed. "My parents begged me to minor in something practical, so I minored in music."

"And your parents thought a music minor was 'practical'?" Sienna asked.

"I'm sure they're still asking each other where they went wrong with me, and why they shelled out all that money for me to go to Berkeley," Gabriel said. "But I'm glad I studied music. I've always loved it."

"I remember." Sienna nodded. Gabriel used to play the organ when the regular church organist wasn't there. Sienna had been in the gospel choir, and had loved looking down at his mop of hair and his large, quick fingers on the keyboard.

"Do you have any idea what you're going to major in at Cal Tech?" he asked.

Her mouth fell open. "How did you know about Cal Tech?"

"I always ask around about you."

She felt her face go warm at the idea of Gabriel asking about her. "I guess we should get down to business," she said. "We're holding up the rest of the band."

"That's okay," Lily said.

"Sienna and I can catch up with each other in Berkeley next weekend," Gabriel said. "But we'll have to carve out time to talk then. We're both going to be really busy. I'm one of the poor saps in charge of making everything run smoothly."

Or at least trying to avoid total disasters. You lucky people will be playing all over the city.”

“Sounds awesome,” George said.

“Sienna,” Gabriel said, “let’s really try to squeeze in time for lunch, or at least coffee at La Strata. Did I tell you, by the way, that you look terrific?”

“Oh, thanks.” She gazed down at the stained carpeting.

“Okay.” Gabriel began handing out folders. “Inside you’ll find a schedule of the headline acts, a map of all the concert sites, info about the hotel, and guides for what to bring, where to eat, you name it. I’ll e-mail Guyda this week with the specifics on exactly where and when Amber Road will be playing, but plan to be in Berkeley next Friday by late afternoon.”

“Yes!” George said, raising a fist in the air.

Gabriel’s eyes met Sienna’s. “Well, I still have to hit another club . . . some band in the Gaslamp that isn’t going on until at least eleven. You guys know anything about Purple Goldfish?”

“Other than that they suck?” George asked.

“Hey, maybe Gabriel will like them,” Mark said.

Gabriel turned to Sienna. “I trust you. Does Purple Goldfish suck?”

She shrugged. “I don’t want to criticize them. You might like them.”

“I get it. They suck,” Gabriel said.

“But you should go anyway,” Sienna said. “Give them a chance.”

He smiled at her. "Anything you say. See you next week." And he was out the door.

Guyda turned to her. "I didn't know you knew the scout."

"Me neither," she said.

"Well, he sure seems to have put you in a good mood," Lily said with her eyebrows raised.

"We're friends. Old friends. That's all," Sienna said. She wasn't sure who she was trying to persuade, Lily or herself.

George was glancing through his folder. "I don't believe it. Adriana's playing the fest!"

"She's going to be there?" Mark gave a low whistle. "She's a big name."

"Sure is." Guyda grinned. "This is a big-deal festival."

"We'll be performing at the same place as Adriana." George looked stunned. "I used to have a poster of her in my bedroom."

"Lots of preteen guys did," Guyda said.

"But George just took his down last week," Mark joked, and even George laughed. "But seriously," Mark said, "thanks for helping us get the Berkeley Blowout, Steve. It's fantastic! I bet there will be huge crowds."

"I'm not a bad manager, huh? Now let's talk logistics. Your first gig is on Friday night," Guyda said. "And it should take you about seven or eight hours to get there."

"You obviously haven't seen my parents' old bus," George said. "It's going to take us more than eight hours. I don't

think that rusty piece of scrap metal has been able to go sixty-five miles an hour since the last millennium.”

Mark put his arm around Lily. “Traveling in style.”

“Very romantic. Just the two of you.” George grinned. “And me, Sienna, and Tracie. And all our instruments jammed into an ancient kiddy transporter.”

“Carter isn’t going to be happy,” Sienna said. “I’m supposed to go to his scholarship banquet next Saturday night. It’s a big honor for him.”

“Come on, Sienna,” Mark said. “This is a big opportunity for us. We need you.”

“I know. I know. I’ll be there. I just feel bad for Carter, that’s all. He’ll be upset that I can’t go with him.”

The band had a lengthy meeting in the greenroom as they worked out the details of the trip to Berkeley. By the time Sienna left, she dreaded seeing Carter. She had kept him waiting a lot longer than she’d planned. And now she would have to break their date for the banquet.

Carter didn’t seem to mind the wait. The moment she walked out of the greenroom, he hurried to her and pulled her into his arms. “You were awesome. I bet the talent scout signed you guys up, right?”

“He did!” She didn’t mention she knew the scout. “We’re going to the Berkeley Blowout!”

“I knew you’d get it,” Carter said. “You guys are great. And Sienna, you were so incredibly sexy onstage tonight,” he said. Then he opened his mouth and kissed her.

She ran her fingers through his long blond hair as their tongues explored each other's mouths and their bodies pressed into each other. After performing with Amber Road she was sweaty and tired, but she didn't care. All she cared about right now was Carter.

When they finally came up for air, Carter whispered, "I can't wait 'til we can really be together."

"Me too," Sienna said. "I wish everything wasn't so rushed and crazy."

Carter sighed. "I shouldn't have signed up for so many extracurriculars this semester. I have all these obligations now, and all I want to do is be with you."

Sienna shook her head. "It's my fault too. Being in the band takes up so much of my time. You know I love it, but I never expected we'd be so busy. Rehearsing, promoting, performing." She was going to have to tell him about the Berkeley Blowout, but not just yet. Not when he had one hand sliding down her back. . . .

"There's one thing I did right, though," Carter said. "Waiting. Not hooking up with anyone else. Maybe I knew in the back of my mind I'd end up with you. You're the one I want to be my first." He kissed her neck, licked her ear, then blew in it.

Sienna had to hold onto the wall. "I want you so bad."

"Next weekend. After the scholarship banquet. After listening to everyone blabber about how smart I am, I figure you'll deserve a nice hotel to sleep in. I reserved a room at the

Beverly Wilshire. You can tell your parents you're staying at Tracie's house, right?"

"Oh, Carter." For a moment Sienna didn't know what to say. He had reserved a hotel room for them at a gorgeous, swanky hotel. For their first time together. He had just made the perfect plan and she was about to destroy it.

"Um . . . I have to talk to you about that," she finally managed. "The Berkeley Blowout is next weekend."

"*Next weekend?* And they just told you about it tonight?"

Sienna nodded. "The timing definitely sucks, but I couldn't say no. This is an incredible break for Amber Road."

"But we already had plans to be together," Carter said.

"I know," she said. "It's just that I can't turn down this opportunity. You know how important the band is to me."

He frowned. "I thought I was important to you."

"Of course you are," she said. But however much she loved him, Amber Road had to come first. "Why don't you come to Berkeley with me?" she offered. "It might be a tight squeeze in the bus, but I don't mind sitting close to you." She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. "We could have so much fun there. Think about it. A road trip, no parents, and rock 'n' roll."

Carter shook his head. "They're handing me a twenty-thousand-dollar scholarship Saturday night. You want me to blow them off so I can listen to you guys perform all weekend?"

"I didn't know listening to my band was such agony for you," she snapped.

“Oh, come on, Sienna. Don’t play the victim here.” His tone had become snappy too. “You said you’d go to the banquet with me. I asked you a long time ago, and I already RSVPed for both of us. I booked us a hotel room. I thought you’d be there with me.”

Sienna sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been so busy with Amber Road,” Carter complained. “Next weekend was supposed to be our big chance to really be together.”

Sienna shook her head. “I have to go with my band. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Carter looked away. “At least I know where I stand with you.”

“Carter, please—”

“Bye.” He started to walk away. “Congratulations on, well, everything having to do with your band, which obviously means everything to you.”

“That’s not true, Carter. Carter!” she called out.

He didn’t answer.

She knew she could go after him. But what could she say at this point to make things better?

Sienna stayed where she was, at Waves.

seven

When Aaron knocked on her bedroom door, Lily was still in bed, listening to a CD of love songs Mark had burned for her. She pulled the blanket up to her neck and yelled, "Come in!"

Her brother opened the door. He was dressed in his motocross jersey, pants, and boots.

"You're going to your race already?" Lily asked. "I thought it didn't start 'til noon."

"Yeah, but it's ten o'clock now," he said. "I told Blondie I'd take her out for breakfast and drive her home. Then I'm going straight over to the motocross competition."

"Blondie?" Lily asked. "The girl you took home from Waves last night?"

He shrugged. "She told me her name last night, but I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Lily laughed. "You're horrible, you know that?"

"Blondie didn't seem to think I was horrible last night," he said.

"TMI, bro," Lily told him. "You'd better be using condoms."

"I'm not stupid," he said.

"Aaron?" the girl called out.

"My God, not again!" Aaron exclaimed in mock horror. "Doesn't the girl ever get tired?"

Lily shook her head. "Blondie just called you Aaron. At least she knows *your* name."

"I'd better go," he said.

"Good luck today. Sorry Mom won't be there to watch you compete. I would go myself, but last night I told Joel Matthews I'd have lunch with him."

"I hope he signs you up," Aaron said. "You're so much better than the rest of that band, it isn't even funny."

"Please stop saying that."

"Aaron?" the girl called out again.

"I'll be back around four or five," he told Lily. "Good luck today to you too."

The house phone rang about a minute after Aaron and Blondie left the house. Lily rushed to the kitchen to answer it.

"Lily, I'm so glad I was able to reach you." It was her mother.

"You're a little late," Lily said.

"Oh, sweetheart, I feel awful about last night. I wanted to be there, truly I did."

Lily hunched her shoulders. "Well, why weren't you then? Spa emergency?"

"It really sounds bad, doesn't it? As if I chose a few days at the spa over you."

Lily didn't respond. It *did* sound bad. It felt bad too. To distract herself, she walked into the pantry to take out cereal for breakfast. Then she remembered they were out of milk. She or Aaron would have to go to the market soon.

"You just don't know what this week's been like. I will never work with that director again," her mother said.

"I thought you wanted the job," Lily said. "You were so excited when you got the commercial."

"I wanted the money, to buy things for you and Aaron."

"Oh, Mom," Lily said. "We don't need more things."

"You need food and clothes, don't you?"

Lily nodded as she stared into the half-empty pantry.

Her mother sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm taking out all my frustrations of the past week on you. That bastard director had me working all day and night in the jungles of Mexico. Did I mention what the humidity is here? It's horrible. And every time a drop of perspiration formed on my face, they had to stop everything and fix it."

"That does sound bad," Lily said as she shut the pantry door and walked toward the family room.

“What kept me going was the thought of having enough money so you can keep buying your adorable clothes and expensive perfumes, and Aaron can take out girls and treat them well.”

Lily thought about Blondie. Aaron didn’t treat girls well, no matter how much money he had. But she did like having nice things and not having to worry about what they cost.

“The whole shoot, I kept reassuring myself that it would be over soon,” her mother said. “But then it rained, so filming stopped. And then we didn’t get enough sun, so that bastard director delayed everything again. Lily, this guy is a total perfectionist. You have no idea how stressful it is to work for someone like that.”

Lily sat on the couch. She had never worked in her life. How could she be angry at her mother when she had been working so hard to support her and Aaron? At least her mother was around more often than her dad. He was such a complete no-show that Lily didn’t even waste time getting angry at him.

“The idiot must have thought he was shooting a big-budget movie instead of a coffee commercial,” her mother complained.

“It sounds like you had a hellish week,” Lily said.

“Hellish is right,” her mother said. “And don’t repeat this, Lily, but the coffee I was pitching tastes like mud. Do you know what an ordeal it was to pretend to like it?”

"But what does that have to do with missing my show last night?" Lily knew it was a rude question, but she had to hear her mom explain.

"It has everything to do with it." Her mother's voice was edgy now, as if it frustrated her to have such a dense daughter. "Don't you see, Lily? I was so wiped out, I doubt they would have even let me on the plane. I had to stay here a few more days for health reasons." She sighed. "I apologize. I'm sure I'm more disappointed than you are about missing your performance."

Lily wasn't so sure about that at all.

Her mother gave a tinny laugh. "Anyway, what self-respecting teen wants her mother listening to her rock band?"

Maybe her mother had a point. Tracie sure wasn't eager to have her parents there. And then they had hauled her off early.

"Do you forgive me?" her mother asked. "Please say yes."

"Yes. I guess."

"Oh, great." Her mother's voice brightened. "I'll call you as soon as I figure out when I can make it home. They're really taking good care of me at the spa."

"I can take care of you," Lily said. "Aaron and I make dinner here sometimes, you know. And I do my own laundry. I'd be happy to do yours."

"Oh, no, no, no. You have fun. Go on dates. Hang out with your friends. You don't need to worry about me," her

mother said. "I'll be fine after a few more days of R and R. I'll see you soon, sweetheart. Thanks for being so understanding. Kiss, kiss." She hung up the phone.

Lily remained on the couch with the phone against her ear. She didn't feel very understanding.

It wasn't until later, when she was in the shower, that she realized her mother hadn't asked her how the performance had gone, or anything else about her week.

Lily was still a little wet from her shower and dressed only in her ivory silk bathrobe when the doorbell rang.

She went to the front door and looked in the peephole. It was Mark.

She let him in. "What are you doing here?" she asked as they stood in the hallway.

"Thanks for the warm greeting." He closed the door. "I just thought I'd come by and surprise you. You seemed kind of down last night. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"That's sweet," she said.

"And you smell sweet." He took a long whiff of her. "Strawberry shampoo or something?"

"Close. Strawberry-kiwi conditioner."

He smiled. "Yum." Then he glanced around the room. "Who else is home?"

"No one. Aaron just left for the day. My mom is still in Mexico."

"I was wondering what happened to her last night. I thought she was going to be at Waves. Then, I guess I got so

psyched about the Berkeley Blowout, I didn't ask you about it. Is she okay? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Lily shrugged. "She just decided to extend her trip, spur-of-the-moment thing." She didn't go into how hurt she felt. A teenager was not supposed to want her mother to come to a nightclub. She didn't think Mark would understand.

She changed the subject. "It's just us here," she said, touching his arm lightly. She untied the sash of her bathrobe, shrugged it off her shoulders, and let it fall to her feet. "Just us. No one and nothing in the way."

"Oh my God, Lily." He remained standing in front of her. He stared at her naked body, his eyes slowly devouring the length of it, up and down. "I could just gaze at you like this forever," he said. "Do you know how perfect you are? I can't believe you're all mine." His eyebrows suddenly furrowed. "You *are* all mine, aren't you?" he asked.

What kind of question was that? "Of course, I'm all yours," she told him. "And you're all mine."

She lifted his hands and put them on her face, then stepped closer to him and kissed him. Soon his hands were on her body, and her hands were on him, and they were both stripping off his clothes as they sunk to the rug in the hallway and had their wicked way with one another, wildly but sweetly.

Afterward, they moved to the couch, where they sat wrapped in each other's arms, Lily in her robe and Mark

wearing just his jeans. She felt at peace for the first time today. She wanted to stay with Mark like this forever.

"Now will you tell me?" Mark's voice was gentle but insistent. "What happened last night, Lily? You didn't seem like yourself onstage. Then later you were talking to that Matthews guy and . . ."

Lily's peaceful feeling vanished.

She looked away from him and glanced at the large crystal clock over the fireplace mantel. Oh, no! It was already eleven-thirty. She was supposed to meet Joel Matthews at noon.

"There you go looking upset again, like you did last night. It kills me to see you like that," Mark said.

"Then maybe you should leave," Lily said, standing up. She was already thinking about what she would wear to meet Matthews.

"Oh, Lily, I didn't mean that." He ran his hand gently through her hair. "I'm here for you."

He was so understanding. But not about Amber Road. The band meant more to Mark than anything, maybe more than she did. There was no way she could tell him about the producer. "Please," she said. "I think I need to be alone today. I'm just kind of upset about my mother. . . ."

"But—" Mark started to say.

"I'll call you later. We can go out or something tonight. I promise."

"You don't want to go to Berkeley?" Mark guessed.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't give me the third degree, okay? I want to go to Berkeley. Now, please, I just need a little time alone!"

Mark raised his hands, as if surrendering. "I'm sorry, all right?"

She sighed. "Don't worry. I'll be my happy self again soon."

"You don't have to be happy on my account," Mark said. "I just want to know what's wrong, see if I can help you."

"Everything's fine," she lied.

He got dressed in silence.

She said good-bye as he made his way to the front door. But it wasn't until he'd left and shut the door behind him that she said what she'd been thinking the last few minutes: "I'm sorry too. More than you know."

She hurried to her bedroom and got ready for her lunch with Matthews to the sounds of Mark's love songs CD playing on her iPod.

Lily drove her turquoise Jag to the restaurant, wondering whether she should call Matthews from her cell phone and cancel the lunch date. She could tell him it was no use, that she could never go solo. Then she could drive to Mark's house and stop keeping secrets from him, and they'd be just as good together as they ever were.

But how could she turn down the opportunity to meet with a successful record producer? Maybe he *could* make her a star.

But how could she double-cross Mark? He had been the first person to believe in her musical ability. He had asked her to be in the band in the first place, and made her lead singer.

“Fire Me Up,” a song from Mandy Mallone, played on the car radio. Mallone was one of Joel Matthews’s discoveries. It was a great song. Lily had seen the video on MTV and knew it had won an award. Lily imagined her mother in her Lexus, listening to her on the radio. Her mother would say, *That’s my famous daughter. She makes me proud.*

Lily didn’t know what to do. She turned up the volume on the radio and let the music wash over her so she didn’t have to think.

She pulled up to the restaurant and dropped off her Jag with the valet. Then she stood, motionless, outside. It wasn’t until the attendant drove off that she smoothed her flouncy floral skirt, took a deep breath, and opened the door to the restaurant.

Joel Matthews was already there, sitting on a leather bench near the hostess stand, wearing a silky shirt and jeans and slicked back hair. He stood up and shook her hand. “Lily Bouchet, future rock star queen,” he said with a smile. “Glad you could make it.”

“You may call me Queen Lily,” she joked nervously.

The hostess led them to their table. Lily had never been here before, but she’d heard about the restaurant. It was in Rancho Santa Fe, one of San Diego’s oldest and most wealthy neighborhoods. The décor was understated elegance—lots of

dark, rich woodwork, muted watercolor paintings of flowers and trees lining the walls, a black piano in the corner with a tuxedoed pianist playing softly.

Mark had a piano like that one at home. Sometimes he would play tunes and they would sing duets side by side. Occasionally, after dinner at his house, the whole family gathered around the piano.

“You like the music?” Matthews asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re staring at the piano and smiling.”

“Oh. No. It’s just . . .” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I mean, I do like the music. I was just . . .”

“Relax, Lily.” He smiled at her. “I wouldn’t have invited you here if I didn’t think you were enormously talented.”

The waiter came by to take their drink order. Matthews ordered some kind of foreign-sounding vodka. Lily got an iced tea. She mentioned hearing Mandy Mallone on the radio.

“She’s great, isn’t she?” Matthews said, putting his napkin on his lap. “I discovered her playing in a horrible cover band, doing bad imitations of top-forty pop songs. I caught the band at my cousin’s wedding. I listened beyond the screechy guitarist and the obnoxious lead singer, and I recognized Marlene’s talent. Her real name is Marlene Wolfschmidt, by the way. Not fitting for a rock star. That was the first thing I did for her. I got her to change her name. Did you know she was nominated for a Grammy? And her latest song won an MTV Music Award.”

Lily leaned forward to make her case for Amber Road. "My band doesn't have a screechy guitarist. Tracie's really good on guitar. And the other singers, Mark and Sienna, are talented too. And our drummer—"

"I know they're your friends, Lily. I'm sure they're very nice people," Matthews said. "And you're going out with the keyboardist, right?"

"Yes." Lily pushed on. "Mark Carrelli. He founded Amber Road. He's a great guy, and he wrote most of the songs we play. They're really good songs, don't you think?"

Now Matthews leaned forward. "I have to tell you, Lily. When your brother, Aaron, sent me the CD, he said your boyfriend was an idiot."

Lily groaned. She hated that her brother and her boyfriend were enemies. She bit her lip, trying to compose herself before speaking so she wouldn't raise her voice. "First of all, I had no idea Aaron was going to send you a CD. Second, I'm not really a solo artist. My main role is as a member of Amber Road."

"You could be a solo artist," Matthews said.

She wanted to shake her head and say, *No, I can't*. Except that maybe, just maybe, she could. "Anyway, Mark is no idiot," she said. "He's taught me a lot about music. He's a brilliant guy, and very talented."

"They're all talented, but you're the one who sparkles, Lily," Matthews said. "Amber Road is holding you back. If your boyfriend really cares about you, he'll want you to succeed, with or without him."

She cringed. That was a hard thing to hear. Maybe the truth hurt.

The waiter gave them their drinks and then took their lunch orders. Lily didn't have any appetite, but she ordered a seafood salad anyway.

After the waiter left, Matthews told Lily, "I believe in you. Don't be afraid."

Lily looked down at the red tablecloth. "I don't even know if I can sing in public by myself."

"You'll never know until you try," Matthews said. "You can sing right here, at the restaurant. That's one of the reasons I chose this place, for its piano. I called the owner, and he said he'd love to have you try out a song here."

"Oh, no. I don't think I can do that," Lily said.

"Yes, you can. If you didn't think you could sing solo, you wouldn't have met me here today. What song do you want to do?"

Lily thought for a moment. "I guess I could do 'Because You Loved Me.' " That was her audition song for choir and she knew all the lyrics and notes.

Matthews lifted one dark eyebrow. "Not many people could carry off a Céline Dion song. But I bet you could," he said. "Let me talk to the pianist. Come with me. Don't be nervous."

She *was* nervous though. He wanted her to sing solo in front of a roomful of strangers. But despite the swishing in her stomach and the frantic thoughts racing in her head, she followed Matthews to the piano.

The piano player said he was happy to play the song for her. Before she lost what little nerve she had, Lily leaned into the piano and began. At first it felt strange to be performing by herself, without Mark next to her, and George on drums, and Tracie and Sienna on guitar and bass. Here, she had only the pianist next to her. She was too quiet on the first few notes. Her voice was breathy too. Damn.

But then she got into the song, into the beauty and emotion of it. Standing off to the side was Joel Matthews, but she didn't look his way. She didn't want to admit to herself that this was an audition song, though she knew it was, or that it could change her life, though she knew it could. She focused on the beat and the melody and the pretty words, and mostly the lush, romantic feel of the song. And she tried to get that wonderful feeling into her voice.

The restaurant had grown silent. After a few verses, the other diners stopped eating in order to listen and stare at her.

She was aware that was a good sign, but it hardly registered. The passion and intensity of the song ran through her—body, heart, mind, soul. She knew she was doing a great job as she let loose and heard herself sing, as if her voice was channeling her feelings about love and being loved.

As the song came to a close, everyone in the room got to their feet. The diners and the restaurant staff all stood, applauding and whistling and cheering. The pianist stood up and clapped for her too. Lily glanced at Matthews, who was smiling and nodding with a smug look on his face, as if he'd

just reconfirmed his flair for finding talent. Shouts of “more!” and “encore!” burst through the room.

Lily knew she’d performed very well, yet she walked back to her seat with her head down, shaky, because she also knew she’d just opened a door that she wasn’t sure she wanted to walk through.

Joel Matthews met her back at their table. “I knew you could pull it off,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said before gulping down some iced tea so she didn’t have to say anything else.

“You were absolutely stunning,” Matthews told her. But then he frowned. “I wish I could make you an offer right now, but I can’t.”

Lily felt disappointment hit like a tidal wave. She suddenly realized she really wanted this opportunity.

“I can’t make you an offer today, not until we cut a demo of you singing a few solos. I need a CD I can pass around to the suits at the record company,” he explained. “But I have no doubt that as soon as they hear your voice, they’ll be bowled over.”

Lily felt a rush again, a nervous rush.

“So can you record a few songs for me this week?” Matthews asked. “I’ll walk you through the process. Then I’ll try to hurry a decision from my record company so you won’t have to wait long to get a formal signing offer.”

Lily nodded. She didn’t know if she’d take an offer at this point, but she was relieved that she didn’t have to decide now.

The rest of the lunch was pleasant. They talked about singers and musicians they liked, and Matthews gave her industry gossip, told her who was difficult to work with, whose voice was so weak the background singers did most of the vocals, and which young singer had a dumb-blond persona but was actually the smartest businesswoman he'd ever known.

As they walked out of the restaurant, he said, "Lily, I think you have tremendous talent. Don't throw it away because of misguided loyalty to a guy and his garage band."

"Amber Road is a lot more than just a guy and his garage band," she said.

"The other band members are probably very nice people, but musically they're not on your level," Matthews said. "Think about signing with me. If you pass up this opportunity, you may spend the rest of your life wondering what would have happened if you'd grabbed it. Just think about it, that's all I'm asking."

"I will," Lily said, as she got in her car. She knew she would probably not just think about it, but agonize over it.

And in fact, she spent the rest of the day doing just that.

eight

"I heard you ran into Gabriel Green last night," Sienna's mother said on the way home from Costco on Saturday afternoon.

"How did you know about me seeing Gabriel?" Sienna asked.

"His mother was so excited, she called me this morning." Sienna's mom stopped at a red light and looked at her. "Gabriel nearly broke his mother's heart when he told her he might not go to law school after all. You know, the boy was accepted to both UCLA and USC law schools. But instead, he's trying to scratch out a living in the music industry. That

is not what his parents expected when they sent him to Berkeley.”

“I didn’t know that. I mean, I know he loves music and that he’s working in the music industry. But I didn’t know he’d applied to law schools,” Sienna said. “Mom, you shouldn’t call him a boy. He’s twenty-two years old. He’s a man.”

The light changed and her mom moved forward. “He not only applied to law schools, he was *accepted* by two top law schools in California. How could someone turn down an opportunity like that?”

“Well, Mom—” Sienna said.

But her mom interrupted. Obviously, she didn’t think there was a valid answer to that question. “Gabriel’s mother thought that perhaps you could talk some sense into him. He certainly doesn’t listen to his parents.”

“You want me to lecture him about the benefits of law school?” Sienna asked.

They were stopped at another red light, but her mom stared straight ahead without talking. Finally, she said, “Gabriel’s mother told me he’s not dating anyone. Maybe you could have dinner with him one night. Or we’d be happy to have him over for dinner. I could make that lamb dish you like so much.”

Was that what this conversation was really about? Her mom and Gabriel’s mom playing matchmakers? Well, she had no use for one. “Mom, I have a boyfriend, remember?” She stared at her mother’s profile, but her mom kept her eyes on the road ahead.

The light turned green, but her mom didn't move forward until a car honked behind them. She sighed. "Oh, Sienna."

"I'm dating Carter. We're very happy together."

Her mom shrugged. "I suppose. But Gabriel is such a fine young man."

"Mom. Gabriel's four years older than me."

"Four years isn't that much. You and Gabriel have so much in common. You both like music, and you worship at the same church, and you come from nice families. He's our type of person."

"What does that mean?" Sienna snapped. She knew exactly what it meant, but wanted to hear her mom admit it out loud.

"I just meant that you two have a lot in common."

"You keep repeating that. Why don't you just say what you really mean? Gabriel and I are both African-American."

"Well, yes," her mom finally admitted.

"I thought you liked Carter," Sienna said.

"Carter's fine," her mom said in a tone that implied he was less than fine.

"But he's not Gabriel," Sienna said. "And he's white."

Her mom pursed her lips.

Sienna's cell phone rang. She saw the call was from Carter and picked up. "Hi." Her voice was testy. She was not only mad at her mom, she wasn't exactly happy with Carter either, after their argument last night about her performing at the Berkeley Blowout.

"You okay, Sienna?" he asked her. "You sound upset. You know I miss you already since last night? That probably sounds dorky, but it's true."

He was so sweet, it was hard to stay mad at him. Besides, she knew he'd really been looking forward to going to the banquet with her next weekend, and especially staying at the hotel with her afterward. "I'm okay," she said in a calmer voice.

"What are you doing now?" he asked her.

Sienna rolled her eyes. "Driving home from an oh-so-exciting trip to Costco."

Her mom shot her a hurt look, so Sienna said, "There were a lot of good food samples today, and we bought enough printer ink to last at least a year."

"Oh-so-exciting," Carter said as sarcastically as she had. She laughed.

"I have some exciting news of my own," he told her.

"What?"

"My great-aunt Bessie broke her hip."

"That's exciting?" Sienna asked.

"That didn't come out right. Honestly, she's an eighty-nine-year-old crankpot who spends most of her time criticizing everyone. She calls me Stretch. She calls my brother Wiseguy. Anyway, my parents decided to drive up to Lompoc to visit her, and they're spending the night over there."

"Ohh," Sienna said. "That *is* exciting news."

"Who's on the phone?" her mom asked. "What's so exciting?"

Sienna leaned away from her.

"Since we can't be together at the hotel next weekend, I was thinking . . . maybe we could be together tonight," Carter said. "I know my house isn't as glamorous as a Beverly Hills hotel room, but we can have it all to ourselves. And I can try to make it glamorous or romantic for you. Sienna, if you could think up some excuse to tell your parents, we could spend the night together. Please say yes."

She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and whispered, "Yes, yes, yes." Then she said loudly so her mom could hear, "Hold on, let me ask my mom."

She put the phone in her lap and said to her mom, "Tracie's on the phone. What's so exciting is the new big-screen, plasma TV her parents just bought. She wants me to come over and watch movies on it tonight and sleep over. Okay with you, Mom?"

"Sure," her mom said. "I trust you."

"Thanks," Sienna said, trying not to cringe. She picked up the phone again. "Did you hear that?" she asked Carter.

He was laughing. "You're good."

"I am. Very good," she murmured. Then she hung up the phone.

A few hours later, Sienna was sitting across from Carter in a little booth at a new Italian restaurant in Del Mar. Their

argument last night seemed like old news as they talked and laughed and flirted over antipasto salad, mushroom gnocchi, and eggplant parmesan. They kissed across the table, held hands on the table, and played footsies under the table.

When the waitress left the tiramisu, Carter picked up his dessert fork, scooped up a piece, and told Sienna, "Let me feed you."

She opened her mouth and Carter put in the small forkful of tiramisu. She ate it, then slowly ran her tongue across her lip. "Mmm. I love this." She wasn't talking about the food. She believed Carter was quite aware of that.

Underneath the tablecloth, she slipped her foot out of her sandal and massaged Carter's leg.

"Sienna!" Carter's face was flushed.

She smacked her lip. "Yummy. Let me feed you now." She took the fork from him and fed him the dessert, at the same time moving her foot gently up his leg.

"Can we go soon?" he croaked.

"Back to your house?" She kept her foot on his leg.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He nodded.

"Because your parents aren't home?"

He kept nodding.

"And your brother's away at college? And we have all night to be together?"

"Yes," he croaked.

She licked her lips. "I'm taking you straight to bed. You know that, don't you?"

His eyes suddenly bulged. "Sienna!" He sounded frightened. She used her most reassuring voice. "Don't worry. This will be the best night of our lives."

Someone behind Sienna cleared her throat.

Holy crap! The waitress was standing about half a foot behind her, smirking. She'd probably heard everything.

"Um, I just came over to ask if you wanted coffee," she said.

"Oh, jeez," Sienna said.

"Just the check, please," Carter said with a smile. "ASAP."

Sienna covered her face with her hands. She could never go back to this restaurant again.

"You okay, Sienna?" Carter asked once the waitress left.

She kept her hands over her face. "So much for my attempt to be sexy," she muttered.

"Let's get out of here," Carter said with a grin.

"Good plan," Sienna agreed, reaching for her purse.

The waitress returned with the check. Carter threw down some bills and said, "Keep the change," and practically flew out of the restaurant with Sienna.

When they got outside, Carter groaned. "I forgot we valet parked. And look at all the people waiting for their cars." There were about six people ahead of them. "Sienna, I want you so bad," he whispered.

He gave the parking attendant his ticket, then put his arms around Sienna. "This is it. Our night together," he whispered. "I love you."

She wrapped her arms tight around his waist. "I love you too," she told him.

Then they kissed and kissed and kissed.

They didn't waste much time once they got to Carter's house. He took her by the hand and led her into his bedroom. "I even cleaned my room for you," he said with a grin. "I hope you know what a big deal that is. There has to be a very special reason to get me to clean my room."

The two of them sat on his bed, and he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her again. Soon his hands were unbuttoning her blouse, undoing her bra. "Oh, Sienna," he said. "You're so beautiful. I'm so lucky."

"I can't believe we finally get to be together," she said. "All night."

"All night long," he said, then kissed her neck, her collarbone, her chest, until she could hardly breathe.

Suddenly, there was a loud boom. It seemed to come from close by.

"What's that?" Sienna asked.

"Oh, no!" Carter's arms fell to his sides. He jumped off the bed, ran to the bedroom door, and closed it. "I wish I had a lock on this thing. That's the garage door. Someone's here."

"I thought you said your parents were out of town, visiting your great-aunt," Sienna said.

"I watched them drive away this afternoon. They're not due back until tomorrow night."

"Anyone home?" a guy's voice shouted.

“Damn! It’s my brother,” Carter said. “What’s he doing here?” Carter left the room, leaving Sienna alone on the bed to hurriedly get dressed.

Soon Sienna heard other voices—many other voices, all male and loud and some of them sounding buzzed. She couldn’t make out everything they were saying, and didn’t really want to, but heard shouts of “Okay, first game, Texas Hold ’Em” and “Who’s in?” and “Carter! Bro! You want a beer?” and “You got any pretzels?”

Carter returned to the bedroom with his head down and his shoulders slumped. He closed the door and sat on the bed about a foot away from Sienna. They made no attempts to touch each other.

“Isn’t your brother supposed to be in college, in Arizona?” Sienna asked.

“He should be.” Carter rolled his eyes. “Once he heard that our parents were out of town, he and his college buddies decided to take a road trip here. They’re staying the night and going to the beach tomorrow.”

“Great.” Sienna grimaced.

“I’m really sorry,” Carter said. “I guess that screws up our plans, huh?”

“Four of a kind, baby!” someone screamed, which was followed by a bunch of obscenities and a shout of, “I need another beer!” Obnoxious laughter followed.

Sienna smiled thinly. “Well, so much for romance.”

“You want to leave?” Carter asked.

A techno song blared through the house.

“Yes.” Sienna tried to smooth her hair. “We’ll have to postpone this.”

“I know,” Carter said.

She walked out of the bedroom, and Carter followed her. As they strode toward the front door, Sienna tried not to look at the college guys, but she felt their eyes on her. A guy who must have been Carter’s brother shouted, “Way to go, bro!” She heard someone belch.

Once they were outside, she looked at Carter with narrowed eyes and said, “That was humiliating.”

“I’m sorry, Sienna,” he said.

They drove to her house in silence. *We’ll work things out*, she told herself.

But in a few months they’d be three thousand miles from each other. Carter and her best friend, Tracie, were going to Yale in August, while she’d be starting at Cal Tech.

Did they really have a future together?

She wasn’t sure.

nine

On Tuesday afternoon, Tracie and Sienna sat across from each other at the school lunch table. “I can’t believe Steiber gave us a pop quiz,” Sienna said. “It was so hard! I hate AP History.”

“I know,” Tracie said. “I hope I didn’t bomb the quiz. All those World War Two battles. Who can keep them straight?” She yawned.

“Thinking about that stuff puts me to sleep too,” Sienna said.

“I was exhausted, anyway,” Tracie said. “I stayed up until two-thirty this morning studying for that math test I told you about. At least I think I did well on *that* test.”

“Good. Your parents would freak if they knew how behind you were in school.”

“I’m catching up,” Tracie said.

Sienna cocked her head. “How did you get them to say yes to you going to Berkeley? It took *me* three conversations and a lot of pleading to convince my parents. And your parents seem scared to let you out of their sight for a few hours, let alone five days.”

Tracie busied herself opening her yogurt. Her parents hadn’t said yes. They hadn’t said anything about Berkeley because she hadn’t asked them yet.

“I bet you really had to work on your mom, especially. She wouldn’t even let you hang out after the show at Waves last Friday.” Sienna took a bite of her turkey sandwich.

Tracie sighed. She was sure her parents would say no.

“Tracie? You did ask them, didn’t you?”

“Oh, Sienna.” Tracie shook her head. “You know me too well.”

“Girl! You’ve got to tell your parents!” Sienna exclaimed. “We’re supposed to leave in three days!”

“I’ve been waiting to figure out a good way to ask them, and a good time, and a good place.” Tracie frowned. “But, really, I don’t think they’ll ever agree, no matter what way I ask them.”

“They’ll never agree if you don’t even mention it. Why didn’t you tell me?” Sienna asked. “I would have tried to help.”

Tracie stirred her yogurt. "I was just really embarrassed. You know how my parents have been ever since I got in that DUI accident. They used to trust me. Now they breathe down my neck, follow me like detectives or something, treat me like I'm six years old."

"*They* should be embarrassed, not you." Sienna bent down and took out a notebook and pen from her backpack. "Let me help you get their permission."

"What? You're going to write them a letter or something?"

"We're going to plan the best way for you to ask them," Sienna said. "But it had better be sometime today."

Tracie smiled at her. "You're a good friend. And a lot better at planning things than I am. I've been procrastinating about this all week."

"I'm just looking out for my own selfish interests. Amber Road needs you on guitar," Sienna said. "And the trip won't be any fun for me without my best friend around."

"Thanks."

"Plus, if I have to ride on George's parents' ancient day-care bus, I think you should have to too."

Tracie smiled. "Okay, let's strategize."

Sienna wrote *Reasons Why Tracie's Overprotective Parents Should Let Her Perform at Berkeley Blowout*. As she wrote, she said the words out loud.

"You should change that to *Tracie's Clingy, Pain-in-the-Neck, Overprotective Parents*," Tracie said. "God, I hope

this is just a phase. Things were so much better when they actually trusted me.”

Sienna laughed and revised the heading. “You’ll earn back their trust,” she said. “Okay, why should they let you go to Berkeley?”

Tracie shrugged. “It could be great for the band’s career for one thing.”

Sienna scribbled *Career opportunity*, then said, “What else?”

“I’ll have you guys to keep me out of trouble.”

“Great. I’m writing *Protection in numbers*,” Sienna said. “You can tell them what a goody-goody I am. Just don’t mention Lily, in case your parents know she’s totally wild.”

“Hi, girls.” Noah Wohl stood behind Sienna, wearing a thin smile. “Tracie, cool new haircut.”

Tracie felt herself blushing. “Thanks. I didn’t see you there,” she told him.

“Hey, could I talk to you alone for a minute?” he asked.

“Sure.” She stood up. “Back soon,” she told Sienna as she followed Noah away from the lunch tables.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a long time,” Noah said.

That was strange. They’d been in a few classes together, but she barely knew him. She glanced at him, waiting for him to explain himself. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but kind of goofy looking, with a mound of blond, frizzy, corkscrew curls on his head and a bit of flab around his middle.

Noah cleared his throat. "Well, uh, I was hoping . . ." He cleared his throat again. The noise was kind of gross, as if he had to spit. Finally, he said, "I was just wondering, uh . . . Do you think you might want to go out with me this weekend?"

Oh, no! Not him too!

"I'm sorry," Tracie said as gently as she could, thinking she should have memorized a rejection speech since she'd been saying no so often lately. "I'm taking a break from dating, from guys. I just want to hang out with friends and stuff until college starts."

Noah shook his head. "It figures. I finally get up the nerve to ask you out, and you turn me down."

"It's not because of you at all," Tracie said. "You seem like a really nice guy. I just have other things going on in my life I need to focus on."

"Sure. You know, it's your loss," he said, before rushing away.

By the time she got back to the lunch table, she was frowning.

"What was that all about?" Sienna asked.

"Noah Wohl just asked me out."

"The guy whose hair looks like a sea anemone?"

"That's not a nice thing to say," she told Sienna, but her frown turned into a smile.

"I hope you let him down gently," Sienna said. "Or at least gave him the name of a good barber."

By now Tracie was giggling. After she caught her breath, she said, "I turned down Noah the same way I turned down Brandon and that fan at Waves with the neck tattoo I told you about yesterday." She ate a spoonful of her yogurt. "It's crazy that all these guys are suddenly asking me out."

"I bet a lot of guys were attracted to you all through high school. But you were always with Carter, and then Aaron," Sienna said. "Now that you're finally available, they're lining up to ask you out."

"Well, not exactly lining up," Tracie smiled. "But it's bad timing. I mean, I've had enough of dating for a while."

"And that may have something to do with it too," Sienna said. "I think guys are attracted to people who are happy with themselves. They want to feel a girl likes them for who they are, not that she just likes having a boyfriend or a date on the weekends. I bet they sense you've grown stronger lately."

"I don't feel strong right now," Tracie said, thinking about how she couldn't get up the nerve to tell her parents about the Berkeley Blowout.

"You've hardly eaten anything. You want a cookie?" Sienna held up one of her Oreos.

"Thanks, anyway." Tracie shook her head. She hardly had an appetite these days. "We'd better hurry up and figure out how to persuade my parents to let me go to Berkeley. Let's see what we have so far."

Sienna handed Tracie the paper. But then the bell rang.

“We’ll talk right after rehearsal and figure it all out, okay?” Sienna said.

“Okay,” she told Sienna. But she didn’t think her parents would let her go to Berkeley no matter what she told them.

ten

Tracie stopped home after school, dropped her backpack, changed into grungier jeans, and grabbed her guitar. She scrawled a quick note saying that she would be at Mark's house, and left it on the kitchen counter.

She arrived at Mark's in a terrible mood. She was exhausted after getting so little sleep the night before. It was raining and her leg was bothering her. And all day she'd been worrying about having to approach her parents about going to Berkeley.

But the moment she started playing, everything changed. Tracie's fingers danced across the guitar strings as she let the music move through her. She forgot all about her parents and her grades and even all about Berkeley. All that mattered was

the music and the way her guitar was part of the amazing sound of Amber Road.

Unfortunately, they rehearsed only a few songs before Lily said, "I can't believe we start our trip in only three days!"

Soon, they were all chattering about the music festival. "This is a big step forward for us as a band," Mark said, "a real opportunity to prove ourselves."

"Yeah," George said. "If we can spend a long weekend crammed five to a bus and three to a room without killing each other, it'll prove we can get along anywhere."

"Six to a bus, actually," Mark said. "Steve Guyda told me his intern will be coming along with us to drive the bus and help with the instruments and equipment. Hopefully, he'll guide us around Berkeley too. We really have to take this trip seriously. We'll be performing four times there. And Guyda said he's hoping to line up record producers to hear us play. This could be just what we need to get a record deal."

Tracie twirled her hair. If her parents didn't let her go, it would not only be disappointing for her, it could ruin things for Amber Road.

"Worried about the trip, Tracie?" Mark asked.

"I'm okay," she said. "Just tired. I stayed up late studying."

"Well, I doubt we'll be sleeping too well in Berkeley," Mark said. "So try to rest up the next few days before we go."

"I will." Tracie nodded. "Hey, how about another song to help me get my second wind?"

"Cool. Your choice," Mark said.

"I've got a perfect one. 'School Bites After Being Out All Night.' That about sums up the day I had. Until school let out and I got here." Tracie smiled.

"Let's go!" George shouted, and they began.

God, she loved this—George rocking out on his drums, Lily and Mark half-singing and half-screaming the lyrics, she and Sienna dueling it out on their guitars. At the end, everyone joined in the chorus just for fun, screaming, "School Bites After Being Out All Night," over and over.

They kept playing even as the door to the garage opened. But when Tracie saw who was there, she stopped singing and slowed down on her guitar. Soon everyone stopped performing.

Mark's mother stood in front of Tracie's mother. Mark's mother looked worried. Tracie's mother was scowling and her arms were crossed.

"What's wrong?" Tracie asked them.

"You tell *me*," her mother said.

"Nothing's wrong." She glanced at Sienna, wondering if she had told her mother about the Berkeley Blowout. But Sienna was staring at the doorway with wide eyes, as if she was as surprised to see Tracie's mother here as Tracie was. "We've just been rehearsing," Tracie said.

Her mother shook her head. "Why didn't you say anything about Berkeley? Were you just going to run off with your friends and not tell us?"

"No!" Tracie half-yelled. She took a breath and tried to speak in a calmer voice. "I was going to tell you today. How did you find out?"

Her mother pulled out the paper Sienna had started scribbling at lunch today, and read out loud: "'Reasons Why Tracie's Clingy, Pain-in-the-Neck, Overprotective Parents Should Let Her Perform at Berkeley Blowout.' I found this in your backpack."

Her mother had looked in her backpack? Oh, God. *Keep calm*, Tracie told herself. "Mom. I was nervous about telling you. I was kind of joking about you being clingy and stuff, but you really have been clingy lately. I was scared you wouldn't let me go on the trip."

"Of course I won't let you go. And neither will your father. We've been worried enough about you being in the band and playing at local nightclubs." Her mother's eyes narrowed. "But going up to Berkeley with your friends . . . Your father and I had a long discussion about you today. You won't be playing with your band in Berkeley or anywhere else from now on."

"But Mrs. Grant—" Mark began.

"Let's go, Tracie. We can talk about this in the car," her mother said.

Tracie felt tears welling. She gathered up her guitar and music sheets and followed her mother out of the garage. She would have liked to say good-bye, but she knew that if she opened her mouth, she would start crying. It was bad enough that the entire band had watched her mother humiliate her.

Once they were in the car, her mother said, "All this rock band stuff is too much for you to handle. I should have put my foot down about Amber Road a long time ago."

"But I love it," Tracie protested as her mother drove away from Mark's house.

"Well, I don't love the way you've been acting lately."

Tracie tried to talk calmly and maturely, though she wanted to scream. "I know I made some bad mistakes, but I wish you'd trust me now. I've learned my lesson." Her mother didn't say anything, so Tracie continued. "I've changed."

"You're not going on that tour."

"Please don't do this to me," she pleaded.

"I'm not trying to be cruel. I want what's best for you," her mom said.

"I can't imagine anything worse."

Her mother shook her head as she drove into their neighborhood. "Friday night I had to rescue you from that bartender and that stalker at the club."

"You didn't have to, Mom. I didn't need any rescuing."

Her mother ignored her. "We're not letting you traipse around Berkeley. Our decision is final," she said as she parked

the car in the driveway. "Mine and your father's. Now let's go inside."

Tracie got out of the car and closed the door hard, took her guitar out of the trunk, and marched into the house.

Her father was home. He was usually a softy. Maybe she could get him to loosen up the reins. She put her Strat in her bedroom, then sat next to him on the family room couch.

He muted the TV. "What's up?" he asked.

"I love being in my band," she told him. "Amber Road means more to me than anything."

He shook his head. "You have your priorities wrong. Your schoolwork should be number one."

She sighed. "Dad. I've got great grades, and I'm being diligent about my schoolwork. But what I love, what makes me feel great, is playing my guitar with the band. Dad, I really, really want to go to Berkeley with them this weekend."

"Your mother and I already discussed this," he said.

"But you didn't discuss it with me. Mom just told me things. She didn't hear my side. And neither did you."

"How about listening to our side? We don't want anything happening to you. And God knows what will happen at a rock concert in Berkeley."

"Nothing will happen, Dad," she said. "And I'll be with my friends. Mark, Sienna . . ."

"They seem like nice kids. But we'd rather you be at home, with us, so we can look out for you."

“Dad, please. I don’t need looking out for.” Tracie stared at the three eggheads on the TV screen silently playing *Jeopardy!* “I’m not drinking anymore. I’m not even dating anymore.”

“End of discussion. You’re not touring with that band.”

Tracie pounded her fist against the couch, then rushed to her bedroom.

eleven

Sienna broke the stunned silence in Mark's garage. "I can't believe Tracie's mom won't let her be in Amber Road. Tracie must feel miserable."

"Her parents think they're doing what's best for her. In a way, she's lucky they care about her so much," Lily said.

"Lucky? Ha." Sienna shook her head. "Her parents care too much about her."

Sienna wouldn't be saying that if she had my mother, Lily thought.

"I don't think Tracie's parents realize how much performing means to her," Sienna said.

Lily tossed her long red hair. "Why don't we tell them?"

"Huh?" Mark asked.

"We'll go over to her house, all of us together. We'll tell her parents how much we need her," Lily explained. "And how much she needs us."

Mark put his arm around her, as if to let her know he was proud of her for trying to help Tracie. But she hadn't suggested this just to make Mark proud. Part of it was guilt. She knew she might defect, and she couldn't stand the idea of the band losing two members. But there was also that stricken look in Tracie's eyes.

"Seriously, we owe it to Tracie to try to help her out," Lily said.

"Wow." Sienna raised her eyebrows. "I never thought I'd hear that coming from you."

Lily stepped away from Mark and glared at Sienna. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Sienna glared right back at her. "For one thing, you called Tracie a drama queen a few months ago."

"That was a few months ago. I guess you'll never let me forget that, huh?" Lily said.

Sienna sighed. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I know Tracie's your best friend, Sienna. You want to protect her," Lily said.

Sienna hesitated a moment. "Tracie told me you visited her in the hospital after her car accident. I was surprised."

Why was it so shocking that she had a heart? Just because she didn't scream and cry in front of people like Tracie did, didn't mean that she wasn't just as sensitive. Lily turned to Sienna. "I'm not quite as bad a person as you think I am."

"I never said you were," Sienna said.

Lily didn't answer. She knew Sienna and Tracie used to talk about her behind her back. They might still do it.

Mark spoke up, breaking the tension. "Anyway, I think we should run with Lily's idea. Maybe with all of us helping to make Tracie's case, her parents will change their minds and let her stay in the band. We just need to convince them that they can trust her."

"If she hadn't gotten into that drunk driving accident, it would be a little easier to convince her parents to trust her," Lily said.

Sienna put her hands on her hips. "Too bad she isn't perfect like you."

"I never meant that I was perfect," Lily said. And she hadn't meant to sound so harsh. Why couldn't she think a little before opening her fat mouth? She wondered whether she should apologize.

Mark interrupted her thoughts. "Lily came up with a great idea, but we all need to plan it together. Instead of arguing, let's get to work. It would be awful going on tour without Tracie."

"At least we have Sienna on bass," George said.

"It's not just her guitar-playing we'd miss though," Mark said. "It's Tracie herself. As a person and as part of this group."

Amber Road started out with talent and ambition, but now we have something else that's even more important."

"Great bodies?" George quipped.

"Well, for starters, trust," Mark said.

Lily bit her lip. Why did everyone have to keep talking about trust? Later tonight, she would be sneaking off to meet Joel Matthews in a studio to record songs for a possible solo career. She was taking Mark's trust in her and practically destroying it with a sledgehammer.

"We didn't really have much trust when we started out last year," Mark continued. "We were just five people who knew how to sing and play music. We were friendly enough, and we tried to get along, but we sure fought a lot too. And—I don't know what the word for it is—but when we play, it's like our voices and the instruments all meld together and we're somehow a lot better together than we are individually. Like, we're all parts of this one amazing whole that—" Mark's face reddened. "Forget it. I sound like an idiot."

No, you don't, Lily thought. That was exactly what it felt like when she sang with Amber Road. How could she walk out on that?

Her cell phone rang. She rushed to grab it from her purse, thankful for the distraction. When she saw that it was her mother, she was even happier. She moved away from the other band members and said hello.

"Lily," her mother said. "I just heard the news. I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"What news?" she asked.

"Really, Aaron told me a week or so ago that a record producer was interested in you. But at first I didn't think much of it. I mean, you're in high school, in a little garage band, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it a—"

"But then I checked up on the guy," her mother interrupted. "You know I have some music connections in L.A. They told me this Joel Matthews is huge. I can't believe he wants you."

Lily bit her lip again. She thought she tasted a drop of blood.

"Has he asked you to sign with him?" her mother asked. The last time Lily'd heard her mother sound this excited, she'd gotten a supporting role in a TV movie.

"No, he hasn't asked me. Not yet," Lily said softly into the phone. She opened the door leading to the side of Mark's house and walked out. "But I'm meeting Matthews at the recording studio tonight."

"Oh, Lily, that's fabulous!" her mother squealed. "I wish I wasn't stuck in Mexico. I'd go with you to the studio and meet this famous producer of yours. I'm thrilled for you! Call me the second after he asks you to sign with him, okay?"

"Mom, he might not ask me at all," Lily said. "And I don't even know if I'd take him up on his offer."

"What? You absolutely have to," her mother said. "You'll need to negotiate with him, of course. But, Lily, opportunities like this don't come around very often. You have to grab

them. I'll find someone to negotiate the contract for you, don't worry. I could even do it myself. I've certainly signed enough film and TV contracts in the last twenty years."

"But, Mom, Amber Road—"

"I have to go, sweetheart," she interrupted. "Just make sure you call me as soon as you get the offer."

"Are you coming home soon?" Lily asked.

"I wish," her mother said. "I'm filming a bit part in a TV movie in San Francisco next weekend. When you get to be my age, you can't turn down parts. They don't come very often."

"Mom! That's perfect! I'll be in Berkeley next weekend, performing with my band. You can come listen to us, finally."

"Oh, Lily." Her mother sighed. "You wouldn't believe how crazy it gets on film sets. It's practically inhumane the way they treat the actors. They keep us there for hours and hours. I doubt I'll be able to get away."

"Can you try?" Lily asked in a small voice.

"I'll try. If Joel Matthews is interested in you, you must be really special."

"I am," Lily said softly.

"What's that, sweetheart? I really need to go."

"Thanks for calling," Lily said.

"No problem," her mother said. "Kiss, kiss." She hung up the phone.

Lily clicked off her phone, then stood at the side of Mark's house, practically frozen. If she stayed with Amber Road,

she'd make Mark happy. If she tried to go solo, she could make her mother proud. She knew she should be asking what *she* wanted to do. But right now, all she wanted was to make Mark happy and make her mother proud. And she knew she couldn't do both.

Mark opened the door and walked over to her. "What's wrong?"

She couldn't tell him. She gripped the phone tight.

"Who called?" Mark asked her.

"I have to leave."

"What? Why? You look upset, Lily." Mark's voice was so tender. "What's going on?"

"I'm just not feeling well, that's all," she lied. "I think I have the flu or something. I need to go home and try to sleep," she said. "I'll be okay."

"Lily, I'm worried," he said.

She managed a tiny smile. "Don't be. I just need some rest." She made it to her car, got in, and sped away.

She stopped at a Denny's and went into the restroom to try to touch up her makeup before she got to the recording studio. It was hard to look at herself in the bathroom mirror. For one thing, her eyes had red tinges. There wasn't anything she could do about that now except hope that they'd clear up. Her mouth was pulled tight, busy making frown lines.

She had just left her very caring boyfriend, and she was minutes away from recording songs for a successful music producer. So why did she look so tense?

She knew why. *Guilt.*

Her phone rang. Instead of Queen's "We Will Rock You" ringtone, the phone should have been screaming, "Traitor!" or "Two-timer!"

She grabbed the phone and didn't even double check the caller ID. She knew it was Mark. "Hey," she warbled.

"Lily, I'm still worried about you. You seemed so upset."

"I'm not feeling well. I think I have some kind of virus," she said. She realized that today was the first time she'd ever lied to him. She'd been evasive with Mark ever since Joel Matthews came to their show last week, but she had never out-and-out lied to him.

"I'm sorry. You want anything? I could come over with a DVD or some medicine or anything else you need."

Did he have to be sweet? Double-crossing him made her feel even worse now. "I just want to rest in bed. Thanks, anyway."

"Well, we're taking you up on your idea to talk to Tracie's parents. We're going over there tomorrow night at eight, but don't come if you're sick. Take it easy, Lily."

"Yeah."

"I'll let you go," Mark said. "Take care. I love you."

"I love you too," Lily said, really feeling sick to her stomach now.

Lily still felt nauseated when she met Matthews at the recording studio ten minutes later. It was the same building where she'd recorded songs with Amber Road.

Matthews led her into Studio B, and her heart sank. The same technicians were sitting in the control room. She sent them a panicked thought: *Please don't say anything about this to Guyda or anyone else I know.*

The guy named J.J. looked up at her and smiled. "Hey, I remember you. You were here about a month ago with a band, right? You have a great voice."

"Thanks." Her stomach churned harder.

"You feeling all right, Lily?" Matthews asked.

She smiled wanly. "Just a little nervous about recording, that's all." Now she was lying to him too.

"You can put all your nervous energy into singing. I bet once you start, you'll be fine," Matthews said. "I'd love to record 'Beautiful Girl.' "

"I can't do that song," she said.

"But it's gorgeous, and it shows off your voice perfectly."

She shook her head. She and Mark had come up with the lyrics to it on the beach, the night they'd first kissed. It was *their* song and she wouldn't co-opt it as her own.

"All right." Matthews was frowning, as if it wasn't all right.

"I'm open to doing other songs," Lily said. "Just not 'Beautiful Girl.' "

"Well, how about 'Tomorrow' or 'Lover'?"

She bit her lip. Mark had written those songs. She'd always performed them with him at her side. But she had willingly come here to record songs. She couldn't turn down every

song Matthews suggested. So she said, “Okay. I’ll start with ‘Tomorrow.’ ”

Matthews was right. She did feel better as soon as she started singing. She sang “Tomorrow,” which she and Mark had written, then followed it with the Céline Dion song she’d sung at the piano bar and a new Gwen Stefani song. She had worried that she would feel uncomfortable without Mark and Sienna singing backup, and the other band members there for support. But, Lily hated to admit this to herself, she did fine without them.

“You soared,” Matthews told her.

They stayed at the studio for hours, trying different versions of the same three songs. Indie versions, up-tempo, down-tempo, lavish, simple. As they worked together, Matthews made her tea and brought her water and praised her as if she were already a star, as if he wanted her to act like a diva. And, honestly, she didn’t mind being treated like one.

It was nearly midnight when Matthews said, “That should do it, Lily. I think we’ve got plenty of good material to show the suits.”

Before she left, Matthews handed her three CDs from different female singers. Lily was familiar with all of them. She liked their music. Each one had a terrific voice and her own unique style.

“Lily,” Matthews told her, “I discovered these solo artists and got them their first recording contracts. They’re all still with me, many years later. If I can get approval from my

company, and I believe I can, I'd like to sign you too. I want you to have your own CD and become a huge star. Think seriously about it."

"I will," she said. "I'm really grateful for your attention."

"You deserve it, Lily," he said. "I'm just lucky I found you before anyone else did."

She thanked him, but the fact was he hadn't been the first person to discover her talent. Mark had been the first.

On the drive home, Lily played one of the CDs Matthews had given her. The first song was beautiful. She'd heard it on the radio many times before. She imagined hearing her own voice on the radio. It would be so awesome. And her mother—maybe even her father—would finally listen to her. They would be proud of their famous and talented daughter.

But what would Mark do? She envisioned him in his Camry, pounding his fist on the steering wheel as her traitorous voice filled his car. Then he'd switch off the radio.

By the time Lily got home, she still hadn't decided whether she would accept Matthews's offer. She almost hoped he wouldn't make an offer.

She was so lost in thought, she was surprised to see Aaron with yet another girl in the living room. Actually, she didn't see much of either of them. As far as Lily could tell, the girl was just a slim figure with dyed black bobbed hair, sitting on Aaron's lap and kissing him. Why couldn't her brother confine his make-out sessions to his car or his bedroom? Lily

shouted, “Hi!” so they’d know they had company and wouldn’t start taking off their clothes in front of her.

Aaron broke off the kiss and said, “Hey, Lily, you feeling okay?” His cheeks were flushed and he was smirking.

“I’m feeling fine. Why?”

“Your loser boyfriend came by with chicken soup. I told him you were out, that I’d been home for hours and hadn’t seen you.”

“Damn. Thanks a lot, Aaron.”

“You wouldn’t want me to lie for you, would you?” he asked with mock indignity.

Her stomach started churning again. “How did Mark react? Did he seem upset?”

“Define *upset*. He pounded on the wall, nearly putting a hole through it. That might be a hint that he’s upset.” Aaron laughed.

“Oh, no,” Lily said.

“I take it you were doing something with Joel Matthews? Are you finally coming to your senses and blowing off that lame band and signing with him?”

“No. And don’t talk about Amber Road like that,” she told her brother. “Nothing’s settled, anyway. Matthews hasn’t even given me a formal offer yet.”

“Yet, huh?”

Lily shook her head. “I have to call Mark.”

She walked to her bedroom and closed the door before punching in Mark’s number on her cell phone.

He didn't even say hello, just, "Where were you? I thought you were sick."

"I *was* sick," she mumbled. "I mean, I *am* sick. I was out getting medicine at the drugstore."

"All that time? Aaron said you'd been gone for hours."

She didn't say anything.

"I don't believe you were at the drugstore, Lily," he said. "I'm not even sure now that you're even sick."

Now she was. She felt like throwing up. She was messing up her relationship with Mark, the best thing that had ever happened to her. But maybe getting signed as a solo act would become the best thing that ever happened to her. She just didn't know.

"I thought we could trust each other." Mark's voice cracked.

She considered telling Mark everything right now. She could promise him that she'd call Matthews to tell him to leave her alone, that she would never perform without Amber Road. But she wasn't sure she could keep that promise.

"Lily, what are you up to? Are you seeing someone else behind my back?"

"No. Never," she said.

"So tell me what's going on."

"There's nothing to tell. I was sick. I went to the drugstore."

"I'm not stupid," Mark said.

"Mark, please."

“Please what?”

She didn’t know. *Please trust me so I can betray you? Please force me somehow to stay in the band? Please make it okay to go solo?* None of those choices sounded right.

“Please stop lying to me, Lily,” he said.

She had no answer to that. “I’ll see you tomorrow at Tracie’s house,” she said before hanging up the phone.

Then she went into her bathroom and threw up.

twelve

Wednesday night, Tracie went to answer her doorbell. It was eight o'clock. Sienna was right on time. Sienna had said she'd come over to try to convince Tracie's parents to let her play in Amber Road. Tracie didn't think it would do any good. She had tried hard herself, and they refused to change their minds. It was nice of Sienna to offer, though.

"Oh my God!" Tracie exclaimed when she opened the door. Sienna was there. And so were Mark, Lily, and George. Each of them held a bag in their hands. "What are you all doing here? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that your parents aren't letting you perform with us," Lily said.

"We need you," Mark said.

"Very true, but let's save our speechifying for Tracie's parents," George said.

"Huh?" Tracie still didn't comprehend why the entire band was at her front door.

"You told Sienna she could talk to your folks, but we figured four mouths are better than one," George explained.

"Wow," Tracie said with a smile.

"Lily figured that, actually. It was her idea," Sienna said.

Tracie's smile grew. "That's really nice. Thanks, Lily. I like your outfit." Tracie almost giggled. Lily wore a long beige cardigan buttoned almost to her neck, and instead of her customary miniskirt, she had on a brown pleated skirt that fell below her knees. The parent-approved ensemble was finished off by flats instead of her usual high heels.

"I'm glad you appreciate the huge fashion sacrifice I'm making for you," Lily joked.

"Hey, I was the one who lent you my mom's cardigan," Sienna said.

"And I can't wait to give it back to you as soon as we're out of here," Lily told her.

"I do appreciate all this. I hope you know that," Tracie said. "I'm so lucky to have you guys as my friends. You do so much for me."

"Can you do something for us now?" George asked.

She shrugged. "Sure. Anything."

"Let us in."

Tracie laughed. "Of course." She opened the door and ushered her bandmates into the hallway. "What's in the bags?" she asked.

"You'll find out," Mark said.

"Tracie?" her mother called out from the kitchen. "Who's at the door?"

"Amber Road," Tracie said.

"What?" her mother asked.

"Amber Road. The band. My band. My whole band is here." Even if they couldn't persuade her parents to let her stay in the group, she felt incredibly buoyed by their support.

Her mother rushed over. "What's going on?"

"Can we sit down?" Mark asked.

"Yes, I guess. Make yourselves at home." She started to head back to the kitchen.

"He means can we sit down with you and Mr. Grant?" Sienna said.

Tracie's mother raised her eyebrows. "I guess. Let me get Tracie's father. Give me a few minutes."

They waited on the living room sofas. "It's really nice that you're doing this," Tracie said, "but, unfortunately, my parents aren't going to change their minds. They're dead set against me playing in any more clubs. Even if they relented on that, there's no way they'd let me go to Berkeley on Friday."

The doorbell rang again. Tracie opened the door for Steve Guyda. "Sorry I'm a few minutes late," he said. He was in a gray suit and he wasn't wearing his nose ring.

“Wow. I can’t believe you’re here too,” Tracie said, and led him into the living room.

When Tracie’s parents came in a minute later, her father said, “Well, this is a surprise,” as if it wasn’t a particularly good surprise.

“Steve Guyda. You came too,” her mother said, sounding puzzled.

“Good to see you again,” he said.

“Would anyone like a drink?” Tracie’s mother asked. “Lemonade? Water?”

They shook their heads. “We won’t take up too much of your time,” Mark said, “but we wanted to tell you how much Tracie means to us.”

“Which could take hours, really, but we’ll try to keep it short,” Lily added.

Tracie’s parents sat together on the loveseat, both of them with their arms crossed.

“For one thing,” Lily said, “Tracie’s a fantastic guitar player. You heard her last week at Waves. Isn’t she phenomenal?”

Her parents nodded. *Reluctantly*, Tracie thought.

“I know music,” Guyda said. “It’s my business to seek out fresh talent. And believe me, your daughter has talent.”

Tracie loved hearing that. Guyda was a good manager, but usually he was stingy with his praise.

“Tracie could go far in this business. The whole band can,” Guyda added. “I’ve been on the phone the last few days with an important record producer. If I can convince her to go to

one of Amber Road's shows in Berkeley, there's a chance your daughter and her band could get a record deal with a major music label. I'd hate to see that opportunity squashed."

"But it's not only about business and music," Sienna said. "Tracie's a good friend too."

"To all of us," George added.

"The band just wouldn't be the same without her," Mark said.

"We're sorry if we left you kids a bit in the lurch," her mother said, "but we've already made our decision. We're only doing what's best for Tracie."

"Mom." Tracie leaned forward on the sofa. "How can you think that stopping me from performing with my friends is best for me?"

"I promise to keep an eye on Tracie the whole time we're in Berkeley," Sienna said. "You can call me day or night, and I'll give you a full report on what she's up to. Or I can call you, every day we're in Berkeley, or twice a day, or three times a day. Whatever you want."

"I won't be accompanying them to Berkeley," Guyda said, "but I've got an intern, a fine, upstanding college student, who will. He'll drive the band members and help with the equipment and any possible problems that could arise. He's very responsible. And, of course, I've ordered him to call me if there's the slightest indication of trouble. And I'll be flying up there and meeting them in Berkeley."

"It's not just a matter of trusting Tracie and you kids. We don't trust the people in those clubs," her mother said. But Tracie noticed that her arms were no longer crossed.

"I'll protect Tracie from any weirdos. I promise," George said.

"Once she starts Yale in August, she'll be living clear across the country," Mark reminded them. "We could treat the weekend in Berkeley as a test run for that."

"Please. I really want to go," Tracie pleaded. "I've been keeping up my grades, and I promise to be really careful while I'm in Berkeley."

"I'll stay with her all the time and be extra cautious," Sienna said. "And we've all brought collateral."

"What?" Tracie's mother asked.

"We believe in Tracie. We want to put our money where our mouths are, so to speak. We're sure that Tracie won't get into any trouble in Berkeley. To show you how sure we are, we're each putting up a valuable item for collateral." Sienna pulled an evening gown from the shopping bag she was holding. "I wore this dress at my eighteenth birthday party. It's my favorite item of clothing. I'm giving it to you." She returned the dress to the bag and slid it over to Tracie's parents. "If there's any kind of problem with Tracie, you can have my dress, to sell or keep or whatever."

Mark handed his bag to Tracie's father. "There's a signed, framed photo of Bruce Springsteen, my favorite songwriter,

in here. If Tracie messes up—though I know she won’t—you can have it.”

Lily gave a small bag to Tracie’s mother. “You can hold this tennis bracelet as collateral. My aunt gave it to me.”

George handed his bag to Tracie’s father. “There’s a leather motorcycle jacket in here I love more than anything, or anyone, for that matter. You hold it until Tracie comes back safe and sound.”

Steve Guyda said, “I didn’t bring anything because I suspect you’d sue my ass and ruin my business if anything ever happened to your daughter.”

“You got that right,” Tracie’s father said. He sighed and turned to his wife. “What do you think?” His arms weren’t crossed anymore either, Tracie noticed.

“Well, with five people promising they’ll keep an eye on her, and showing how much they care by coming here tonight and giving us their valuables . . .” Her mother nodded. “I think we should allow her to stay in the band and go to the music festival on Friday.”

“I agree,” Tracie’s dad said.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Tracie exclaimed.

“You won’t regret it,” Mark said.

“I’ll call you from Berkeley as often as you like,” Sienna said.

“And thank you guys for coming over here,” Tracie said. “I don’t know what I’m happier about, that you cared enough to help me tonight, or that I get to perform with you again.”

“Now about that earlier offer of a drink,” George said. “I’ll take a vodka tonic if you got it.”

“George!” Tracie exclaimed.

“I’m kidding!” he said. But Tracie’s mother glared at him, and the rest of the band gave him angry looks too.

Tracie knew she should show her disapproval too. But she felt so happy right now, she couldn’t even fake an angry expression. To think that in two days she’d be with her friends in Berkeley! It wasn’t exactly that her parents trusted her now. But *something* had just shifted, and Tracie couldn’t help feeling a little shiver of excitement. So much had changed in her life this last year, and so much of it had been incredibly hard.

For the first time in a long while Tracie let herself hope.

Maybe, just maybe, these new changes would be good ones.

thirteen

Carter drove Sienna to George's house on Friday morning. More than half a block away, Sienna could see the bus. George hadn't been exaggerating. It was an eyesore, thin and long, shaped a bit like the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile. It was painted in a pattern of Pepto-Bismol pink and baby blue rectangular blotches, with *WE LUV UR KIDZ* in big yellow letters across the back. All the paint was peeling, revealing large chunks of rust.

"Oh my God," Sienna murmured. "We're driving to Berkeley in *that*?"

"You sure you want to go?" Carter asked her as he parked his Prius.

Sienna nodded. "I wish we had a more stylish ride, but I'm sure."

The others were already there, standing amid a huge pile of suitcases, duffle bags, amps, and instruments. George grinned at Sienna as she got out of Carter's car. "So what do you think of our deluxe transport?"

"You were right. Your parents' old bus is a piece of crap." She said it with a smile. She wouldn't see Carter for the next five days, Amber Road's bus was even worse than she'd imagined, and she was awake at seven A.M. during spring break. Yet Sienna felt like jumping up and down.

She didn't think she was the only one. Everyone in Amber Road had bright eyes, flushed faces, and eager smiles as they stood in the chill morning air.

"Is that giant slab of rust safe?" Carter asked as he walked over to the group.

"Well, it's bigger than most of the other things on the road," Mark said. "That's about the only good thing I can say about it."

"And it's free," George said. "Free is always good."

A tall, stick-thin girl came out of the van and took a long drag on her cigarette. Ashes fell onto George's driveway as she waved and said, "Hey."

"This is Crystal, the girl I've been dating," George said. "She's here to see me off."

"Nice to meet—" Tracie started before coughing.

"You okay?" George asked.

Crystal pounded on Tracie's back.

"It's . . . the . . . smoke . . ." Tracie sputtered. "Please . . . get . . . away . . . from . . . me."

Crystal stepped back, close to Sienna, flicking her ashes. "You don't have to be all dramatic about it," she told Tracie. "I know it's the trendy thing to discriminate against smokers, but—"

"Watch it!" Sienna screamed. "You're ruining my purse."

Crystal walked over to George, who stood staring down at his shoes. "George, your friends are mean," she said. "Why don't you stick up for me?"

"You put a hole in my new Coach bag!" Sienna pointed to her purse.

"I'm out of here." Crystal stomped off, blowing smoke rings on the way to her car.

"Sorry, Sienna." George shrugged. "I guess we should go now."

"You're off to a great start," Carter said wryly.

Sienna put her arms around Carter's shoulders, and shot a quick glance at Tracie. She was relieved to see that Tracie didn't look bothered by their PDA. After a rocky start, Tracie had said she was okay with Sienna and Carter being together.

"Thanks for getting up so early to drive me here and say good-bye," Sienna told Carter. "I wish you would go with me."

Carter shook his head. "You make it sound like I have a choice. I can't miss the scholarship banquet tomorrow night. I wish you would go with me to that."

"Oh, Carter. Let's not argue before I leave."

"You're right." He pulled her closer. "Come here and let's say good-bye properly. Or better yet, improperly."

She lifted her head to his, and they kissed. She felt so good in his arms. For a moment she thought about staying here, going to the banquet with him this weekend, finally getting the opportunity to make love. But the moment quickly passed. She couldn't let down the rest of the band. Besides, she really wanted to play at the music festival.

The band members loaded their suitcases and some of the instruments and equipment into the bottom compartment of the bus. Tracie, of course, carried her guitar on to the bus.

"You don't trust the luggage compartment?" George asked her.

"Not with my precious Strat," Tracie told him. "This guitar rides with me."

Lily was the second one to board. "Eww," she cried. "Open a window! Did your girlfriend smoke a carton of cigarettes in here, George?"

Mark came into the bus and then quickly started opening windows. "It reeks," he agreed.

After Sienna put her suitcase in the storage area of the bus, she climbed the steps and stood by the driver's seat for a few

moments. She could hardly breathe. "George," she said as he slid into the driver's seat, "we need to find a new girl for you, a nonsmoker."

"I know," George said. "Ever since I've been dating Crystal, I've had a horrible cough. But don't worry. I always like to have a backup, someone waiting in the wings. I've been IMing a girl I met online, and get this: she lives in the Bay Area. I'll be meeting her in person when we get up to Berkeley."

"Speaking of Berkeley, we need to hit the road," Mark said. "We're performing tonight, and we still have to pick up Guyda's intern."

"Hold on tight," George said, pulling away from the curb.

Sienna and Carter waved to each other until the bus turned the corner. Then Sienna closed her eyes. She'd been so excited about this trip, packing a suitcase of performance clothes with a hippie flare in honor of Berkeley, thinking about five days filled with friends and music and adventure. She hated spending so much time away from Carter, though, especially because it meant skipping their chance to spend the night together in Beverly Hills. She'd make it up to him, she told herself. Though she wondered if that was just an empty promise.

"Mandy Mallone is hot," George said when her song blasted from the bus's radio.

"Her voice kind of reminds me of yours, Lily," Tracie said.

Lily shrugged. “You think?” But she was fantasizing again about being in her parents’ Audi when her own song played on the radio. Her parents would turn to her in the backseat and beam. They wouldn’t say, “We’re so proud of you,” but it would be obvious they were thinking it.

She shook her head slightly to snap out of the fantasy. *It’s ridiculous, anyway*, she told herself. For one thing, she couldn’t even remember the last time she’d been in a car with both her parents. For another, her father wasn’t due home from New Zealand for four more months, and he’d already been hired as cinematographer for a film shoot in Indonesia this fall.

But her mother really might show up to hear them play in Berkeley! Lily had texted her early this morning with the time and address of their first gig. Her mom had written right back, promising to do her best to be there. She even sounded sincere—in Lily’s opinion, anyway.

Mark put his arm around Lily’s shoulders. “Mandy Malone’s voice is kind of similar, but Lily’s is way better.”

She snuggled against him. “Not that you’re biased or anything.”

George pulled up to an apartment building in Solana Beach. “That must be Josh Hall,” George said. “Unless there’s another guy in his apartment complex standing outside with a suitcase who likes to wave at dorky old buses.”

“He doesn’t look much older than us,” Mark said.

“He’s cute,” Tracie said.

Lily peered at him. Tracie was right. He was tall and had a goatee, but it didn't hide his baby face—round eyes and a skateboard ramp nose and freckles, framed by a mess of thick, wavy brown hair. He was cute, but not her type. No one was her type except Mark—which was why her chest felt ragged inside.

Josh stuffed his suitcase into the bottom of the bus, then rushed up the bus steps. "Hey! Great to see you!" he said. "I've been totally looking forward to this. Tell me who you all are, okay?"

So they all introduced themselves.

After Tracie's turn, Josh said, "Oh, good. I was hoping you were Tracie. I'm supposed to pay special attention to you."

Tracie giggled. "I guess I should be extra nice to you, since you'll be reporting to our manager."

"Definitely," he told her with a grin.

George moved into the backseat and Josh took the driver's seat. "So where's the real bus?" Josh asked.

George laughed. "You think you can get this baby to Berkeley and back in one piece?"

"I give it fifty-fifty odds," Josh said. "Thirty-seventy if Tracie keeps distracting me."

Tracie giggled again.

Josh drove toward the freeway. "I downloaded your music, and Steve gave me one of your CDs. You guys are really good."

"We know," George said.

"I was going to say you're really good except for your drummer," Josh said, laughing. Everyone joined in—George the loudest. "How about letting me have a private performance?" Josh asked. "I'd love to hear you live."

"Well, we do have nine hours to kill," Mark said. "Might as well."

They sang their favorite songs. Even Tracie and George, whose voices were mediocre at best, joined in. "Come in on the chorus, Josh!" Sienna yelled. He did, and sounded even worse than Tracie and George.

After a while, they decided to listen to the radio again. George passed around his cell phone so everyone could see the pictures he'd downloaded of Danielle, the girl he'd been IMing and text messaging. They all agreed she was pretty, with her auburn hair and hazel eyes and heart-shaped face. "There's got to be something wrong with her," Tracie whispered.

"Yeah. There's always a huge downside with the girls George likes," Lily whispered back.

Even with the benefit of the carpool lane, the traffic going up to L.A. was bad. But they'd expected it. It was Friday morning rush hour, after all. And Lily didn't mind the drive. There were a lot worse things than a bus ride spent snuggling up to her boyfriend and listening to music with her friends.

Her cell phone rang and she answered without thinking. It was Joel Matthews. She told him, "I'm on the bus with the rest of my band, driving up to the Berkeley Blowout."

"I figured. I called to wish you a good trip," he said. "I hope to have good news for you soon."

"Thanks." She sensed Mark staring at her. "I'd better go," she told Matthews.

"Just don't sign with anyone else this weekend," he said with a slight laugh.

She didn't know whether he was kidding or not. She said, "Believe me, that won't happen. Thanks for calling." Then she hung up.

"What won't happen?" Mark asked, still with his arm around her.

"Oh, nothing," she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Who were you talking to?" He sounded more suspicious than curious.

"It's not important."

He took his arm off her shoulder. "You sure have had a lot of these unimportant calls lately."

She crossed her arms. "What are you getting at? You want me to tell you every little detail about my life?"

"No, just details like who keeps calling you, and maybe where you were the other night when you said you were sick and had to go home. How about those little details, Lily?"

"Um, should we sing another song?" Tracie asked.

"No!" Mark and Lily said together. *At least we agree on something*, Lily thought.

Josh turned up the volume on the radio.

“Are you going to tell me who was on the phone or not?” Mark asked.

“Just because we’re going out doesn’t entitle you to know every single thing about me. I mean, you don’t tell me a lot of things.”

He frowned. “What do you want to know, Lily?”

“Well, you hardly tell me anything about Amber. I know you were friends with her, and you played music together before she died, but that’s about it. It’s like you seal up that part of your life. And I think it’s a bigger part than you let on.”

He was silent.

She bit her lip. She was being unfair, using Amber like this. Because really this was all about her trying to keep her dealings with Joel Matthews a secret from Mark. Now she felt guiltier than ever.

“Fine,” Mark said. “I’ll tell you about Amber. In fact, I can take you to her gravesite if you want. She’s buried in L.A.” He turned around. “Do you guys mind stopping at the cemetery?”

“A cemetery?” George echoed.

Mark nodded. “Maybe this sounds weird, but I want to show Amber the band I formed in her memory.”

No one spoke for a moment.

“Never mind,” Mark said. “We don’t have to stop. I can go another time by myself. I—”

“It’s okay,” Lily said, nestling close to him. “If it’s important to you, let’s go.”

"Yeah, we should go," Tracie agreed.

So Josh took them to the Los Angeles Memorial Cemetery. He parked the bus and then waited on a bench while Mark showed his bandmates the grave of his friend Amber Carlson. "You know where Amber wanted to go to college?" he asked.

"Where?" Lily stood behind Mark and wrapped her arms around him.

"UC Berkeley." His voice was choked. "She was really into it. She always watched the Cal football games on TV. We were supposed to take a road trip up to Berkeley to watch them play live, but she died before we ever made it up." He wiped his eyes. Lily held him tight. "Amber had all this Cal stuff—a baseball cap and a sweatshirt and T-shirts and even this Golden Bear coffee mug I used to tease her about. Her parents gave me her baseball cap after . . ." His voice trailed off.

"She sounds like a lot of fun," George said.

"She was great." Mark smiled wanly. "This trip. Amber was always so into music and Berkeley. It's like we're fulfilling a dream of hers in a way."

"We'll try to make her proud," Tracie said.

"Definitely. I'm glad we came here," Sienna said.

A few minutes later, Sienna, Tracie, and George walked back to meet Josh while Mark and Lily stayed at the gravesite.

Lily stood beside Mark and took his hand. "Thanks for bringing me here," she told him. "I'm sorry I never got to meet Amber when she was alive. You knew her a long time, didn't you?"

“We were best friends since fifth grade. She was a real tomboy back then. She hung out with the boys, playing soccer and basketball at recess, and refused to wear girly clothes. Even when she was ten, Amber was into hard rock when all the other girls were into the Backstreet Boys.” He smiled. “We used to go over each other’s houses and play video games and listen to music. Rock, of course.” He bent down, plucked a dandelion from the grass, and sniffed it. “She took guitar lessons for years. Once she got an electric guitar, it drove her parents crazy. No one had soundproofed garages back then, like I have now.”

“Sounds like you guys had a great time together,” Lily said.

Mark nodded. “She got a keyboard for her thirteenth birthday. By then, she was growing out of her tomboy stage. We even kissed once that year, but it was weird. We didn’t know what we were doing, and our braces clinked together, and I think we slobbered all over each other.”

Lily squeezed Mark’s hand.

“But it was only that one kiss. Amber was really like a sister to me. Anyway, she got the keyboard and let me fool around with it, and that’s really when I got into playing music myself. We used to jam together all the time, writing these amateur songs and making our parents listen to our bad garage-band concerts. Of course, we both eventually got better at songwriting and stuff. She would have had such a great future.”

“Amber died in a car accident when she was sixteen, right?” Lily said.

“Yeah, way too young.” He put the dandelion into his pocket. “I wish you could have known her. She was my best friend. She was terrific.”

“She sounds like it,” Lily said.

“After she died, I came here every day,” Mark said. “At the time, my family lived pretty close by. I think that was one of the reasons they moved out of L.A. I was supposed to move on with my life. And I have. But I’ll never forget Amber. She—the memory of her, at least—will always be part of me.”

“Thanks for telling me about her.” Lily hugged him tightly. Then she said, “Why don’t I give you some time alone?”

As she walked away, she thought, *How could I ever leave Amber Road? Hasn’t Mark suffered enough already?*

fourteen

"The hotel isn't exactly the Ritz Carlton," Josh said as they drove into Berkeley, "but there's tons of stuff within walking distance of it."

It was just after five p.m. They'd been traveling all day, but Sienna was too excited to be tired. She gazed out the window as they passed restaurants, coffeehouses, clothing boutiques, a vitamin store, a used bookstore, and a little hardware store. "There aren't many chain stores here, huh?"

"Not really. But we're getting more and more of them. Some people are pretty upset about that," Josh said.

"There it is!" Mark exclaimed, and Josh pulled up to the hotel.

"We made it," Tracie said. "Berkeley. Home of the great university, People's Park, the free speech movement . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's get out of the bus already. My butt is killing me," George complained.

They filed out, and Sienna looked around in awe. The area in front of the hotel was busy. The street was filled with cars creeping along in traffic, and the sidewalk bustled. There were students carrying loaded backpacks and singing along with their iPods, a woman hawking amateurish pencil drawings, a man pushing a shopping cart and pulling a dog.

A large African-American woman stopped in front of Sienna, shouted, "Sisters unite!" and walked off.

"Okay, now I get why my parents were worried," Tracie said.

"That's Berserkeley for you," George said.

"Also known as The People's Republic of Berkeley," Josh added.

"I think it's cool here," George said. "If I had better grades, I would have applied to Cal. Much better grades. Much, much better grades."

"Let's get into the hotel and find a schedule for the Blow-out so we can figure out what bands we can listen to," Mark said. "Plus, we need to check into our rooms."

“Mark, if you want to share a room with Lily, I’ll be happy to sleep with Sienna and Tracie,” George said with a grin.

“No way!” Sienna playfully hit his shoulder.

“But nice try, George,” Tracie said.

They walked into the hotel lobby. The hotels Sienna had always stayed at with her parents had doormen and large lobbies with marble floors or lavish carpeting and high ceilings. This hotel had no doorman, and the lobby verged on depressing. The ceilings were low and cracked, the wallpaper looked dated and faded, and the carpeting was thin and stained. Well, it wasn’t as if Steve Guyda hadn’t warned them that they’d be traveling budget class.

“I actually tried to get a separate room for Lily and me,” Mark said. “I would have sprung for it myself, but they were all booked up. So we’ve got the three girls in one room, and George, Josh, and me in another room.”

Sienna’s thoughts turned to Carter again. He’d booked a room for them in Beverly Hills this weekend. What a waste! It would have been so fun and romantic to share a ritzy hotel room.

“I’ll get you checked in,” Josh said. “That’s what I’m here for. You guys just relax in the lobby while I deal with registration.”

“Great, thanks,” Mark said. He gazed at Lily. “Want to take a little walk?” Sienna had dated Mark long enough to

know he was asking Lily whether she wanted to make out with him.

Lily smiled at him. "Sure. I was just craving a little walk myself."

They went through the lobby holding hands. They stopped in the back corner and put their arms around each other and started kissing.

Sienna took her phone out of her purse. There were no messages. She had left a message for Carter a couple of hours ago, on the bus. "I wonder where Carter is," she murmured.

Next to her, Tracie said, "Oh, Carter's always so busy. He's probably winning another trophy for something or volunteering to help save the world."

"The world can wait," Sienna said. "I already miss him." It was nice for Mark and Lily, both being in the band. It wasn't just that they got to spend a lot of time together. It was also that they both loved music. Carter liked music okay, but he didn't have the passion for it that she had. Maybe if he did, he would have come to the Berkeley Blowout.

"Gabriel's here," Tracie told her.

Sienna looked in the direction she was pointing. Sure enough, there he was, looking handsome as ever in a thin beige sweater, khaki pants, and flip-flops.

He rushed over to them. "Great! You got here!"

"Were you worried?" Sienna asked.

“Nah.” Then he smiled. “A little. I heard about the bus you were riding in. George’s mother told your mother, who told my mother, who told me.”

Sienna rolled her eyes. “Do they have a ‘Mothers of Band Members’ chatline set up or something?”

Gabriel laughed. “I’m sure our mothers will spend most of this week telling each other how worried they are.”

“Well, if they knew how bad the bus really is, they’d worry even more,” Sienna said. “But we all made it here with our limbs intact and minimal brain damage.”

“Can’t ask for more than that,” he said, smiling.

Sienna silently disagreed. She would have liked to drive up in Carter’s Prius. But what she said was, “So did your mom tell you that my mom wanted you to check up on me?”

“Do you realize how convoluted that sounds?” Gabriel said. “The scary thing is that I understand what you meant. And, yes, actually, I was told to check up on you. But I would have done it anyway.” She stiffened a little and he quickly said, “I didn’t mean it that way. What I meant is, I wanted to see you again. I wish we’d kept in touch the last few years. I didn’t realize what I was missing.”

“I . . .” She picked at her fingernail. “Look, I have to make a call. This guy back home . . .”

The warmth left his eyes. “Guy back home. Right.” His tone turned businesslike. “So you and the rest of the band are fine? You know where you’re performing tonight?”

Sienna opened up her cell phone and stared at it. “Yes, I think we’re fine.” Her voice was as businesslike as Gabriel’s now. “Thanks for coming by.” She took a few steps away and punched in Carter’s phone number.

He still wasn’t answering, so she started to leave a message while she watched Gabriel walk out of the hotel. But it was hard to concentrate. She had to turn away from Gabriel before finishing the message for Carter.

fifteen

"Lily, I didn't know you got stage fright," Sienna said.

"Huh?" Lily stared across the little table at Sienna and raised her eyebrows. They were inside a tiny, dark nightclub in North Berkeley. They sat at a small booth with George and Gabriel, waiting for their turn to perform. Six other bands had already played, a couple of them pretty decent. Lily glanced at her watch. Nearly midnight. It was hard to believe they had only left San Diego that morning.

"It's just that you seem so nervous," Sienna said. "You keep looking all over the club. I wouldn't worry about VIPs coming tonight. Guyda told us the first show was the least

important, that there probably wouldn't be much of a crowd. Remember?"

Lily looked around again. "I guess Guyda knew what he was talking about. There's hardly anyone here." She searched for her mother again. She didn't see her.

Maybe Lily wouldn't have felt so bad if Mark were with her at the table. But he was still talking to Josh and Tracie near the entrance to the club. Mark had been worried about getting all five members of Amber Road and their instruments and equipment on the tiny stage as quickly as possible. They were probably still trying to figure out the logistics.

"I bet there's no more than thirty people in here," Sienna said. "And that number includes the five of us, plus Josh, and you, Gabriel."

"That's all right," Gabriel said. "Try not to think of it as a puny crowd. It sounds better if we call it *intimate* or *cozy* or something."

Lily stared at the front door again, but there was nothing to see there, meaning her mother hadn't shown.

A cocktail waitress brought a basket of French fries to their table. Lily had no appetite, but Sienna and Gabriel both reached into the basket. When their hands met, Sienna's eyes lit up like neon.

Well, Lily thought, *Gabriel has to be more interesting to Sienna than the band onstage, though that's not saying much.* She figured the band, which called itself The Berkeley Boys, was invited to perform because they were local and

probably well connected. They were three middle-aged men with shell necklaces hanging almost to their potbellies, singing about LSD and fat reefers and free love. Maybe if the audience were middle-aged, they would appreciate them more. But most of the people in the club looked under thirty. They were talking and yawning and barely clapping at the end of each song.

Mark finally came over. He stood next to her, leaned over, and whispered, "This crowd sucks."

"That's because this band sucks," she whispered back. But what if the audience reacted the same way to Amber Road? She'd be so embarrassed in front of her mother. Where was she? Lily looked at the front door again. Her mother would be hard to miss, with her platinum blond hair and jumbo-sized chest.

She wasn't there. Amber Road was supposed to go on-stage in a few minutes. Lily had called her mother right before dinner. Her mother had finished filming her TV movie and promised she'd come this time.

"Lily, you okay? You worried about your mom?" Mark asked her.

Lily kept staring at the entrance to the club. "I just hope she's all right. She should have been here a half hour ago."

Mark leaned down and put his arm around her. "She might have had trouble getting parking. It's not easy out there."

Lily nodded, willing the door to open for her mom.

George drummed his fingers on the table. "I could totally use a beer right now," he said. "I wonder if they'd take my fake ID here."

Sienna shoved him and gestured to Tracie, who had been trying hard not to drink since her DUI accident.

The Berkeley Boys finished up to barely audible applause, and Lily glanced at the club entrance again.

Her mother walked in, finally, in a tiny, low-cut red sweater, tight jeans, and platform shoes.

Lily suddenly found herself breathing easier, as if she'd been holding her breath until just now.

"We have to hustle, put our equipment onstage as soon as The Berkeley Boys get off," Mark said to the rest of the band.

"My mom just came in," Lily said. "The blond lady." Mark looked over and smiled while Lily waved.

Her mother blew her a kiss. Lily returned it before rushing onstage. "Can we start with 'Beautiful Girl'?" she asked Mark.

"That's usually what we end with," he said. Then he glanced at Lily's mother again, who was taking a compact out of her clutch purse. "Yeah, we can switch it around," he said.

Lily caught the pity in his voice. She knew it seemed pathetic to want to show off for her mom. But it wasn't as if she did it all the time. She had never had the chance before.

Mark turned to the other band members and said, "We're moving 'Beautiful Girl' to the top of the set list." After waiting

for everyone to set up their instruments, he yelled, “One, two, three, rock!”

And they started. As Lily sang the first verse, “I fell in love today, down at the beach by the waves,” she waited for the adrenaline to kick in, for the feeling of being swept away by the music and the vibe from the audience. But that familiar surge of energy didn’t start.

She sang the next verse, and the next, and the next, but she must have been too focused on her mother sitting in the middle of the club listening—or not listening—to be carried away by adrenaline or anything else. She wasn’t singing badly tonight, but she hardly gave a great performance either.

She couldn’t give her all when she was distracted by her mother. While she sang, her mother touched up her lipstick and ordered a drink and pulled her BlackBerry from her purse.

And Lily felt Mark’s eyes on her. Feeling sorry for her, she knew. He wasn’t one hundred percent focused on the song either.

She tried to reassure herself that Amber Road was a lot better than the band that had performed before them. The audience was, if not wildly enthusiastic, at least paying attention. She could feel them getting into the music, swaying with it.

Not that Lily noticed much of the audience besides her mother. Her mother clapped at the end of her song, then blew her another kiss.

As they started “Tomorrow,” her mother’s drink came—a martini, probably—and she paid for it and took a few sips.

Lily started to relax a little and focus more on the song than on who was listening to it. After all, her mother had come just like she’d promised, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. The band was doing well, and the small audience in the club had perked up. *Everything’s turning out great*, Lily told herself. She sang the lyrics to match the romantic emotions of the song rather than her own nervous emotions about her mom. Her adrenaline finally kicked in, spurred on by the audience, silent in their appreciation for the band. She looked at Mark and sang the song for him, for their love of each other and of the music.

Then, toward the end of “Tomorrow,” her mother suddenly stood up, clutching her BlackBerry. She grabbed her purse from the table, gave Lily another air kiss and the same fake smile she used for photographers, and walked out of the club. Her mother hadn’t even bothered to finish her drink.

Lily forgot the next lyric. Mark sang it for her, and then the next line, and the next. She closed her eyes and made herself start singing again; but all her passion for the song, for anything, was gone. It took all of Lily’s strength to keep on singing, to keep on standing.

Mark moved next to her and put his arm around her, literally propping her up. He sang with her, and motioned for Sienna to join in.

They finished the song, and the audience was quiet for a few seconds before finally applauding. “We’ll take a five-minute break,” Mark announced. “Then we’ll be back better than ever.”

He helped her offstage. There was no greenroom in this tiny club, no place they could go that wasn’t in the middle of the audience. He whispered, “Let’s talk outside, Lily.”

She didn’t respond, so he took her hand and led her to the exit and then to the side of the building. It was dark now. But she looked around anyway, on the chance that her mom was still there. She didn’t see her.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” Mark said.

She moved away from him and leaned against the wall. “It was stupid of me to think she’d want to come tonight,” she said.

“No, that’s not true.” Mark moved next to her and took her hand. “Anyone would love to hear you sing—your own mother, especially.”

She shook off his hand. “I know Amber Road means a lot to you. But, really, Mark, let’s face it: we’re just another struggling rock band. We had a little gig tonight that barely paid anything, in a rinky-dink club we couldn’t even half fill. It was completely self-centered of me to think that Amber Road’s stupid show was worth my mother’s time to drive from San Francisco to Berkeley and then scramble for parking. I should have told her not to bother in the first place, instead of begging her to show up. It’s so pathetic.”

"Is that really what you think of this? We're just starting out, Lily. For how old we are and how new the band is, we've done really well."

"What we've done is *minor*," she told him. "I mean, no one in this band even knows what real success is."

Mark backed away from her. "I hate how you're sounding, Lily."

"Well, I hate how you're acting. You have no idea what it's like for me. My mother has been on TV shows and movies. She was even nominated for an Emmy once. Has your mother ever been in *People* magazine? Mine has. I know performing at the Berkeley Blowout is a big deal to you. To my mother, it's a joke. I should have realized that."

"Our band should be a big deal to her because her daughter's in it. Her very talented daughter who I'm in love with." Mark sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. "Listen, it's hard for me to hear you call everything we're doing a joke. I know you're upset about your mother leaving. You probably don't mean what you just said."

He stopped talking. She knew this was supposed to be her cue to say she didn't mean it, that she was as excited as Mark was about Amber Road. But right now, Lily didn't feel like that at all. "Look," she said, "why don't you go back into the club? I'll be there in a few minutes, I promise, ready to go on-stage with a smile plastered on my face."

"Lily, please."

"I just want to be alone now," she told him.

“Fine.” He returned to the club by himself.

She let out a deep breath as soon as he was gone. She loved Mark. But—and she knew this was horrible, but she couldn’t help how she felt right now—she thought maybe he really was holding her back. Her brother had been saying it all along, and now Joel Matthews was telling her the same thing, that she was better off without Mark and Amber Road, that she should leave the band for a solo career.

If she did, and became as famous as Joel Matthews predicted, her mother would take notice of her. Instead of listening to one and a half songs in a tiny club in Berkeley, her mother could be sitting in the front row of a stadium in a big city, the proud parent of a famous hit singer.

Lily gritted her teeth. She would stick it out this weekend with the band. She’d finish her obligation to Amber Road. That’s what she considered it now, an obligation. After that, she would be free to break out as a solo artist. She walked back into the club, still gritting her teeth, and made her way onstage.

sixteen

"Thirteen more hours, Danielle," George crooned into his cell phone on Saturday morning.

Next to him on the bus, Sienna downed more of her overpriced hotel coffee. Listening to George sweet-talk a girl he'd never met did not boost her mood, and it was in serious need of a boost.

Her cell phone rang and she grabbed it out of her purse, hoping it was Carter. They'd been playing telephone tag the last two days. He had returned her call last night while she was onstage. When she'd phoned him early this morning, she'd woken him. He had asked in an icy voice whether he could call her back at a decent hour.

She caught the phone on the fifth ring and said hello.

"Hello, Sienna."

"Hi, Mrs. G." Ugh. Not again. She'd already talked to Tracie's mom twice yesterday. She had promised to keep an eye on Tracie and report back, but she hadn't realized how frequent the phone calls would be. And exhaustive.

"How's the trip so far?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"It's great," Sienna said. "But uneventful, really."

"What do you have new to report?"

"Let's see. Our performance went well last night." She didn't mention that Lily had gotten upset for some reason, and left and come back during their show. "We had a small crowd, but we tried our best."

"Did the club serve alcohol?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"I think it might have," Sienna said. Actually, she knew it did. "Of course, no one in Amber Road drank any alcohol. We had water and soda. I think Tracie had tea."

"Hot or iced tea?"

Why the hell did it matter? "Hot," she told Mrs. Grant. "It was kind of chilly out last night."

"I hope Tracie dressed appropriately," Mrs. Grant said. "Do you know if she wore a sweater or jacket?"

Sienna had no idea. "Yes. She wore a sweater. A thick, warm one."

"Just the sweater helped keep her warm, right? She's staying away from the boys?"

Sienna rolled her eyes. "Mostly we just hang out with each other."

"Mostly?" Tracie's mom asked suspiciously.

"She's staying away from the boys." Sienna didn't tell Mrs. Grant that Tracie had spent a lot of time with Josh both before and after the show.

"And did she eat breakfast today?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"Oh, yes. We ate together this morning." Technically, they just drank together. But coffee could count as breakfast, right? She was on her second cup. After this phone call, she'd probably need a third cup.

"Answer me something important, Sienna," Tracie's mom said. "Has Tracie been drinking enough water?"

Hell if I know, Sienna felt like saying. Instead, she told Mrs. Grant, "We have a case of water bottles in the bus." At least that was the truth. "I need to get off the phone. But I promise you that I'm keeping an eye on your daughter," she said in her most assuring voice. "Everyone in the band is watching out for Tracie, including Mr. Guyda's very responsible intern. And Mr. Guyda himself is coming to Berkeley today. We're meeting him this afternoon. Do you have any other concerns, Mrs. G?"

"A lot, but I don't want to keep you too long. How about two more questions to ease my mind?"

"No problem," Sienna said, trying to sound polite, even though she felt like screaming.

“This intern. Is he a careful driver?” Tracie’s mom asked. “Is he staying within the speed limit? Is he able to handle the bus?”

That’s three questions—one too many, Sienna wanted to say but didn’t. “Josh is very careful. He drives nice and slowly and seems to be handling the bus perfectly. Well, it was good talking to you.”

“Wait!” Tracie’s mom yelled. “You still need to answer my second question. Are you using the buddy system?”

The buddy system! Sheesh! Sienna had last used that at Camp Lakota when she was ten. “We are, as a matter of fact,” she lied. “Tracie and I are each other’s buddies.” *And I hope she appreciates the sacrifice I’m making, getting grilled by her overprotective mom all the time*, she thought. “Okay, talk to you later. Bye-bye,” she said, and hung up the phone.

She closed her eyes, happy for a moment of quiet.

But the quiet lasted only one moment. George told his phone-a-friend, “Meeting you is going to be the highlight of the weekend, and quite possibly of my life.”

Sienna chugged down the rest of her coffee. She still felt tired. Sleep had been difficult last night. She wasn’t used to sharing a room with two other girls. And after pulling the shortest straw—actually, guitar string—she got stuck with the hotel’s portable cot, which meant sleeping on a thin, lumpy mattress over thick metal bars.

The three-to-a-room situation also meant quick showers this morning and a shared, wimpy hotel blow dryer. So on top of everything else, Sienna was having a bad hair day. Frizz framed her sour face.

“Did I ever tell you your voice is like an angel’s?” George cooed into the phone.

Yes! And it was a dumb line the first time too! Sienna rolled her eyes again. George had been chatting up this computer date in the hotel lobby, while getting into the bus, and so far, the entire time they’d been riding to their gig. Sienna had heard him say Danielle had a voice like an angel’s twenty minutes ago.

She looked out the bus window and told herself to cheer up. Berkeley was a cool place. So far today, she’d seen many sights that were rare or nonexistent in San Diego: charming duplexes with pretty gardens in front, a BART subway station, a ton of outdoor cafes, and actual pedestrians.

The bus slowed as it approached the park. Huge tents were set up on the grass, and lots of people were already wandering around. Some hauled instruments, some toted coffee, some tried to balance both, and everyone looked happy to be there.

Josh said, “This is great! What a totally excellent way to spend a Saturday!”

Sienna nodded. He was right. She needed to pull herself out of her funk and appreciate what she had. “And we get to perform twice today,” she said.

"Yep." Josh slowed down the bus. "Guyda's no slouch. He got you a not-so-great ten A.M. booking for fun and a great five o'clock spot for your career." He parked the bus in the area reserved for bands. "Leave your instruments and other gear in here for a few minutes, all right? I need to find the staffers so we can figure out exactly where you'll be playing."

"The staffers meaning Gabriel?" Sienna asked. Her mood instantly changed for the better.

"He's your friend, right?" Josh said. "You want to come with me? I bet he'll drop everything to help us once he sees you."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Sienna said. But she *did* know. She bet he *would* drop everything for her. She was pretty sure Gabriel had a crush on her. Last night, he'd been flirting with her, laughing at her little jokes as if she were a comedian, asking all about what she'd been up to the last few years, and acting enthralled with what she'd told him. Their hands had touched while they were sharing French fries before Amber Road's show. Instead of moving their hands away, they had lingered for a few moments.

"Sienna? You ready to go?" Josh asked.

"Oh, right. Sure." *Sheesh*, she'd really been daydreaming. *There's nothing to dream about, though, as far as Gabriel is concerned*, she told herself. She'd help find him only because Josh had asked her to. But she absolutely couldn't flirt with

him, *wouldn't* flirt with him, not with Carter waiting for her to return to San Diego.

"Oh, here comes Gabriel," Josh said. "Good timing. Come on, Sienna, let's talk to him."

She tried to smooth out her hair as she followed Josh out of the bus, but knew she was stuck with a frizzball style today.

Gabriel stood near the van, leaning against a large oak tree bordering the park. He was wearing torn jeans, a linen vest with no shirt underneath, Birkenstocks, a large smile, and bulging biceps.

She told herself to stop staring.

"Great to see you, Sienna," Gabriel said. "I've been looking out for you all morning."

"It's hard to miss this big old bus," she said. "It really stands out."

"And so do you." He smiled. "Hey, you changed your hairstyle."

Sienna's hands went to her hair. "Not by choice."

"It looks more natural. More Berkeley-ish," Gabriel told her.

"I don't know if that's such a good thing," Sienna said.

"It's good. I love Berkeley."

He was flirting with her again. It wasn't right. She looked away, to Josh, standing next to her.

"We should get settled," Josh said.

"Right," Gabriel said. "Stop distracting me, Sienna." His smile widened. "I'll show you guys where Amber Road will

be performing. You can stay parked where you are, then carry your stuff over. You'll be in the tent that's pretty much in the center of the park. You won't get a ton of people this morning, but tonight you should pull a big crowd." He looked at Sienna. "You're going to blow everyone away."

Sienna and her bandmates took their instruments and other gear out of the bus and followed Gabriel. Her phone rang while they were walking, but she couldn't stop to put her guitar down and make everyone wait while she took the call. It was probably Tracie's mom again. She'd have to call her back later.

As they made their way through the park, they passed other musicians and concert-goers impatient and excited for the bands to begin. "This is great," Sienna said.

"It is," Gabriel said. "I love this whole atmosphere—all these people totally into music. And hanging out with you today makes everything even better."

It was nice to be appreciated. Carter hadn't acted upset at all about missing this. The only thing he seemed bummed about was that she wouldn't go to his scholarship banquet. If he were into music like Gabriel was, he'd want to be here. She wondered what he was doing today. She wished she could have talked to him instead of playing telephone tag.

"Are you all right, Sienna?" Gabriel asked. "You need anything before I go?"

"No. I'm . . . just overwhelmed, I guess." She sighed. Even though this cute guy was acting interested in her, and even

though they were getting ready to play in a cool music festival that could jumpstart Amber Road's career, she couldn't stop thinking about Carter.

"Listen," Gabriel said. "You guys don't have a performance tomorrow night. My housemates and I are throwing a party in the Berkeley Hills. I hope you'll all show. I can give Josh directions."

"Sounds good," Mark said.

"Thanks. We'll talk about it," Josh said. "I'll call you tomorrow and let you know for sure."

Gabriel nodded and walked off.

Mark turned toward the tent where they were going to be playing. "Now we'd better figure out how we should set up, and then get moving," he said.

"Want some help?" Sienna offered, thinking it might take her mind off of Carter.

Together, she and Mark and Josh took a look at the stage. There were already mikes and monster speakers in place. They would need to bring in the instruments, amps, and a mass of cables and wires.

Gabriel had left to check on the other bands, but Josh proved himself a brilliant tech, figuring out how to work the speakers and connect all the electronics. By now, the members of Amber Road had played in a lot of venues and worked together well. So setup was easy, even though this was the first time they'd performed in a tent outdoors.

Luckily, it was a nice day—the Bay Area fog lifted, and the sun began to peek through by the time they started playing. There was a small crowd for Amber Road, which was to be expected. After all, Sienna reminded herself, it was ten A.M. on a Saturday in a college town far from their friends and San Diego fans. The audience was an interesting mix of hippies, students, and people with kids.

Everyone in Amber Road was excited to be playing outdoors, and it showed in their performance. They knew they didn't have a prime time slot this morning, but that eased the pressure, allowing them to perform with high spirits and a great sense of fun.

The audience must have sensed that. What they lacked in numbers, they made up for in enthusiasm, clapping and hollering after every song. Almost everyone stayed for the entire set, and their audience grew steadily.

After the show, the band got a lot of compliments. They didn't see anyone who appeared to be a record producer, but Guyda had told them not to expect producers at the park this morning.

It wasn't until hours later—after they'd played their set list plus two encores, hugged each other, taken down their equipment, and finally sat down on the grass—that Sienna remembered to take her cell phone out of her pocket and check her messages. Carter had called. "Hey, it's me, and I'm up now," his message said. "Sorry I was crabby this morning. Where

are you?" Sienna played the message three times, all the while feeling a dull pain in her chest.

She called him back, but his phone rang and rang. She wished he were here next to her, on the grass beside her friends in Amber Road.

She had just hung up when Gabriel sat down and asked her if she wanted to walk through the park with him and listen to the other bands.

She shrugged. "Sure."

He broke into a huge smile, as if she had just made his day. "Have you heard the Mary Janes yet?" Gabriel asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I've never heard of them."

"I bet you'll love them. They're on the other side of the park." He pointed toward a steep, grass-covered hill. "You up for it?"

She nodded. "Sounds cool."

Gabriel had been right. She loved the Mary Janes. They were an all-girl band in their twenties, delicate looking, dressed in pastel blouses and light cotton skirts. But they rocked like a kickass heavy metal band. "They're fantastic," Sienna whispered to Gabriel.

"Some people say their music is too jarring," he said, "but I had a feeling that underneath those preppie clothes of yours beats the heart of a hard-rocker."

"Now don't you be thinking about what's underneath my clothes," Sienna teased.

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm not a player." He sounded hurt. "Underneath my clothes is a soft, squishy heart."

Afraid talking about their hearts would lead to dangerous ground, Sienna changed the subject. "What other bands are good here?"

Gabriel cleared his throat. "There's a pretty decent funk band playing today." He pointed, and they walked over together.

"They're good," Sienna said as they listened to the funk band, "but it's hard to get totally into their music because of the lead singer."

"He looks just like our priest, doesn't he?" Gabriel said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," she said, and they laughed together. She wondered if she should feel guilty for having so much fun without Carter. *No*, she told herself. *I'm allowed to have fun.*

"Let's dance," Gabriel said.

Sienna paused, then said, "Okay."

They faced each other and shook their hips and clapped to the music. "I wish you were here longer," Gabriel said as they danced. "There's a lot of great bands in the Bay Area I'd like to show you. This funk band is all right, but there's one based in Oakland that's awesome. And there's a new rock band, Rising Dissent, that puts on a great show. They were playing at the festival last night but at the same time as your show."

"Maybe we'll catch them later this weekend," Sienna said.

The song ended. They hugged each other briefly, leaving half a foot of space between them. "One more dance?" Gabriel asked.

She smiled. "Sure."

They started dancing again. Gabriel said, "San Diego has a surprisingly good music scene, huh?"

"Yeah. But when people think about San Diego, they think of SeaWorld or the zoo or something. There are all these great rock bands there that hardly anyone knows about."

"Let's see," Gabriel said. "There's Bitty Boys Club, Bad Drugs, Jemima Meyers and Her Frogs—"

"Holy crap," Sienna interrupted him. "You know about those bands?"

"I'm a music lover. I was raised in San Diego. Of course I know about them."

"Right." It was great to be with someone as into music as she was—more, actually.

She and Gabriel talked and danced through two more songs before joining her bandmates at a food stand set up in the park. They noshed on greasy hamburgers and limp fries. Though she sat with everyone from Amber Road, she spent most of her time talking to Gabriel about the bands they'd just heard, their annoying moms, church gossip, and which TV series never should have been canceled. They were talking and laughing so much, Sienna had to keep reminding herself to eat her lunch.

Sienna had just finished her iced tea when Tracie said, “Sienna, can I talk to you alone for a sec?”

Sienna shrugged. “Yeah, sure.” She walked with Tracie to the trash can.

Tracie threw out her paper plate and cup, then asked, “You’re not hooking up with Gabriel, are you?”

Sienna shook her head. “No!”

“You guys seem all happy together,” Tracie said.

“We’re not hooking up,” Sienna told her. “What about you and Josh?”

“What? Just because we sat across from each other at lunch?” Tracie asked. “I’m not hooking up with him or anyone else for a long time. Eating across from a friend who happens to be male is not a date.”

Sienna laughed. “You spent the meal smiling and laughing almost as much as Gabriel and me. And the way you were sharing Josh’s Jell-O, you looked more like lovers than friends.”

Tracie blushed.

“Sienna,” Gabriel called out. “Come walk around with me some more and keep me company.”

Now *her* face got warm.

Tracie smirked at her. “It’s nice having friends who happen to be male, isn’t it?”

“I’ll see you later.” Sienna headed toward Gabriel.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Tracie called after her. Sienna didn’t think that limited her very much.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in the park with Gabriel—minus a few interruptions while he did some emergency troubleshooting. As he bandaged a college student's scraped knee, Sienna walked a few yards away and called Tracie's mother.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Grant asked without even saying hello.

"Nothing," Sienna said. "I just thought I should check in with you."

"Thank goodness." Mrs. Grant's voice relaxed. "Well, I don't want to be too much of a bother. So just tell me how Tracie's doing and we'll make this short."

"She's fine. I just had lunch with her," Sienna said.

"What did you eat?"

"Um, hamburgers and fries."

"No vegetables?" Mrs. Grant said as if she was appalled.

"There was lettuce and tomatoes on the burgers," Sienna said. "I took off my onion slices, but Tracie might have left hers on. We had a show today at the park. It was a small audience, but I think we did well."

"Are people drinking there? Have any men asked Tracie out? Are there a lot of homeless people at the park?"

So much for Mrs. Grant not wanting to be too much of a bother. "I haven't seen anyone drinking," Sienna said. "Or asking out your daughter."

"Are you sure?"

Sienna clenched the phone and looked toward Gabriel. He was looking at her. "I should get going," Sienna told Tracie's mom.

"Wait!" Mrs. Grant said. "You didn't answer my question about the homeless people."

Sienna rolled her eyes. "There are a few homeless people here, I guess. But it's not like they're bothering us."

"What about—"

"I really need to go," Sienna said. "Don't worry. Everything's just fine. I'll call again soon." She clicked off her phone, then turned it off completely. She didn't want Mrs. Grant to call back. And also, she knew deep down, she didn't want Carter to call when she was with Gabriel.

She spent the rest of the afternoon with Gabriel, soaking in music from the other bands. Just after four o'clock, the two of them made their way back to the tent where Amber Road was to perform again.

They found the rest of the band already there, tuning up their instruments and running through a sound check with Josh. Steve Guyda had arrived too, having flown in from San Diego. He shook Gabriel's hand. "Good to see you again. Thanks for giving Amber Road the opportunity to perform here."

"Thank you for telling me about them," Gabriel said. "I caught their set again this morning. You've got a terrific band here."

"No doubt. Let's hope the record producer I invited for Monday night will agree," Guyda said. He turned to the band. "There probably won't be any VIPs at today's performance. But you never know. Sometimes they have a little free time and pop in on groups to hear a couple of songs."

"Whether there's a big-shot in the audience or not," Mark said, "we *have* an audience—a big one—and we want to make them happy they came."

"I see some hot college girls in the audience that I would love to make happy," George said.

"Yeah, good luck with that." Sienna shook her head.

"Seriously," Guyda said. "Don't get burned out before Monday night. If I can get that record producer to listen to you, your performance could make your career as a band. Tonight is mostly for practice and good times."

Mark smiled at Lily. "Yeah, I think we could all use some good times," he said.

"Especially me," George added.

"Check it out," Tracie said. "This is the biggest audience we've had in Berkeley so far. And they're already rocking."

Sienna looked around. A large crowd had gathered—almost a mob, really—and they were smiling, laughing, even dancing without music. It had been a great day, and the audience's enthusiasm added to her soaring spirits.

They ditched their set list, instead deciding to play ten upbeat songs in a row. No ballads, no melancholy tunes, just ten

party songs to match the crowd's high energy and the band's excitement to be playing here tonight.

Amber Road started strong and gained ground as the evening progressed. The audience seemed to love all the songs they played, and the band members themselves loved performing them. Josh and Gabriel stood in the front row, whistling and shouting and cheering them on.

At the end of the set, they got a long, loud ovation before performing three encore songs. The band members hugged each other when they were done, like they did after every performance.

But then Gabriel hugged Sienna, close and hard. "You were great, Sienna," he said. "I knew you were a good singer from listening to you at church when you were younger, but I never realized you could rock so hard. I had the best time today. Thanks for hanging out with me."

"You're really sweet," she said. But even while they were hugging, her mind was hundreds of miles away, on Carter. He would be driving to his awards banquet now. She wondered who he would sit with at the dinner she'd blown off to come here.

Was Carter thinking about her right now too? And would he be hugging anyone tonight?

seventeen

After their Saturday evening show in the park, the band returned to their hotel to freshen up. Lily found it strange to share a room with Tracie and Sienna. In San Diego, she had her own spacious bedroom and bathroom. In fact, she and Aaron had a twelve-room house practically all to themselves, with weekend overnight visits from Mark and whatever girl Aaron brought home, along with occasional appearances from their parents. But here in Berkeley, she was crowded into a little bedroom plus a bathroom with Tracie and Sienna.

Out of consideration for them, she had taken a very fast shower and now used only one thin, small towel to dry herself off. She

quickly put on her robe and walked out of the bathroom, knowing that the other girls would need the bathroom too.

Tracie and Sienna were sitting on Sienna's bed. Tracie was putting Sienna's hair in a French braid, weaving white ribbons into it. "I usually do our hair, and Sienna does our makeup," Tracie told Lily. "You want me to do your hair too?"

"Oh, that's okay. Thanks anyway," Lily said, thinking that Tracie had asked her just to be polite. Even though Tracie and Sienna seemed to be making an effort to be nice to her this weekend, she still felt like an outsider. After all, Tracie and Sienna had been best friends for years while she had met them only a few months ago.

Lily took a tight wrap dress out of the tiny hotel room closet, brought it over to her bed, fished out a thong from her suitcase, and started getting dressed for dinner.

"I love French braids," Tracie said. "You're going to look so pretty tonight, Sienna."

Sienna sighed. "Maybe I should take a picture and send it to Carter. It's the only way he'll catch sight of me this weekend."

"I'm surprised my mom hasn't demanded to see pictures of me," Tracie said. "Or samples of my urine by FedEx so she can do drug tests on it."

Sienna laughed. "Don't give her any ideas. If we sent her a jar of your pee, she'd demand blood and saliva tests too."

"And probably a lock of my hair," Tracie said. "I wish she'd stop worrying about me all the time."

Lily bit her lip. If Sienna and Tracie had any idea what it was like to have a mother who never worried about them, they wouldn't be complaining. She took her stilettos out of her suitcase and stuffed her foot into one of them. Maybe her mother didn't notice her, but plenty of other people would.

"I don't know what's worse," Sienna told Tracie, "your suspicious mother, or my mother—who's probably spending her weekend shopping for invitations and a mother-of-the-bride dress for her fantasy wedding between me and Gabriel."

"My mom's probably shopping for a chastity belt and a Breathalyzer for me," Tracie said.

They both laughed. Even Lily had to smirk at that.

"You think I should call your mom again?" Sienna asked Tracie. "It's been about five whole hours since I last talked to her."

"Oh, God. My crazy, paranoid mom," Tracie said. "I guess you should phone her soon so you won't have to take her call in the middle of dinner."

Lily headed for the little bathroom to do her makeup.

As she passed by, Sienna said, "Hey, Lily, didn't you mention your mom was up here this weekend? Has she seen us yet, or is she waiting for our big show tomorrow night?"

Lily forced herself to shrug. "She caught our show last night. I guess I forgot to introduce you to her."

"Oh," Sienna said. "I didn't notice you with anyone. "Wait. Weren't you making out with Mark last night at the club? Don't tell me your mom's cool with that."

“Oh. Uh, that was after she left.” Lily felt tears building.

“Sorry I missed her,” Sienna said.

“Yeah, she was really sorry she had to leave. Big emergency,” Lily lied.

“What emergency?” Tracie asked, sounding more concerned than suspicious.

There was no emergency. Her mother had left a phone message last night, saying she’d double-booked a charity dinner at the same time as her performance.

“Is your mom okay?” Tracie asked.

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Lily said. “My mom thought the band was great.”

“My mom would rather I stick to church choir,” Tracie said.

“You know what? I’ve had enough of mothers this weekend,” Sienna said. “No offense, but can we change the subject?”

Lily would be happy not to think of her mother either. But since her mother had walked out of the club last night, the hurt had been stuck in her chest like an arrow. She rushed to the bathroom and closed the door, just before the tears fell.

She cried as quietly as she could. She didn’t need anyone feeling sorry for her. Sienna and Tracie would assume she was putting on makeup or doing her hair. And she would do that, if she could ever calm down.

But the tears kept coming. There was so much to cry about. She was tired after the long ride in the crowded bus

yesterday, getting so little sleep last night in the hotel room, and their three performances in the last twenty-four hours. But the tears weren't just from exhaustion. Yesterday she had evaded Joel Matthews's phone call and then watched her mother walk out on her show. And all the time she was with the rest of the band, she was thinking that she might abandon them soon and they'd probably hate her for it. The tears kept falling.

There was a knock on the door. "Lily? You almost done?" Tracie asked. "Our makeup's in the bathroom and we have to meet everyone in the lobby in five minutes."

She hated this fishbowl existence! She just wanted to be alone. She took a deep breath and told herself to keep her voice chirpy. "Give me two more minutes," she said. She hadn't done a good job of faking chirpiness, but maybe the girls wouldn't notice.

"Lily, what's wrong?" Tracie called out from the other side of the bathroom door.

"Two minutes!" she screamed.

"You don't need to be a bitch about it!" Sienna yelled back. "You're the one who's been hogging the bathroom. Tracie was trying to be nice."

Lily swiped a towel over her wet face, grabbed her makeup box, threw open the bathroom door, and stomped out. "The precious bathroom's all yours," she said before plopping on her bed.

Sienna flashed her a frown, then said, "Come on, Tracie. There's a new look I want to try on you." She headed toward the bathroom.

Lily put her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. *Pathetic*, she thought. *I'm hugging myself.*

"You go first, Sienna," Tracie said. "I want to talk to Lily for a little bit." She walked over to Lily's bed, sat next to her, and put her hand on Lily's arm.

"Oh, no." Sienna stood at the bathroom door, staring at her. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were upset."

"That's because I acted like a bitch. I'm the one who should be sorry," Lily said.

Sienna walked toward her. But before she could reach her, Lily said, "Look, just do your makeup. I'll be fine."

"Go ahead, Sienna." Tracie waved her off. "And afterward, will you go to the lobby and tell the guys we'll be a little late meeting them?"

Sienna nodded, then walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

"It's your mom, isn't it?" Tracie said, squeezing her arm a little. "I saw her last night. I mean, I know you didn't point her out to us or anything, but she looks just like you. Or she thinks she does, I guess. She looks, well, like a middle-aged woman trying to look like a teenager and kind of making a fool of herself."

"You think?" Lily said.

Tracie shrugged. "Just my totally blunt opinion. God, I hope I didn't offend you."

Lily shook her head.

"So why did she leave in the middle of the second song?"

"You noticed that too?" Lily asked.

"Now it sounds like I was spying on you or something," Tracie said. "I wasn't. It's just . . . I care about you. I . . . I saw how you reacted onstage when she left, how Mark had to hold you up. I felt really bad for you, Lily, but I didn't want to embarrass you."

"Not more than my mother already had, anyway," Lily said.

Tracie shook her head. "She embarrassed herself. It's her loss. She doesn't appreciate a good thing. You're the best thing she has, and she doesn't even know it."

Lily gave Tracie a weak smile. "That's a nice way to look at it."

"It's true," Tracie said.

Sienna came out of the bathroom. "You want me to hang out with you guys here?"

"Thanks, but Tracie's already got me cheered up, sort of, anyway." Lily relaxed her arms and hung her legs off the side of the bed so she wasn't all cocooned anymore.

"Sienna," Tracie said, "would you mind going down to the lobby now?"

Sienna's eyes met Tracie's for a moment. "That's fine. Take care," she said, and left the room.

"I'm really sorry about your mom," Tracie told Lily after the door closed.

"Well, I know your mom's been giving you grief too," Lily said. "She almost made you quit the band."

"Both our mothers have managed to screw us up in their own opposite ways, huh?" Tracie said.

Lily nodded. "I'm glad she finally let you tour with us."

"One day, maybe if we're real lucky we'll be a totally famous rock band," Tracie said. "And my mom will be glad she didn't yank me out of the band like she wanted to. And your mom will be this has-been, and she'll wish she'd paid you more attention when you were just starting out."

That's just what Lily had been thinking. "What if I had the chance to be famous now?" she asked.

Tracie raised her eyebrows. "What?"

Lily bit her lip. She should keep this a secret. She didn't even have an offer yet, hadn't even told Mark what was going on.

"What are you saying?" Tracie asked.

Lily couldn't keep this to herself any longer. Secrets were driving her crazy. She told Tracie, "A record producer is thinking about signing me. He's been talking to me a lot."

"Wow, Lily! He wants to sign up the whole band, right?"

Lily shook her head. She watched Tracie's expression change from a wide-eyed smile into a puzzled frown.

"Believe me, I tried," Lily said. "But he doesn't want the whole band. He just wants me."

There was silence. Lily felt like crying all over again. What had she just done? After Tracie had comforted her, she'd basically told her she wanted to abandon her and the rest of the band. Had she really expected Tracie to be okay with that? To even understand?

"What does Mark think of all this? And Steve Guyda?" Tracie finally asked.

"Oh, Tracie." Lily twisted a strand of her hair. "They don't know. You're the only one who does. I'm really sorry. I don't even have an offer yet."

"Yet," Tracie said.

"I might not get one at all."

Tracie put her hand on Lily's arm. "I hope you do."

"You want me to leave the band." Lily turned away, stared at the dirty white wall near the bed. Tracie and Sienna had never really liked her. "I know Sienna's still mad at me for going out with her old boyfriend and replacing her as lead singer."

Tracie shook her head. "That's not it at all. First of all, Sienna's with Carter now. And she knows, deep down, that you're a better singer than she is. Sienna's voice is great, but yours is incredible. I could see why that producer wants to sign you. Lily, it's your singing and Mark's songwriting that make Amber Road stand out from other bands."

Lily turned toward her again. "Oh, Tracie, you're good too. And so are Sienna and George."

"We're all good. But you're the standout," Tracie told Lily. "And you know what else makes Amber Road special?"

She didn't want to hear. Thinking about how special Amber Road was just added to her guilt.

"It's our friendship. We might argue and stuff sometimes, but we love each other and I think it shows in our music."

"And here I am, ready to destroy our friendship to go out on my own," Lily said.

"You'd be crazy not to," Tracie told her.

Lily cocked her head. "What?"

"I know it's almost impossible to get a record deal. We all know that. Lily, you should go for it."

"Now you're being so nice that I really don't want to leave the band," she said.

"It's all right," Tracie said. "I understand why you would go solo. Why you *should* go solo. We all should understand that. And anyone who doesn't is a jerk."

"But how could I leave a band that's so supportive of me?"

"Oh, Lily. We'll still support you, as your fans. We'll go to your concerts and request your songs on the radio. You have to take this opportunity," Tracie said.

Their hotel phone rang. Lily picked it up. It was George. "You and Tracie coming down soon? Danielle, my online date, is waiting for us at the restaurant. I don't want her to think I ditched her."

"Okay, we're coming," Lily said. She hung up the phone, then turned to Tracie. "George is having a panic attack, thinking his computer date is going to lose patience and leave the restaurant."

“You sure you’re all right?”

Lily managed a smile. “I’m feeling a lot better now. I’ll be ready to go as soon as I slap on some makeup and do something with my hair.”

“Let me do your hair, okay?” Tracie asked.

Lily smiled. “That would be great. Thanks. And thanks for being a friend.” She still wasn’t sure whether she’d accept the solo offer if it came, but she didn’t feel like such a terrible person now for considering it.

eighteen

The moment Lily and Tracie stepped out of the elevator, George waved his arms at them. "Let's go!" he shouted from the hotel lobby. "Danielle, who's quite possibly the love of my life, is waiting for me." So for George's sake, Lily rushed to the bus with the other band members.

"Josh, man, you have got to drive as fast as possible," George insisted. "I can't wait to meet Danielle."

"We know, we know," Josh said, and Tracie giggled.

"Oh, sure, laugh about it," George complained. "Who cares that I'll be twenty minutes late for our very first date? At least I was able to text her and tell her to hold on." He opened his cell phone. "She sent me a picture of herself in

front of the restaurant.” He held it in front of Lily’s face. “Isn’t Danielle beautiful? And she seems like she has a great personality too.”

“More important, she claims to be a nonsmoker,” Mark said. Lily tried not to laugh.

Danielle was waiting at Namasté, the Indian restaurant Josh had recommended. Surprisingly, she looked even prettier than her photo, tall and curvy, with bright green eyes and thick, wavy hair. She smiled as the bus pulled up.

“Looks like you finally found yourself a winner,” Sienna told George.

Josh parked the bus, and George practically flew through the open door, racing toward Danielle. Lily watched him from the bus window. A big grin lit his face; he looked happier than she had ever seen him. Maybe he really had lucked out.

Then he stopped a few feet from Danielle and frowned. He shook her hand, but Lily saw him look all around him as if he was searching for an escape route. “What could she possibly have done to turn George off so fast?” Lily whispered to Tracie, who was seated next to her.

“It’s bizarre,” Tracie whispered back.

Lily soon found out what the problem was. They all found out, unfortunately. Anyone within about fifteen feet of Danielle would know. As they got closer to her, Lily and the others started sniffing. Something smelled foul. “Oh, jeez,” Lily whispered to Tracie. “The girl George thought was the love of his life has a horrible case of BO.”

George glumly introduced Danielle to everyone. Lily shook her hand from as far away as she could. "It'll be fun to get acquainted over dinner," Danielle said.

"You're going to eat at our table?" Lily resisted the urge to plug her nose.

George shook his head. "Let's go to a different restaurant, Danielle. One with outside dining, and hopefully a strong breeze." He turned to Mark and mumbled, "I'll meet you guys back here as soon as I can get away."

George's eyes were sad as he left the restaurant with Danielle and her awful odor. But Lily couldn't help feeling relieved. She took her first deep breath since getting a whiff of Danielle.

"Poor George," Mark said.

"She's even worse than the smoker," Lily said.

Mark put his arm around her and sniffed her neck. "Ah, you smell so good," he joked. She giggled, and he nuzzled her neck. At that moment, she hoped that Matthews would call to say the record company didn't want to sign her after all.

The hostess led them to their table. The restaurant was pretty, with dim lighting and walls painted in rich burgundy and decorated with thick, colorful tapestries. They stopped at a long table with low benches covered with a plush, dark, floral fabric.

Josh took Tracie's hand. "I have to sit next to you," he said. "It's my job. Remember, Steve Guyda ordered me to keep an eye on you."

"You're very good at your job," Sienna joked. "I'm sure it's a real hardship for you."

"It's the worst!" Josh complained in mock horror.

Tracie gave him a little shove.

"See how she manhandles me!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you love it," Sienna said.

"They're so cute together," Lily whispered to Mark.

"Yeah, but not as cute as us." He kissed her on the cheek.

Sienna put her elbow on the table and her chin in her palm. "Seeing two pairs of lovebirds really makes me miss Carter."

"We're not lovebirds." Tracie let go of Josh's hand.

"Right," Sienna said sarcastically.

Lily looked at the menu, recognizing most of the exotic dishes. London was full of Indian restaurants, and when she had lived there she'd eaten plenty of Indian food. *Aaron would love this place*, she thought.

Tracie, though, seemed baffled. "I have no idea what to get," she muttered.

"I've been here a lot," Josh said. "Trust me, the food is really good. If you want, I could just order a bunch of stuff and we could share."

Everyone agreed to that and they were happy they did. Josh was right: the food was delicious. They started out with nan, a large, thin bread like a Mexican tortilla but more flavorful.

Then they shared chicken tandoori, which Lily always thought was the most delicious chicken dish on earth; boti kabob, chunks of lamb roasted on skewers; fish curry, which was like a spicy, thick golden stew; and a thick drink called mango lassi, which tasted divine.

After their busy afternoon at the festival, the dinner seemed relaxing for everyone, Lily thought. She and Mark snuggled together in the booth, and Tracie and Josh talked quietly and laughed every so often, sitting almost as close as she and Mark. Though Sienna admitted that she missed Carter, she didn't seem upset. "Hey," she said, "I'm eating amazing food and staying in a new city surrounded by people who are as into music as I am. It's not such a bad deal."

As they were finishing dinner, Mark put his hand on Lily's leg and whispered that he wished they could share a room, that she looked so pretty with her hair in a braid.

"Tracie did that for me," she said. Then she murmured, "I wish we could sleep together too. Promise you'll come over my house as soon as we get back to San Diego."

"Oh, I promise you that," he said softly while his hand rose high on her bare thigh.

Lily's phone rang inside the purse hanging from her chair. Damn. She'd forgotten to silence the ringer. She froze.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Mark said, his voice suddenly steely, suspicious.

"I'll let it go to voicemail," she said.

"No. Pick up. It's not like there's anyone you can't talk to in front of us, right?"

She slowly took out her phone and said hello, praying it wouldn't be Joel Matthews.

"Lily," Matthews said.

She bit her lip.

"You ready for great news?"

She felt blood on her lip, pressed her finger to it.

"Are you there, Lily?" Matthews asked.

"Just a minute," she sputtered. She announced to the table, "I'll be back soon." Then she stood up and rushed through the restaurant, not daring to glance back.

The moment she got outside, she realized she'd left her purse and her sweater in the restaurant. It was chilly and windy. *Punishment for talking to Matthews behind everyone's backs*, she thought. "Sorry," she told Matthews on the phone. "I can talk now."

"You're going to like this conversation," he said. "My company wants to sign you up. They're really excited about you, Lily."

For a moment, a brief moment, her heart soared. *Yes!* she thought. *They love me! They think I have talent!*

But then her heart sank just as quickly as she thought about Mark.

"Lily?" Matthews said.

"Uh huh."

"Aren't you happy?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she said, knowing that she didn't sound happy at all. She tried to work enthusiasm into her voice. "I'm very flattered. I bet you could really boost my career."

"I'm going to make you a star, Lily, a huge success."

"What about Amber Road, the rest of the band?"

"We've been over that before." He sighed. "Just you, Lily. We want you. You're the one with the amazing voice. Amber Road would be nothing without your vocals."

"And Mark Carrelli's songwriting," Lily told him.

"Your boyfriend's a good songwriter. If we use his songs, he'll be well compensated. Your record deal could be the best thing that ever happens to him."

"With all due respect, Mr. Matthews, I don't think Mark would agree."

"Agree with what?" Mark said.

Lily turned around and gasped. Mark was standing behind her, his face red, his arms crossed over his chest.

She said into the phone, "I'll have to call you back. I'm really grateful, I hope you know that."

"So is that a yes?" Matthews asked her.

"I'll call you as soon as I can." She clicked off the phone.

"What's going on, Lily?" Mark sounded as if he was fighting hard not to yell. "What are you doing behind my back?"

"Oh, Mark." Lily sighed.

"Look, I've known there's been something going on with you for a while. Your brother hinted at stuff, trying to make me jealous. At first, I didn't believe him. I trusted you so

much, Lily.” His eyes were narrowed into slits. “But there are too many suspicious things. That day you said you were sick, and then you weren’t home when I came by. All these hushed phone calls. And your face, the way you look, whenever I talk about Amber Road’s future. I can tell when something’s not right with you.”

Now her face felt red-hot despite the cold, windy weather outside. She was burning with shame. She wanted to turn away, run away, but she knew her shame would follow her even if Mark didn’t.

“What’s going on, Lily?” he demanded.

She dug her fingernails into her palm. How could she ever tell him she was thinking of leaving the band? He would be even more upset than he was now.

He glared at her, his face as red as hers felt. “Would you at least do one thing for me, Lily? Just stop lying to me, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay,” she managed to squeak out. She took a big breath. “You’re not going to like hearing this. I shouldn’t have kept it a secret in the first place.” She finally met his glaring eyes. “I’ve been talking to Joel Matthews, the guy who you met at Waves. He’s a record producer, and he wants me to sign with his label. Solo.”

Mark’s arms, still crossed, clenched his body tight as if fighting off an attack. “How did he even hear about you? Did you call him or something?”

"No," she said. "My brother wrote him, without telling me. He mailed him a CD. I swear I didn't put Aaron up to it."

"As if I can believe anything that comes out of your mouth now," Mark said.

"I'm not lying. Not now," Lily said. "Matthews liked my demo and he called me. He took me to lunch. He had me record a few songs."

"You did all that with him and you kept it all quiet."

"I didn't know if anything would even go through. He just made me the offer tonight. I tried to get him to take the whole band. You probably don't believe that, but I really did. I haven't told Matthews yes or no yet. I'm torn, Mark. I hope you understand."

He shook his head. "I understand that you've been lying to me all this time. That you took advantage of me. That after I gave you your start by putting you in Amber Road and making you lead singer and writing songs for you, you decided to royally screw me by trying to go solo."

"I didn't try to go solo. I was *asked* to go solo. And I haven't even said yes yet."

"Yet," Mark said through gritted teeth.

"Tracie said I should do it. She said she understood, and anyone who didn't understand was selfish," Lily said.

Mark pounded his fist against the stucco wall of the restaurant. "You told Tracie about this? And you didn't bother

to tell me? How many other people have you told? Am I the last to know?"

"No, Mark. I just told her because—"

He put his hand up to silence her. "I've heard enough," he seethed. "Go back to the restaurant. I'll be waiting for the rest of the band near the bus. We're through." He walked away.

Lily leaned against the wall of the restaurant. She couldn't go back in and face the others and their questions, and she couldn't follow Mark to the bus either. She put her hands up to her face and cried silently for the second time that night.

"Lily?" Tracie had come out, carrying Lily's purse and her sweater. "What's wrong? Did you and Mark have a fight?"

She nodded. "That was Joel Matthews on the phone. He gave me the offer. Mark is furious. He . . ." She wiped off the tears from her cheeks, but more rushed down to replace them. "I told Matthews I'd call him back. I have to give him an answer."

"Oh, Lily." Tracie hugged her.

She wept into Tracie's shoulder. "The way Mark was acting tonight . . . he hates me now. Told me we were through." She cried noisily. "So how could I *not* leave the band? I don't even want to be on the same stage with Mark right now. And I'm sure he feels the same about me."

"He just found out about everything. He's probably shocked. He'll calm down, I think," Tracie said.

“I don’t think so. You know how much Amber Road means to him. The band was named after his best friend, and now I’m breaking it up. I don’t see how I can perform with you guys Monday night. Everything’s gotten so complicated and horrible. Tracie, I . . .”

She couldn’t go on. She leaned into Tracie and sobbed.

nineteen

"Thanks for arranging the Alcatraz Island trip," Tracie told Josh. They stood with George by the railing of the boat late Sunday morning, staring at the noisy sea lions in the bay and searching without success for dolphins. "It was really cool to see the old prison. And this boat ride is pretty great too."

Josh shrugged. "I'm glad *someone* had fun today. Everyone else acted so grumpy, I wanted to lock them in one of the jail cells and keep them there until they shaped up."

"Sorry," George said. "For your sake I'll pretend to be happy, even though I'm trying desperately to get over the girl I thought was the love of my life. I can't believe all the time I

wasted e-mailing and calling and texting a girl who smelled like she last bathed in the prior millennium.”

“There you go again,” Josh said. “Complain, complain.”

“You’ll find another love of your life, George.” Tracie patted him on the arm. “You always do.”

“Thanks, Tracie.” He flashed a brief smile. “And Josh, all props to you for driving us over to San Fran. I wanted to see the city, but the idea of driving those hills in that bus—”

Josh shrugged. “Well, I grew up here. I learned to drive stick on those hills. So it’s no biggie.”

“Then you’ve seen Alcatraz before?” Tracie guessed.

“At least five times,” Josh answered. “Every time a relative came to town, we’d do all the touristy stuff,” he explained. “But it was a lot more fun walking around the island with you, Tracie, than with my Aunt Elsie and Uncle Fred.”

“Don’t I feel flattered.” Tracie laughed.

“Though Old Elsie and Fred were much better company than Mark and Lily today. I take it they got in a fight?” Josh asked.

“Obviously a big one,” George said. “I haven’t heard them say two words to each other since dinner last night.”

“And I know Sienna was all bummed that she couldn’t get cell phone reception from the boat or the island. But did she have to make such a big deal out of it?” Josh shook his head.

“I think she had trouble sleeping too,” Tracie said. “She told me the cot in our hotel room is really uncomfortable.”

“Well, I hope everyone gets over themselves before going onstage tomorrow,” Josh said. “Steve Guyda thinks he has a decent shot of getting that record producer to show up.”

George pointed to the bay. “I still don’t see any dolphins, but that sea lion looks like an old blind date of mine.”

Tracie laughed. “I wish I could stand out here longer, but I need to sit,” she said. “My leg’s still healing from the car accident. I probably shouldn’t have done all that walking around Alcatraz today, and yesterday at the Berkeley Blowout.”

“I’ll go with you to find a seat,” Josh offered.

They found a vacant bench on the lower deck of the boat. Tracie looked out the window. The water was sparkling blue. “It’s so pretty here. Last time I was on a boat, I was so messed up. I was drinking. I screamed at Sienna on her birthday. It was awful.”

“Man, Tracie, I can’t imagine you like that,” Josh told her. “It seems like you really have your life together.”

Tracie nodded. “I’m a lot happier now. I’m sober. I’m not mooning over guys all the time like I used to.”

“You’re not?” Josh asked.

“Nope,” Tracie said. “Ever since I decided not to date anyone for a while, things have been a lot easier.”

“Easier, but probably not as much fun,” Josh said.

She shrugged. He was right. But these days, she’d take easy over fun. Fun had gotten her into way too much trouble.

The captain announced that the boat was docking. “Wow,” Josh said, “that ride went fast.”

"Time flies," Tracie said. *When you're having fun*, she added to herself. Ever since meeting Josh, she'd been having fun. In a good way. An easy way. She picked at her thumb-nail. *It's only easy because you're not dating him*, she lectured herself. *Keep it like that.*

Tracie and Josh joined the others at the dock, and Tracie realized that their moods hadn't changed. Mark's teeth were still clenched, Lily looked like she was in mourning, George was mumbling about changing his e-mail address and phone number, and Sienna was ranting about Carter again. "Where the hell is he?" she said. "I can finally make calls on my cell, but he's not picking up."

"Cheer up, everyone," Josh said. "You're supposed to be on vacation. Or at least a working vacation. You sounded great yesterday. Amber Road may even have an incredible future if you stick it out together."

"We won't be sticking it out together, so stop talking about our damn future," Mark said.

"What are you talking about?" Josh asked. "You guys are so good together."

Mark shook his head. "We aren't together. Not really. We're far apart now, moving farther apart every day, and ending up absolutely nowhere."

Josh looked at Tracie with raised eyebrows.

She touched his arm and pulled him aside. "I know you're just trying to be nice," she said, "but today's not a good day to discuss Amber Road's future. Trust me."

"Maybe I should call Steve Guyda. Let him know there's trouble with the band. I'm supposed to be working for him. Part of my job is keeping an eye on you guys."

Tracie shook her head. "Please don't call Guyda. He wouldn't be able to help at this point. And, anyway, he'll be here tomorrow night for our big show."

Josh sighed. "Okay, I'll wait." He returned to the group on the dock. "What should we do next?" he asked. "Grab some shrimp cocktail and sourdough bread at Fisherman's Wharf? Look at all the fancy stores in Union Square full of stuff I can't afford? Take a walk around Golden Gate Park?"

"Shopping, for sure," Lily said. "I need a few new outfits. Well, I don't absolutely need them, but I'd love to buy clothes anyway. And I heard the Macy's at Union Square is eight stories tall!"

"Really?" Sienna asked. "I think the biggest department store in So. Cal. is three stories. Let's shop!"

"Shopping. Ugh," George said.

"There's no way I'm going shopping," Mark said, "especially with Lily."

Sienna ignored him. "I vote for Union Square. I could totally use some retail therapy."

Josh turned to Tracie. "What about you?"

"I'm sorry," she told him. "It all sounds good, but my leg is really hurting now. I don't think I can walk around anywhere."

"I have a solution," Josh said. "George and Mark, you can walk over to Fisherman's Wharf from here. It's just a couple blocks down. I'll drop off Sienna and Lily at Union Square, so you two can shop 'til you drop. Then I'll take you out to lunch, Tracie, so you can rest your leg. Tracie and I can pick everyone up in a few hours."

They all agreed to Josh's plan. Tracie was secretly grateful to get away from her miserable bandmates.

Twenty minutes later, Tracie and Josh entered San Francisco's Chinatown. "It's huge," she said as they drove beneath the green-roofed gate on Grant Street.

"Huge and crazy. I love it," Josh said.

The area bustled with cars on the street and people on the sidewalks. The storefronts were colorful, many in red and white, with signs in Chinese and English. They passed fruit stands and newsstands and a lot of souvenir shops and restaurants.

"There's no way I'll be able to find street parking for this bus," Josh said.

"I can walk a few blocks to the restaurant," Tracie told him. "Now that I've rested it a little, my leg doesn't hurt that bad."

He drove the bus into an expensive parking lot. "For what we're paying for parking, the food better be good," Tracie said.

"I'm paying for parking. And lunch too," Josh said. "The food *is* good. And I should know. In case you haven't noticed, I'm kind of a foodie."

"I noticed," she said.

"I've probably been to eight different dim sum places in this city. I'm taking you to my favorite one."

"I haven't been to any, in any city," Tracie said. "But I'm always up for adventure."

"Unless you count dating as an adventure," Josh said.

Tracie didn't respond.

They left the bus and walked out of the parking lot and onto the sidewalk. It was jammed with people. "What's everyone rushing around for on a Sunday?" Tracie said.

Josh took her hand. "Just stay close to me."

Tracie told herself she had to hold Josh's hand to be safe. *It's a friendly gesture, that's all.* But then why did she feel so flushed? And how long had she been grinning?

They dropped their hands when they arrived at the restaurant. Tracie was sorry they'd gotten there so quickly.

The place was very large, filled with round tables on two floors and people pushing metal carts around the room, stopping at most of the tables along the way. There weren't many other Caucasians there. "It's kind of weird to be the minority for a change," Tracie told Josh.

They followed the hostess to a table on the first floor. "No menus?" Tracie asked after they sat down and the hostess left.

Josh pointed to a nearby cart. "Those carts are full of food. You pick what you want and they hand it to you. They keep track of what you take by stamping your card." He pointed to a paper in the middle of their table.

A waiter pushed a cart to their table. "Har gau?" he asked.

"Shrimp dumplings," Josh translated for Tracie. "They're really good."

Tracie nodded.

"Yes, we'll take them."

They *were* good. They also picked out cha siu bau, which were white chewy buns filled with barbequed pork; spring rolls; shumai, which were fried dumplings; and crispy fried squid, which tasted a lot better than it sounded. They drank it all down with black tea.

Josh suggested green tea ice cream for dessert. But Tracie said if she ate one more thing she'd explode. "I'll just blow up, right here, in the restaurant. It could be embarrassing for you."

Josh laughed.

"No, really. I've never eaten such a huge meal before. But it was all so delicious. I had to try everything, right? And some things I had to eat two of, or three of, or four of." She giggled.

"You're adorable, you know that?" Josh said.

She looked down at the table.

"Tracie, I hope you're aware that I have a major crush on you."

She kept staring down. She hadn't known he had a crush on her, major or otherwise. Not for sure, anyway.

"A bad crush. It started the minute I saw you Friday morning," Josh said. "Then when we started talking and I realized

your personality was even better than your looks, I could barely believe my luck.”

She felt a smile taking over her face. *Flattery will get you everywhere*, she thought.

“But the topper was hearing you onstage and being blown away by your guitar-playing and the way you got into the music. I’m crazy about you, Tracie.”

She looked up, at his shiny eyes and boyish freckles and warm smile. She felt like reaching across the table and kissing him then and there.

But instead she looked away. They had known each other only a few days. And, more important, she was trying to find herself, to grow as an individual on her own.

“Tracie? Do you have any feelings for me?” Josh asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t. I mean, I can’t. I mean, no.”

“What does that mean exactly?” he asked.

“It means, I want to be on my own for a while, that’s all. I just came off a relationship. It’s too early to think about guys right now.” She said it, but the truth was she did think about guys. Right now. Specifically, she thought about Josh. A lot.

“I could wait for you,” he said.

She shook her head again. “I’m starting college in a few months. Remember I said I’m going to Yale? That’s three thousand miles away from your school, San Diego State.”

“But only eighty miles away from where I’ll be in a few months.”

She stared at him. "What?"

"I like San Diego State all right, but I'm really there for financial reasons. In August I'll transfer to NYU. It's expensive, but it'll put me in debt for only two years."

"That sounds good," Tracie said.

"Very good, since New York City is only seventy-nine point six miles from New Haven, Connecticut." He smiled. "I looked up the distance between NYU and Yale on George's laptop yesterday."

"Oh, Josh. That's sweet. And I like you, I really do." She sighed. "But I'm just not ready to start dating anyone. I might not even be ready by the time college rolls around."

"But, Tracie . . ."

"No. It won't work. It's too soon." She looked away again. "We'd better get out of here and pick up the others."

twenty

"This Macy's is huge," Lily said as they strolled by the first of endless cosmetic counters.

"Eight whole floors," Sienna said. "It makes the Macy's in San Diego seem shrimpy." Sienna could make small talk just as well as Lily could.

They were stuck with each other. If Sienna had known it would be just the two of them, she never would have said she wanted to go shopping. She had always tolerated Lily. But there was a difference between tolerating her and being friends with her. Sienna couldn't even recall ever being alone with Lily. But now here they were, inside Macy's in San Francisco,

expected to hang out together for two and a half hours until Josh picked them up.

“Should we go to the next floor?” Lily asked as they neared the escalator.

Sienna shrugged. “You looking for anything in particular?”

“Just a new life.” Lily stepped onto the escalator to the second floor.

Maybe they would go beyond small talk this morning, Sienna thought. “I wonder what floor sells new lives. I could use one myself, or at least a simpler life,” Sienna said. “If Carter and I weren’t both so crazy-busy, maybe we’d even be able to reach each other on the phone once in a while.”

“Be careful what you wish for. Mark and I are spending, like, almost all our time together, and it’s only making things worse between us.” Lily got off the escalator and headed toward the shoe department.

Sienna followed her. “I wasn’t going to pry. But since you brought it up . . . Lily, what happened between you and Mark? You guys were always so into each other, and now you’re not even speaking.”

Lily sighed. “Tracie didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what? She didn’t say anything. Honest.” Sienna picked up a bright red kickass boot, then decided she wouldn’t have the nerve to wear it and returned it to the little table. “You don’t have to tell me what’s going on. I don’t want to be all nosy,” she said.

“Well, you’ll know soon enough. I should have told people a lot sooner. Especially Mark.” Lily snatched up the boot. “If you’re not going to try this on, I want to. These boots would be so cute with my black velvet minidress.”

“Go for it,” Sienna said. “It screams ‘Lily!’ Personally, I’m more of a sensible-black-pumps kind of girl. So what’s up with you and Mark?”

Lily stared at the boot, as if she didn’t want to meet Sienna’s eyes. “I got an offer from a record producer—Joel Matthews—to go solo.” She paused, still staring at the boot. “He doesn’t want to sign the whole band. Just me. I’m sorry.”

Sienna was grateful now that Lily wasn’t looking at her. She bet her eyes were bulging and she knew her mouth had dropped open. She had never expected anything like this. Amber Road had been through rough times, but she had always thought they were a tight group. She closed her mouth, then closed her eyes too.

“I know you think I’m screwing you, that I’m an ungrateful bitch,” Lily said.

Sienna felt Lily’s gaze on her. She shook her head. “No, actually.” She opened her eyes and met Lily’s. They looked weary and red-tinged as if she’d barely slept last night, or maybe she’d been crying.

“After all Mark’s done for me,” Lily said, “and knowing how devoted he is to Amber Road. To leave now would be so—”

Sienna cut her off. "So natural. Any one of us would leave the band if we got an offer like that," she said. "A big-name record producer wants to take you on? Instead of asking us for our opinions first, you should be asking him, 'Where do I sign?'"

"Oh, Sienna. You're being so generous about this," Lily said. "And I've been acting like I'm Amber Road's only singer. You have a great voice. You and Mark can handle all the songs."

"We can handle them, but we can't match your incredible voice," Sienna said. "Believe me, you leaving would be a big loss to Amber Road. Not just to Mark, but to all of us. You have such a great opportunity, though. You're taking it, right?"

Lily shrugged. "I told Joel Matthews I'd let him know tomorrow. Mark is furious with me."

"Is that why you were so upset last night in our hotel room?" Sienna asked.

"Sort of. I hadn't heard definitely from Joel then—he called when we were eating dinner. But I knew he wanted to sign me, and I was already stressing about telling Mark—and I felt so guilty."

Sienna touched Lily's shoulder. "And now I feel guilty about yelling at you."

"Don't. I was hogging the bathroom. With three girls sharing one bathroom, I'm surprised we haven't murdered each other by now."

Sienna grinned. "Try on those boots to cheer yourself up. Hell, you should buy them to celebrate the offer from the record producer."

"I'd love to. But you should get some new shoes too." Lily smiled. "Why don't you look for some heels higher than an inch?"

"No thanks. I'll live vicariously through you," Sienna joked.

Lily ended up buying the red boots and Sienna bought a practical pair of flats.

Then they went to the huge Junior department together. When Lily came out of the dressing room wearing a see-through dress, Sienna held her tongue and didn't mention that the dress needed a slip or at least a bra. Later, she pretended not to notice Lily's frown as she modeled a gray knee-length skirt.

After they'd hit all eight floors of Macy's, and Sienna's feet were starting to throb, they had lunch about a block away at an overpriced sandwich shop—*shoppe*, as it was called. Sienna ordered a twelve-dollar roast beef sandwich while Lily ordered some foofoo gouda cheese–avocado thing.

"You know what?" Sienna said with a smile. "I always thought you were so confident, the way you dressed to show off your body, and your calm attitude while everyone else was in panic mode. But I've realized this weekend that you're just as neurotic as the rest of us. You're just better at hiding it."

Lily nodded. "All those moves I've made—different cities and countries, being the new girl in school all the time. They

taught me to hide my nerves. And it's not like if I acted upset, I'd get a bunch of sympathy from my parents. I haven't seen my dad in months. He's a cinematographer and he's always shooting films in weird locations. And my mom . . . Well, she's not home all that much either."

"I'm sorry," Sienna said.

"Thanks." Lily shrugged. "Enough about my melodrama. Let's just enjoy our twelve-dollar sandwiches and our hang time in San Francisco."

And they did.

By the time Josh picked them up, they were smiling and laughing as if they'd been friends forever.

Sienna tried calling Carter again as soon as they got back on the bus, only to find that her cell phone battery was dead. She borrowed Tracie's phone, but had to leave another message for him. "I swear I'm giving up on guys," Sienna said after she hung up. "They're just too much of a hassle."

"Hear, hear," Lily muttered.

"You can be in my no-dating club," Tracie said.

Mark raised his hand. "I'll join too."

"I should be club president," George said.

"And I'll stand outside protesting," Josh joked as he parked the bus.

After everyone got out and headed toward the hotel, Sienna took Mark aside and said, "I need to talk to you in private."

"Sure," he said. He pointed down the street. "Starbucks?"

"That would be great," she told him.

They didn't exactly have privacy there though. Tracie and Josh were already in line, so busy laughing and chattering that Sienna didn't think they'd even notice her and Mark.

Sienna and Mark got drinks, then found a table as far from Tracie and Josh as they could. "What's up?" Mark said. "Sorry I've been all distant today. There's a lot on my mind."

"I know what's on your mind," Sienna said.

Mark raised his eyebrows.

"Lily told me. She was really upset, believe it or not."

Mark tightened his grip on his coffee cup. "*She's* upset? We're the ones who should be upset. She wants to ditch us, just when we're really starting to go places."

"Mark," Sienna said. "Lily's got more talent than anyone in Amber Road. You know that."

"Everyone in the band is good. Sienna, I can't believe you of all people—"

"Funny hearing me say that, huh? We both know how mad I got when you made Lily lead singer instead of me. And I agree we all have talent." She sipped her latte. "But Lily has an exceptional voice. The more I listened to her sing the last few months, the more I realized you made the right decision. I'm a good singer, but Lily's phenomenal. I don't want to hold her back, and you shouldn't either. Lily should be applauded for getting a record deal, not treated as if she did something bad."

Mark shook his head. "Easy for you to say. Lily's my girlfriend."

"Oh, Mark. She's not leaving *you*—just the band," Sienna said.

He kept shaking his head. "Just the band that means everything to me. *My* band. I formed Amber Road. I named it after my best friend."

Sienna put her hand on Mark's arm. "Do you think if Amber were alive, she'd want to hold Lily back?"

He didn't answer.

"I never knew Amber, but I hear the way you talk about her. I feel like I know the type of person she was. Good. Generous. Looking out for you and probably everyone else in her life. That's what your friends do, the same as you do for them."

"Amber *was* good and generous," Mark said.

"I think Amber would be proud of Lily. And proud of you for recognizing Lily's talent, pushing her to rehearse, and sing with feeling, and grab any brass rings that happen to come her way. And now that a brass ring has been dangled in front of her, I bet Amber would want you to tell Lily that you love her whether she's in your band or not, that you want only the best for her."

Mark nodded. "I sure know how to pick them, don't I?"

"You knew right away Lily had talent," Sienna said.

"That's not what I meant." He stared at her with his warm eyes. "I meant I know how to pick girls: Amber, Lily, you." He took a breath. "But how can I let Lily go?"

"The real question is how can you *not* let Lily go."

Mark sighed. "What if we go on another tour? I can't imagine not being with my girlfriend while we're gone."

"Tell me about it," Sienna said. "I miss Carter so much. You just have to deal."

"And what if Lily goes on tour? I'd go crazy without her."

"If your relationship can't handle time apart from each other, you have to wonder how strong it was in the first place," Sienna said. "I happen to think it's very strong."

Mark sipped his coffee. "It is strong. I should act strong too." He gave her a thin smile. "Sienna, you really know how to kick my ass."

"Yeah, I'm pretty good at it, if I do say so myself."

"You're great at it. And you're right," he said. "As usual."

"Don't you mean as always?"

"Don't press your luck," he joked. "Listen. Do you mind if I rush out of here? I need to find Lily and tell her what an idiot I've been. And I want to listen in while she calls Joel Matthews and accepts the record deal, so I can be the first to congratulate her."

Sienna smiled back at him. "I can't believe I'm about to say this now. But, Mark, after you leave Starbucks, I'm going over to Tracie's table." She pointed at Tracie and Josh, sitting on the other side of the cafe. "We've all got that party at Gabriel's house tonight, and we'll want to get some dinner first, but we don't have to get ready until six or so. I'm going to tell Tracie to keep away from our hotel room for a few hours.

You and Lily can be alone in there, and you can make up in the best way you know how. Okay?”

“What would I ever do without you, Sienna?” He winked at her. “Now don’t you be getting any solo deals and leaving the band, okay?”

“I’ll try not to.” She laughed. “I’ll see you at . . .” She looked at her watch. “At six P.M. That should give you time for a teary talk with Lily, the call to Joel Matthews, the congratulatory hug, whatever follows that”—she raised her eyebrows—“and cuddling afterward.”

He laughed so hard he choked on his coffee. “Thanks, Sienna.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now get out of here already,” she said. “I have to tell Tracie about the plan so she doesn’t barge in on you guys in the hotel room. Though it looks like she and Josh might sit at Starbucks giggling and flirting all day and night.”

Mark stood up and rushed toward the exit.

twenty-one

Outside, the clouds were covering the sun. Lily sat by herself in the lobby of the hotel, trying not to think about Mark. Things had been so awful since their fight the night before.

Instead, she focused on the singer standing on a platform on the other side of the lobby. Steve Guyda hadn't been kidding when he said the Berkeley Blowout would use every available performance space in Berkeley. The singer was Adriana, performing a few teaser songs to promote her show tonight and her new top-forty CD. The hotel lobby was jammed with her fans, and Lily watched as they applauded wildly. A few of them even waved signs that read, *WE LOVE YOU, ADRIANA!*

Lily believed, frankly, that she was a better singer. Adriana performed the same Céline Dion song Lily had used at the restaurant for her audition with Joel Matthews. Lily thought while Adriana's version was good, it was not as strong or as pretty as her rendering. *That could be me soon*, Lily thought. Or would she just be miserable, missing Mark, and wishing she had stayed in Amber Road? She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. She still didn't know what she was going to tell Joel Matthews tomorrow.

"Lily," Mark said.

She turned around. Mark's face wasn't all clenched like it had been since their argument. Maybe he wasn't so angry anymore. Or maybe he was just hiding it really well.

"You want to tell me again what a horrible person I am? Is that why you're here?" she asked him.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she put her hand up. "Really, Mark, I don't want to hear it. I know you feel hurt, and I should have told you about what was going on a lot sooner, but I don't think arguing about it again is going to help either of us."

"I came over here to tell you I'm sorry," Mark said.

"You did?"

He nodded.

How she'd longed to hear those words from him! She wanted to sink into his arms, feel his strong, warm body again. She had missed that so much.

But Lily held back. Last night he was furious at her. He couldn't have completely changed overnight. So what did he mean just now when he said he was sorry? Sorry that she had the nerve to think of leaving Amber Road?

"I'm sorry for being such a jerk," he said.

"Oh." Her mouth wanted to form a smile. She bit her lip to stop it.

"Can we find a quieter place for me to grovel for your forgiveness?" he asked.

Her mouth won.

"My God, Lily, I love your smile."

"Where should we go?" Lily asked. "There's a Starbucks across the street."

"Tracie and Sienna are there. Can we talk in your room?"

She tensed up. "Is this 'talk' to try to convince me to stay with Amber Road?"

"Just the opposite." He took her hand and led her away from Adriana and the crowd listening to her. "You're a lot better than Adriana, you know that? You should have your own fans cheering you on. Just you, Lily, solo. You deserve it."

"What made you change your mind?" she asked him.

"Well, I'm not a total jerk. I probably would have come around eventually. But your friend Sienna sped up the process. She spent a half hour in Starbucks with me, telling me what a moron I was." He stopped at the elevator. "And I tried to imagine what Amber would have thought about all

this. She would have told me to let you go solo. She would have wished you well.”

They stepped into the elevator and he pushed the button for her floor. Then she did sink into his arms.

She tried to kiss him, but he said, “No. Wait. Call Joel Matthews first. I want to see you give him the good news. Then we can really celebrate.”

Lily shook her head. “I have until tomorrow to call him. I need more time to think about it.”

“What’s to think about? It’s an amazing opportunity,” Mark told her as the elevator stopped at her floor and they walked arm-in-arm toward the hotel room. “Lily, you can’t walk away from this. You can’t turn down Joel Matthews.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said at the door to her room. “You want to come in? Just for a few minutes. I’m sure Tracie and Sienna will be back soon. We all have to get ready for Gabriel’s party.”

“Not until six o’clock.” Mark grinned. “They promised.”

Lily grinned back at him. “We can do a lot in two hours,” she said, right before Mark’s open mouth covered hers.

When Lily’s cell phone rang about an hour later, she was lying on the hotel’s lumpy double bed, playing with the hair on Mark’s chest. She had no desire to waste their time alone on a phone call. But she thought she’d better see who it was. Maybe it was Sienna or Tracie, needing to get into the hotel room. She took her phone off the nightstand and

checked. "It's my mom," she told Mark. "She hardly ever calls."

"Answer it, Lily," Mark said.

"Hi," she said into the phone. "You still in San Francisco?"

"Yes. Busy, busy, busy," her mom said cheerily. "My feet are killing me. I spent all afternoon today shopping in Union Square."

"I was there too today," Lily said.

"Oh, too bad. If I'd known, I would have met you."

"But I left a message for you that I was going to Macy's. If you had called me back . . ."

Next to her, Mark kissed her forehead. She snuggled in even closer to him.

"My phone must be acting up," her mother said. "I didn't get your message."

Yeah, right, Lily thought.

"Listen," her mother said. "A call did manage to get through to me today. A call about you, from Joel Matthews. He said he offered you a record deal. I'm so excited! Why didn't you tell me, Lily?"

She felt her body stiffen. Mark whispered, "Everything okay?"

"Joel said you told him you weren't sure about accepting the offer," her mother continued. "You were just playing him, right? Trying to negotiate the best deal with him?"

"No, Mom. I still haven't decided whether I want to go solo."

“Lily, don’t be silly. Do you realize who Joel Matthews is? He’s with a huge label.” She softened her tone. “Trust me, I know the entertainment business. Joel Matthews and L.A. Records can make you famous. It’s such a fantastic opportunity for you. You have to accept the offer.”

Her mother sounded so excited. Maybe she really did care about her. She might just be bad about showing it. “So you think I have talent?” Lily asked.

“Of course. You were great the other night.”

“You only heard me sing two songs.” *One and a half, actually*, she thought.

“I heard enough to recognize that you have what it takes. Sorry I didn’t stay very long. I had to go to a charity dinner. You got my message, right?” She didn’t wait for a response. “Believe me, sweetheart, I would rather have listened to you sing. It cost me five hundred dollars that night to schmooze and show off my freshly Botoxed face to people in the industry. You have no idea how hard I work to keep myself in the limelight.”

“You poor thing,” Lily said sarcastically.

“That’s why it kills me to think that after all I’ve done to get where I am, my own daughter would turn down something handed to her on a silver platter,” her mother said.

“You all right?” Mark whispered.

Lily realized she’d been frowning. “I’m fine,” she mouthed to Mark.

“Joel Matthews told me they have a big promo budget for you,” her mother said. “They’re going to send you around the

country to meet radio station producers. They'll have ads for your first CD. You'll get a press tour. Fame, money, you can have it all."

"That does sound good," Lily said, trying to fake enthusiasm in her voice.

"It sounds great! Don't worry. All you'll have to do is sing and look pretty. I'll take care of all the business stuff. You'll need someone who knows the ins and outs of the entertainment biz. And I'll go on the press tour with you too. Won't that be nice?"

"Yeah, Mom. It would." Maybe they'd finally be like a real mother and daughter and spend time together. Aaron could come on tour too and they'd be like a real family.

"Joel and I are still negotiating my percentage."

"Your *what*?" Lily asked.

"I get paid a percentage of what you make. That's standard in the industry, sweetheart. It's to make sure managers are looking out for their clients' best interests," her mother explained. "Not that you'd have to worry about that with me, of course. Anyway, all the big music stars have managers. You need one ASAP."

"You think I'll be a big star?"

"Of course I do, especially with me managing you." She said it as if it was a given—that Lily would be a big star and that her mother would manage her. "Joel's already faxed me the contract to look at. We're negotiating a few details, but all

the main terms are set. I'll fax you over the contract to sign just as soon as we've worked it all out."

"But, Mom, I haven't even agreed to sign with him."

"Don't be stupid, Lily! Of course you'll sign with him. Who do you think you are? Your father and I have been supporting you and your lazy brother for the last eighteen years, in high style. You need to get over yourself and get to work."

"So this is about you wanting me to bring home a paycheck?" Lily asked.

"No." Her mother took a deep breath. "I didn't mean to lose it just now. I was just really excited about being able to manage your career. And of course I'm excited for you too," she added as if it were an afterthought. "Oh, sweetheart, you don't know what it's like being a forty-year-old actress. My career is dying a slow death. Now I have a chance to be a mover and shaker in the music industry."

"Mom, I've got to go," Lily said.

"All right, Lily. But call Joel right away. Tell him you're thrilled by his offer, that you should have accepted on the spot before. Tell him *of course* you want to do it."

Lily wiped a tear from her eye.

"Or do you want me to call Joel back myself?"

"No, Mom." Tears silently streaked her face.

Mark kissed her cheek, then whispered, "Hang up the phone. You don't need this."

"I'll handle everything. Don't worry," Lily told her mother.

"That's terrific, sweetheart. Call me back as soon as you talk to Joel again."

"I will," Lily lied. She clicked off the phone.

"I'm sorry, Lily," Mark murmured.

"She wants to be my manager. It's supposed to be this big career move for her," Lily said.

"Not a good move for you, though," Mark said.

"Even if I did agree to Joel Matthews's offer, why would I let her manage my career?" Lily's voice was shaky and weak, but she continued. "She can't even manage to come home when she says she'll come home or return my calls half the time. She can't even manage to be a decent mother."

She put her head on Mark's chest. "I had this stupid fantasy that my mother would be in her car and hear me singing over the car radio and be all proud of me," Lily said. "But now I know that fantasy was all wrong. If my mother ever heard my song on the radio, she probably wouldn't even notice. If she did, she wouldn't be proud of me. She'd be too busy trying to figure out how to squeeze money out of me."

"She's not good enough for you," Mark said.

"She's not. I realize that now. She's not good enough for Aaron either. He pretends not to care about her, but I see him with all these girls, grasping for the love and attention he doesn't get from our mother. It's sad."

"Your brother probably doesn't even understand what he's doing," Mark said.

“I know. I didn’t understand too much about our mother until just now. Everything at home’s been so messed up for so long.” She bit her lip. “Oh, Mark! Thank God for you. Thank God you’re here.”

He held her tight and stroked her hair and told her he loved her again and again.

twenty-two

Josh had to drive the bus up a winding road in the Berkeley Hills in order to get the band to Gabriel's party. At least Gabriel's house was easy to find. They just followed the sound of the blaring hip-hop music.

"Nice place," Sienna said as they walked to the front door. Much of the house was glass, probably to take advantage of the hilltop view. The rest was old-fashioned red brick and dark wood, a welcome change from all the stucco tract homes back in San Diego. Sienna lifted the brass knocker on the enormous wooden front door.

Shortly after the knocker thudded loudly, Gabriel opened the door. He wore a Berkeley Blowout sweatshirt, dark

jeans, and sneakers, and he held a plastic cup half-full of beer.

“I see you got all dressed up for your party,” George joked.

Gabriel laughed. “Hey, these are my best jeans.” Sienna thought he looked fantastic, even casually dressed.

He smiled broadly at her. “Sienna! So glad you’re here! Come on in,” he said.

“What are the rest of us? Chopped liver?” George asked as they walked into the house.

“I’m glad you came too, George,” Gabriel said, “but you have to admit you’re nowhere near as cute as Sienna.”

“Uh, thank you, I guess,” Sienna said.

Gabe headed away from the front door. “Let me get you a drink.”

“All of us, or just the cute members of the band?” George asked.

“All of you. Come with me.” He kept walking.

Sienna and her friends followed him. The inside of the house was pretty too, with bright Spanish floor tiles and fancy arches separating the rooms, and wooden ceiling beams high over their heads. “You’re lucky to live here,” Sienna told Gabriel.

“I know. It belongs to my bud Shawn’s parents. He and Juwan and I pay rent, which makes it sort of affordable. We all invited friends tonight, so it’s crowded.”

“That’s an understatement,” Mark said as they squeezed through throngs of party guests.

"We have beer out back and margaritas in the kitchen," Gabriel said. "What's your poison?"

Sienna glanced at Tracie. Maybe she shouldn't be here, around all this alcohol.

But Tracie said, "You have water or soda or something?"

"Of course. In the kitchen," Gabriel said.

"No alcohol for me," Josh said. "I'm the designated driver. It's hard enough to drive that horrible old bus when I'm sober. Plus, I want to keep Tracie company."

"Thanks." Tracie smiled at him, and so did Sienna.

Sienna suddenly smelled something overly sweet. She looked around and found the source—a girl who smelled as if she'd just swum laps in a vat of perfume.

The girl approached the group and tapped George on the shoulder. "I saw you play yesterday. You're good. I'm a drummer too, for the band Corner Pocket. You want to dance?" She pointed to the next room, which had dark hardwood floors and no furniture and about eight people dancing to hip-hop music.

"Yeah, let's boogie." George sniffed. "But what's that smell?" he said as he followed her to the other room.

Mark and Lily decided to dance too. Tracie and Josh went into the kitchen. That left Sienna and Gabriel alone together.

"You really do look great tonight," Gabriel told her. "Not that you haven't looked great every day this weekend."

She turned away and murmured, "Thanks."

“Are you seeing anyone?” he asked. “You mentioned a ‘guy back home’ before.”

She hesitated. She was seeing Carter, supposedly. But they hadn’t spoken since Friday. And things had been tense the last time they’d been together. Finally, she said, “I’m kind of seeing someone.”

“*Kind of* doesn’t sound like much,” Gabriel said. “You want to come outside with me? There’s a great view from the backyard.”

Sienna nodded, and they made their way through the crowd. She didn’t object when Gabriel took her hand. She told herself that it didn’t mean anything, that he was just helping her navigate through the mass of partygoers.

Except that he kept holding her hand after they got outside, away from the masses and everyone else. Sienna told herself that it was no big deal, that it was just a friendly gesture.

“The best thing about this house is the view,” Gabriel said.

She peered down. It *was* nice. They were on top of a canyon, with hundreds of pretty lights below.

“We’re out in the country. We see deer all the time here,” Gabriel said, “and squirrels, rabbits, blue jays, hummingbirds. I like to have my coffee out here in the morning and feed the birds.” He winced. “That sounds dorky, doesn’t it?”

“I think it’s sweet,” Sienna said. “Thanks for inviting us to your party. Your house is so cool.”

"I'm glad we got to hang out together this weekend." He laughed. "Though I doubt anyone's happier about that than my parents."

"What?" Sienna asked.

He shrugged. "They're old school. They want me to marry a black woman, not that I'm anywhere near ready to marry anyone right now. And they say you come from a nice family. They say that *repeatedly*."

"That's just what my mom said about you. I think my parents are worried because the only two guys I've had serious relationships with are white."

Gabriel shrugged. "Color doesn't matter to me. Besides, the last people I'd let choose my girlfriend would be my parents."

"Ditto," Sienna said.

"But, still," Gabriel said. "There is something nice about being with you."

"Something nice? Well, I'm glad you could find one nice thing about me," she teased.

"Yeah. You have nice eyebrows. That's about it," Gabriel joked.

"Eyebrows. That's two nice things." Sienna laughed. "You're too generous with your praise."

"And your chin is okay too." He put his finger on it. "And I guess I like your cheeks." He moved his hand up and stroked her cheek. "Both of them. So that's five nice things." He put his other palm on her other cheek, then moved his face toward hers. He was going to kiss her.

"I can't." She stepped back. "I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have led you on. I don't just *kind of* have a boyfriend. I *do* have one. His name is Carter. Carter Branham. We haven't been getting along that great lately, but I don't want to fool around on him. You're a nice guy, a terrific guy, really. But you're not Carter. If things were different . . ."

"Okay, I get it." Gabriel sighed.

"I'm sorry. I think I was flirting with you," Sienna said.

"No. I shouldn't have been so forward with you. Or maybe I should have listened to my parents when I was in San Diego and gone to church and asked you out then. Maybe that's a message from God." They both smiled. "We can be friends, right, Sienna?" he asked her.

"Of course," she said.

"And you'll call me if you and your more-than-a-kind-of boyfriend ever break up?" he asked.

"Definitely."

"Like a second afterwards," Gabriel said. "I don't want to lose my chance with you."

"I'll call. I promise. But don't wait for me." She shrugged.

"This guy and I, well, we're pretty in love."

"Pretty? Kind of?" he asked, teasingly.

"We are. Definitely. Carter and I are definitely in love."

twenty-three

The music was so loud that Tracie and Josh had to shout in order to hear each other on the dance floor. That was okay with Tracie. With a few inches of space between them now and without the opportunity to talk to each other, things were safer.

Neither of them was a very good dancer. But Tracie enjoyed moving her body in a decent rhythm to the music and getting some exercise, and it was fun to try to match her moves to Josh's.

They'd been dancing for about twenty minutes when her leg started to ache.

"You're wincing!" Josh shouted over the music. "Is it your leg or my dancing?"

She laughed. "My leg. I need a rest."

"What? I can't hear you! Why don't we take a break?" he shouted.

"Good idea!" she yelled.

They left the dance floor and collected their water bottles from the side of the room. Then they walked through Gabriel's living room, only to find that every sofa and chair was taken.

Josh suggested going outside, so Tracie followed him out the sliding glass door. There wasn't anywhere to sit there either. They leaned against a tree near a large hammock on the back patio. A couple was on the hammock with their arms crossed, arguing about something. "Just wait a minute or two," Josh whispered to Tracie.

Sure enough, the girl soon hopped off the hammock and ran into the house. The guy followed her.

Tracie and Josh rushed to claim the hammock for themselves. "Good timing," Josh said.

"Perfect," Tracie said.

He put his arm around her, but she wriggled out of his embrace.

"I won't do that again. I promise," Josh said. "Sorry."

"We're supposed to be friends, that's all," Tracie said.

"Friends. Right." Josh nodded. "I'm trying to respect your feelings, Tracie, really. But here we are at this beautiful house

in the hills, just the two of us on a hammock under a starry night sky. With you looking so sweet just to make things worse for me. And that crush I mentioned before?" He sighed. "It's gotten bigger."

"Oh, Josh, I'm sorry." She looked away. "You know, this party tonight is the first one I've been to in a long time where I haven't gotten drunk. Isn't that pathetic?"

"It's not," Josh said. "Because you're not drinking tonight. So it's great."

"You don't know how messed up I was before," she told him.

"I wish I had known you then. I would have taken care of you."

She wanted to snuggle against him. Instead, she remained where she was, gripping the edge of the hammock. "I let people take care of me before," she said. "But not anymore. Now I'm finally learning to take care of myself."

"It's good that you're more independent, Tracie," he said. "But everyone needs help from their friends sometimes."

"I'm glad you're my friend," Tracie told him.

Josh raised his water bottle. "A toast to friendship."

"To us," Tracie said. "Friends."

They clinked bottles. "With the hope of something more," Josh said.

twenty-four

When her cell phone rang, Sienna was in Gabriel's backyard, eating too many potato chips and talking to George and a couple of Berkeley grad students. She prayed it wasn't Tracie's mother, who probably would freak once she heard the party noises in the background.

No! It was Carter, finally! "Hi!" she said, moving away from the group gathered around the chips, and feeling extremely relieved she hadn't kissed Gabriel.

"Sienna, it's good to hear your voice," Carter said. "Where are you?"

"I'm in Berkeley, silly, where I'm supposed to be," she told him.

"No. You're supposed to be in my arms," he said.

She sighed. "I wish."

"Maybe your wish will come true," he said.

"Huh?"

"Turn around," Carter said.

She did. And there he was, standing just a few yards away from her, his eyes even shinier than she'd remembered, his mischievous grin lighting up his face.

"You—!" She hurled herself into his open arms.

Carter held her tight while she stroked his thick hair and explored his mouth as if it were an exotic foreign country she hadn't visited in years.

They kissed for a very long time. Finally, they came up for air and Carter said, "That kiss, and the expression on your face when you saw me, were worth the eight-hour drive."

"I missed you so much." Sienna clung to him. "It was awful not even being able to talk to you on the phone for three days."

"I'm sorry," Carter said. "Mark's the only person who knew I was going to do this. I didn't answer my phone today, because I was worried I'd blow the surprise or you'd somehow figure out I was coming."

She noticed Gabriel standing by the chips and frowning as he stared at her in Carter's arms. "Can we leave the party now?" she asked Carter. "I'm dying to be alone with you."

"Let's go," he said.

She told George she had a ride back to the hotel and thanked Gabriel for the party. Then she and Carter walked hand-in-hand through the backyard and the house and out the front door.

They stopped to kiss on the way to Carter's Prius, then kissed again in the car. "I can't believe you're here," she told him.

"Best decision of my life." He drove down the steep hill. "I'll be here until Tuesday. I can take you back to San Diego, unless you want to ride in the bus with the rest of the band."

"Hmm. That's a hard one." She pretended to think about it. "Sit in the old, slow, crowded, un-air-conditioned bus, or ride with my wonderful boyfriend, just the two of us?"

They both laughed, mostly just from the joy of being together. "So I guess I'll sleep on the rug in the guys' hotel room, if they'll let me," Carter said. "It'll be crowded in there, but it's only for two nights."

"You're a trouper," Sienna said.

He shrugged. "Or I could stay at the Kingston. I don't know if you've heard of it, but it's a gorgeous old hotel near the border of Berkeley and Oakland."

"That sounds great, but impossible. You'll have to sleep in the guys' hotel room. You won't be able to get a room anywhere else," Sienna explained. "Because of this music festival, everything was totally booked when we arrived."

"I booked the Kingston a few hours after you told me you were coming here."

She hit his arm playfully. "You sly dog."

"Care to join me for a night of lovemaking? Or would you rather share the room with Lily and Tracie?" He grinned.

"I think you should take me back to my hotel," she said.

Carter's grin disappeared. "That's all right. I don't want to rush you if you don't feel ready. We don't have to sleep together. It was worth the drive up just to see you and kiss you and talk to you in person." He stopped his car in front of her hotel.

She laughed. "I meant you should take me back to my hotel so that I can pack my suitcase. Give me five minutes, okay?"

"You're evil!" he said.

"I'm a bad, bad girl." She stroked his chest. "You'll find that out very soon."

She made it in less than five minutes, rushing up to her room, throwing her things into her suitcase, leaving a note for Tracie and Lily, and racing back to Carter's car.

Carter sped to the Kingston Hotel and valet parked the car to save more time. It was beautiful inside, with a grand lobby with marble floors and ornate chandeliers. They rushed through the lobby and up the elevator to the ninth floor.

"Our room's that way." Carter pointed, and they hurried down the hallway.

As Carter put his key in the door, Sienna said, "*Our* room. I like the sound of that."

Carter opened the door and they walked in. Sienna saw that the room was lushly decorated. But mostly she noticed the king-sized bed in the middle of it. This was not only their first time, she reminded herself, but Carter's first time ever. That made it even more special.

"If you opened the curtains, you'd see a beautiful view, supposedly," Carter said. "We can look at it tomorrow morning. I have a feeling we'll be too busy tonight to care about the view."

Then he dropped her suitcase and kissed her again, tasting her eager mouth with his tongue as he massaged her back with his strong hands.

She unbuttoned his shirt and kissed his chest and placed her hand over his hard-beating heart.

"Carter," Sienna said, "you're not . . . nervous or anything?"

"Are you kidding? I am so ready for this," he told her. "It feels like I've been waiting for tonight forever."

They dropped to the bed. Soon he was taking off her shirt and she was undoing his pants and they were kissing again and saying, "I love you," over and over.

Then they were gasping for air and writhing in each other's arms and moaning with pleasure as they finally made love.

Afterward, as they lay in bed holding each other tightly, Carter said, "That was definitely worth waiting for. But we

need to make up for lost time.” He kissed her neck as his hands roamed her body, and Sienna felt that heaven itself couldn’t be any better than this.

Carter had been right. Sienna never thought about the view that night. She was totally preoccupied with her love, her lover, Carter.

twenty-five

Tracie got off the hotel elevator Monday morning and headed for the coffee bar. It was quiet in the hotel at seven A.M. Some Japanese men in pinstriped suits sat on couches reading Japanese newspapers, a desk clerk talked quietly on the phone, and another hotel worker walked by Tracie and said, “Good morning.”

She decided to get the largest coffee the hotel carried. She’d been tossing and turning all night. She had wondered whether any record producers would be at their show tonight; and if so, whether the producers would like them. And if they did like the band, whether they would still like it without Lily singing in it. And she had thought about Josh, though she’d

tried hard not to. *I'm fine without a guy in my life*, Tracie told herself now. But what if she wanted things to be better than fine?

As she got closer to the coffee bar, she said, "Oh, God."

Josh was there, leaning against the counter, pouring sugar into his coffee. He started to yawn, then covered his mouth.

He looked so cute today, his hair going in strange directions, a bad case of bed head. Tracie realized her own hair was probably just as disheveled. Obviously, neither of them had showered yet this morning.

He started walking toward the exit.

"Oh, no! Josh! Stop!" she shouted before clamping her hand over her mouth.

He turned and looked at her, as did the woman behind the coffee bar, the Japanese men in the lobby, the desk clerk, and probably anyone within a hundred yards who wasn't completely deaf.

She kept her hand on her stupid loud mouth and knew that her face had turned red.

Josh gave her a huge grin. "Tracie!" he called out just as loudly, so that everyone now looked at him.

She rushed toward him.

He met her halfway. "Fancy meeting you here." He was still grinning.

"It's karma or something." She pointed to his hand carrying the coffee cup. Coffee dripped down its side in long brown streaks. "Are you okay?" she asked him.

He looked at his hand. "Oh, that? It's nothing. Just a large burn that will probably scar me for life, all to talk to a girl who wants nothing to do with me."

She smiled. "Hey, we can be friends, right?"

"Right." Josh's grin disappeared.

She hated what had just happened to him—his hazel eyes suddenly dimmed as if her words had turned down a switch for them, his mouth shut tight.

And why? Because she had decided not to date anyone. She had made that decision just a few weeks before. But it seemed long ago, because it was before she had met Josh.

Josh—kind, cute, fun Josh—was staring down at his coffee cup as if he couldn't bear to look at her. "Well, I guess I should go now," he said. "Before we ran into each other this morning I was going to take a walk, to get my mind off of . . . things."

"What things?" she asked him, mostly to keep him here, talking to her, instead of walking out the hotel door. "Why are you up so early, anyway?"

He shrugged.

"I barely slept," Tracie said. "I kept thinking about the show tonight."

"You guys will do great." Josh used a napkin to wipe the coffee from his hand.

"And thinking about you kept me awake too," she said.

He finally looked at her. "Oh, yeah?"

"I was thinking that I'm crazy about you."

His grin returned, even bigger now. "Funny, I was thinking the same thing myself. Except about you, Tracie. I bet I slept about as well as you did. And even when I slept, you were in my dreams."

She wanted to kiss him, right now, in the hotel lobby. She forced herself to look away. The Japanese men were smiling at her, as were both the woman behind the coffee bar and the desk clerk. "You know I told myself not to date anyone until August, at least," she said.

"I know. And now I've told myself the same thing. I'm not going to date anyone until August either."

She tilted her head.

"You're worth waiting for," he told her. "Even if it kills me."

"I'm sorry, Josh," she said. "But you don't know what I was like before. I had no confidence in myself. I thought I needed to have a guy in my life all the time. All through high school, I'd freak if I didn't have a date on Saturday night. I've never seen a movie by myself or even gone out to eat without someone keeping me company at the restaurant." She shook her head. "I used to buy my clothes based on what I thought the guy I was seeing would like. I was always trying so hard to be part of a couple that I lost myself."

"I don't want you to lose yourself," Josh said. "Because the self I found on the bus Friday morning and over the last few days, I like very much."

"Thanks," she told him.

"But I don't want to lose you either. What if we saw each other every other Saturday night?" he asked. "Then you could have plenty of dateless Saturday nights, if that makes you happy. And I could promise not to comment on your clothes, so you could dress just for yourself. Tracie, we can take it slow, as slow as you want." He shrugged. "Hell, we can go to the movies and sit in different theaters if you want. I'll even buy you your own separate popcorn."

"I don't like popcorn."

"Well, don't eat it on my account," Josh said. "After we watch our separate movies, we can go out to dinner and sit by ourselves on opposite sides of the restaurant. It wouldn't even count as a Saturday night date, right? But you'd be in my life."

"You're sweet," Tracie said. "But I've realized now I don't need a guy in my life."

Josh sighed.

"Take you, for example." Tracie pointed to him. "I don't feel that I need your arms around me, or the touch of your hand, or your mouth on mine."

"Good for you," he said coldly.

"I don't need all that. But I *want* it. Intensely."

He shook his head and grinned. "I'll wait until August. And even if you don't feel ready in August, I'll wait longer, for however much time it takes."

She finally grinned herself. "Yes, we should wait. As long as it takes for you to put down your coffee cup so your hand

doesn't get burned again. How much time will you need? Three seconds? I doubt I can hold out much more than that. Then you can put your arms around me and kiss me, and we can really give these people in the lobby something worth staring at."

It took only two seconds.

They stayed in the lobby, kissing and hugging and laughing, for a good long time.

twenty-six

It was Monday evening. Sienna had spent the whole day with Carter. Now they were standing in the lobby of her hotel, waiting for Josh and the rest of the band to show up. Any minute now, they were supposed to head out for Amber Road's final gig of the festival. "Last night was amazing," Sienna whispered to Carter. "And this morning."

"Yep. The Kingston sure is a nicer hotel than this one," Carter agreed.

She goosed him. "You know what I mean."

"I do." His voice got serious. "That was the best night of my life, Sienna. I love you so much."

They kissed again. Sienna wanted to stay in his arms forever.

But a few minutes later she heard Mark talking. "This will probably be Lily's last performance with Amber Road," he said.

Sienna and Carter parted and looked over at Mark. He stood next to George and Josh. "Good to see you up here, Carter," he said.

"Decided to take a little drive, did you?" George asked.

"Isn't he the best?" Sienna said.

"Carter, you're the best," George said.

"The very best," Mark said. "But don't set the bar too high. Next thing I know, Lily's going to expect me to follow her on all her solo gigs."

George laughed. "I know you will."

"I'll be her number-one groupie," Mark said.

"There she is." George pointed. Lily and Tracie came off the elevator, giggling about something.

Lily went up to Mark and kissed him on the cheek. Meanwhile, Tracie approached Josh and kissed *him* on the cheek. Sienna could hardly believe what she was seeing. Yesterday, Lily and Mark hadn't been speaking to each other, and Tracie had insisted she was going to stay away from guys until August. Sienna had called Tracie's mother a few minutes ago and assured her that everything was fine. Well, everything *was* fine. Josh seemed like a great guy.

"Whoa," George said. "I think I missed something last night."

"Yesterday afternoon." Mark's arm was around Lily.

"This morning." Josh's arm was around Tracie.

George sighed. "I feel so out of it."

"Me too, George," Sienna said.

"Not to mention I feel so alone," George said.

Sienna snuggled closer to Carter.

They walked out to the parking lot together. Carter wished them luck and said he'd see them soon at the club. After he and Sienna kissed good-bye, she got in the bus. She knew it was corny, but she missed him already.

"Looks like everyone found love except me," George said as Josh started up the bus.

"Your time will come," Tracie said. "But before your next date, you should do a smell test. It could save you a lot of time."

George sighed again.

"Well, this is it," Sienna said as Josh drove them out of the parking lot. "Our big chance to get noticed by a record producer."

"Not to mention, it's probably Lily's very last show with the band," Mark said.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," Lily said. "I'm planning on lots more shows with you."

"Huh?" George raised his eyebrows. "I heard you were going solo, that you had a great opportunity with a record producer."

"It's an opportunity, but anything without you guys around can't be called great," Lily said.

"Lily, you have to call Joel Matthews and accept his offer," Mark said.

She shook her head. "I already called him, but I didn't exactly accept his offer."

"You turned him down?" Tracie asked.

"Not exactly. I said if he wanted to sign me, he'd have to take everyone in Amber Road."

"Oh, Lily. No," Mark said.

"Yes. And I invited him up today to hear us perform."

"Now I'm really nervous," Tracie said.

"Me too," Sienna said. "But also grateful."

"Well, I'm grateful for you," Lily said. "I joined the band in the first place to have fun, and it just wouldn't be fun by myself. Besides, I realized that you guys are more than just people I play music with. You're even more than my friends. You're like a family to me. And I'm not going to give up my family."

"You wouldn't have to give us up. You know we'll support you whether you're with Amber Road or not," Tracie said.

"I know that," Lily said. "The last few days, you guys have shown how totally supportive you are. And that's one reason I don't want to perform without you."

All of a sudden, the bus stopped in the middle of the street. "Hang on!" Josh yelled, too late to keep Sienna's stomach from lurching up and down. "We're stalled out," he announced a few seconds later.

There was a loud *thump* behind them, and the bus jolted forward. “We just got rear-ended!” Mark yelled. “Pull over, Josh.”

“I can’t.” Josh turned the ignition a few times and gave the bus gas, but it just sputtered in place. “I can’t even start this horrible bus,” he said. He tried a few more times, with no success.

“We’ll have to push it,” Mark said.

So Tracie steered the bus while the others pushed it to the side of the road. The man who had hit them with his SUV helped push too.

Once the bus was safely off the road, Mark climbed back inside. “Oh, no!” he shouted. “My keyboard! It was in the back of the bus. It’s mangled.”

Josh and George exchanged insurance information with the guy behind them, Tracie fruitlessly tried to start the bus, and Mark and Lily examined the other instruments. The keyboard appeared to be the only thing damaged. It had been lying right where the bus was rear-ended.

“I’ll see if I can get a shuttle bus to take us to the club,” Sienna said, punching in the number for Information on her cell phone. “We don’t have much time.”

“How are we going to perform without a keyboard?” Lily asked.

Sienna shrugged as she got connected to the shuttle bus company.

“We might have something available in forty-five minutes,” the dispatcher told her.

"We can't wait that long!" Sienna cried. "We're supposed to be onstage in forty-five minutes."

"Well, why didn't you reserve something earlier?" the dispatcher said.

Sienna hung up. She called Carter and told him what had happened.

"I'll come get you," he said.

"But you have your Prius. We have everyone in the band, plus Josh and our instruments."

"So I'll have to make a few trips," he said as if it were no big deal. "You should call a cab too. That might help."

"Right," she said, grateful for his take-charge attitude. She'd been so nervous about everything, she could barely think straight.

Mark interrupted her phone call. "Sienna, could Carter pick up a rental keyboard? I'm on the phone with a music store in Berkeley."

She asked Carter, knowing he would say yes.

"Of course," Carter said. "Anything you guys want."

He appeared a few minutes later. Sienna had never seen him go so fast before. Carter was driving the Prius as if it were a sports car. He pulled over to the bus and practically jumped out of the car.

They filled the little backseat and tiny trunk with George's drum set and the two guitars, leaving just room enough in the Prius for Carter and her in the front seat.

A moment after they closed the car door, Carter took off again and rushed toward the club. "Thank God you came," Sienna said.

Carter shrugged. "Must be fate."

"A little bit of fate and a lot of you being sweet enough to drive eight hours to see me," she said. "Last night was the cake, and today is the icing."

"Oh, I don't know about that." He smiled. "I'd say last night was a seven-layer cream-and-custard-filled cake with rich chocolate icing to die for. Today is just the fruit garnish."

Carter pulled up to the club twenty minutes before the band was supposed to perform. The two of them worked quickly, unloading the car and taking in the instruments.

"Okay," he said when everything was safely backstage. "I'd better hurry over to that rental place and get the keyboard. I wish we had time for a long kiss for good luck."

"I'll take a raincheck on that," Sienna said.

Then she watched him drive away, her handsome knight in a shining white Prius.

twenty-seven

Lily had never been so nervous in her life. They had no bus, a broken keyboard, and a taxi driver who didn't seem to know much English or many driving rules. During the crazy cab ride through Berkeley, she went from praying they could make it to the club on time to praying they'd get there alive.

Somehow, she, Tracie, George, and Mark arrived at the club ten minutes before they were scheduled to perform. Josh was stuck waiting for a tow truck, but had promised to come as soon as he could.

"I usually don't get nervous," Lily said as they hurried toward the club entrance, "but with all we've been through today, and if Carter can't get that rental keyboard—"

"We'll be fine," Mark said. "If Carter can't bring it here before showtime, we'll go without it for a couple of songs."

Lily nodded, but she knew their music would suffer without a keyboard and Mark's talented fingers on it. And she knew Mark well enough to realize that he knew it too.

Lily breathed a bit easier when she saw Sienna sitting onstage with all the instruments except the damaged keyboard. Sienna had set up everything. Already, there were about fifty people gathered to hear them and the bands coming after them.

"Okay, guys," Mark said. "Let's run through a quick sound check."

Somehow Mark's calm tone steadied them all. Lily took her place at the mike, and did her best to act as if everything was going exactly as planned.

Still, no one in the band could hide their relief when a minute before showtime, Carter ran in holding the rental keyboard. "I went twenty miles an hour over the speed limit today, and I parked illegally for the first time in my life," he said. "But, you know what? It was fun."

Sienna laughed. "Ooh, you criminal!"

"Not anymore," he said. "I'm going to repark my car before I get a ticket. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sienna blew him a kiss. Then Mark set up the new keyboard and they finished the sound check. Everything seemed to be in order. *Except our nerves*, Lily thought.

By the time the club's owner came on stage to introduce them, there were about a hundred people in the audience. *Not*

a huge crowd, but respectable, Lily told herself. And most important, she spotted the three people she had hoped would come today. One was Steve Guyda, their manager. He was talking to someone Lily guessed was the second person she was hoping to see—a plump woman with short purple hair, chandelier earrings, and a white linen suit. Lily assumed she was the record producer Guyda had mentioned. The third important person was Joel Matthews. He wasn't even looking at the stage. He was texting on his BlackBerry. Lily made it her goal to get him to put away his BlackBerry, preferably during the first song.

"You guys ready?" Mark asked quietly, and everyone nodded.

Tracie looked scared to death, but she always did before a performance. Lily figured she'd be fine as soon as they started the first song.

"Remember that even if no record producers show interest in us today, *we* know we're good. And we're having fun together and we love each other, and that's all that counts," Mark added.

"Well, a record deal would count for something," George said. "Actually, it would count for a lot."

That might be what George thought and Lily's mother too, but Lily agreed with Mark. Performing music you loved with people you loved, and having fun doing it, counted a lot more than getting a record deal.

“Three, two, one, rock!” Mark shouted.

They played “Partytime” first. Lily put all the frustrations of the last week into her singing. The disappointment in her mother, the worries about going solo, the tension with Mark, even the problems with the bus—they’d all been festering inside her. But now her emotions came out, channeled through the music. She shouted the lyrics and stomped around the small stage and sashayed by Mark as he pounded and massaged and worked the rented keyboard as if it were his own.

They were all performing their best. George was beating the drums like he was nearly but not quite insane. Tracie and Sienna played guitar and bass so fast and furiously, Lily wouldn’t have been surprised if their guitars burned up on-stage. And Mark was grinning as if he and Lily had never had a single problem, as if he hadn’t spent the last hour rushing to get here and hoping he could get a replacement for his damaged keyboard.

The crowd was with them too. They were dancing and clapping and pounding their fists in the air. At the end of “Partytime,” the applause was booming as if there were 500 people in the club and every one of them was completely swept up by the music.

Lily glanced at Joel Matthews. His BlackBerry was gone. And he too was clapping like mad.

They started the next song before Lily had a chance to look at Steve Guyda and the purple-haired woman. They

switched gears, to the pretty song “Tomorrow” that Mark and Lily had written together. The audience grew quiet and listened, raptly, it seemed. The song ended and the applause started again, even louder than before.

This time, Lily glanced at Guyda and the producer he’d brought. They were whispering to each other. Josh stood next to them, looking tired but happy.

Next, Lily sang a ballad, then the sexy “Stray Cat.” Then Mark and Sienna sang some faster songs with her. They performed faster and edgier songs. With crazed energy, they played the hardest-rocking song of all, “School Bites After Being Out All Night.” Then they gradually slowed down again. Their last song was Lily’s favorite, “Beautiful Girl.” She noticed a few fans in tears as she sang. She was teary herself.

When they finished the set, the thunderous applause and excited cheers and shouts of “More!” and “Encore!” went on and on. The crowd was almost manic in their enthusiasm. Lily and her bandmates couldn’t stop smiling.

They played two more songs for encores. The crowd still shouted for more as they packed up their instruments and ran off the stage. The crowd didn’t stop asking for encores until the next band got onstage.

This club didn’t have a greenroom or dressing room, so they gathered in the parking lot. Mark called out, “Group hug to celebrate our best performance ever!”

“And because I love all you guys and I’m so proud of everyone!” Sienna shouted.

“And because after the girls I’ve been with this week, I deserve a hug,” George said.

They formed a small circle and hugged each other tightly.

Soon Carter joined them, and then Josh. The group hug morphed into a couples hug. Lily and Mark held each other close. She noticed Sienna and Carter kissing. Next to them, Tracie and Josh were kissing too. George stood off to the side a bit. Feeling sorry for him, Lily called out, “Come join us, George.”

Just then, a tall girl with long black hair approached him. “Your drumming was awesome,” she said.

George grinned, thanked her, and then sniffed her.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked.

He shrugged. “I just have a sensitive nose, that’s all.”

“Well, you won’t smell anything on me,” the girl said. “I’m allergic to perfume and a ton of other scents. I have to use hypoallergenic soap.”

He smiled. “Just the kind of girl I’ve been looking for.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” the girl said.

“Could I have your phone number?” George asked.

He entered it in his cell phone, then waved good-bye to her just as Joel Matthews approached the band. “Is this a band or a lovefest?” he asked.

Lily and Mark separated. “Both,” Lily said. “Guys, this is Joel Matthews.”

Everyone stopped kissing and talking, and greeted him.

"So, Lily," Matthews said. "Are you sure it's all of you or none of you?"

She nodded. "Positive. I can't leave this group."

"That's a good thing, because I don't think you should." He smiled. "When I heard you in San Diego, I should have stayed for more than ten minutes and I shouldn't have focused only on your lead singer. You're fantastic together, all of you. I'm going to tell my label to sign up the whole band."

"Are you serious?" Mark asked.

"If I weren't serious, do you think I would have flown up here, wandered through Berserkeley to catch your act, searched for you afterward, and broken up your make-out sessions?"

"Sounds serious," George said.

"That's awesome!" Mark exclaimed.

"Thank you!" Lily said.

Steve Guyda walked over to them. "Thanks for what?"

"Joel Matthews wants his record label to sign us," Lily said.

Guyda smiled. "That sounds promising. Glad you like the band. But it looks like you're going to have to bid for them. I don't know if you saw CeeCee Wassersman in the crowd today, but she wants to sign up Amber Road for *her* record label. These kids are hot!"

Lily stared at Guyda, open-mouthed.

"There's a cafe a few doors down that looks quiet. Why don't you and I talk it over," Guyda suggested to Matthews.

"All right." Matthews turned to Lily. "Keep in mind, when you're deciding between our competing bids, that I recognized your talent first." He walked off with Guyda.

It wasn't until the two men were out of earshot that the band started yelling. Lily didn't know who started it, but soon everyone in Amber Road was screaming like crazy. One of the good things about being in Berkeley was that a crowd of teenagers yelling their lungs out didn't seem too out of place. Lily suspected the people who lived here had heard much stranger things.

As they screamed, the band members started hugging each other again. This time, they didn't pair off into couples. They were all together.

When they finally quieted down, George said, "Remember a few months ago, I told you guys I wanted to be a famous rock star?"

"A few months ago?" Mark said. "You tell us that pretty much every day."

"Sometimes twice a day," Tracie added.

"Well, I think it really might happen," George said.

"That would be cool," Sienna said. "We deserve to be rock stars. We've been through a lot."

"Thank God we've had each other to go through it with," Lily said.

"It's you we should be grateful to—for turning down that solo deal," Mark told her.

"Yeah," George said. "If it were me, I probably would have screamed, 'Where do I sign?' a second after I got the offer."

Lily yanked on George's ponytail. "I couldn't leave you guys after all the stuff we've been through together."

"We *have* been through a lot together," George said. "Or at least the rest of you have. There's one thing I missed that I still really regret."

"What?" Sienna asked him.

"I left early that night you girls traded boyfriends and hooked up with different guys. You should try it again. And keep in mind that I'm ready, willing, and able to hook up. Whenever you're ready."

"When hell freezes over," Sienna said.

"Don't hold your breath," Tracie said.

Lily bopped him on the head.

"Call me crazy," Mark said, "but while George was rambling on and I was trying to ignore him, as usual, I just came up with some lyrics. About us. All of us."

Mark sang the lines: "Money's all right, and romance too. But I'd rather have a friend like you."

"That's good, Mark," Sienna said.

"Thanks. I could use some help fleshing this out."

"Let's all work on it," Lily suggested.

So they stayed in the parking lot, arm in arm, and created the rest of the song together.

As Lily sang the next lines, “I don’t need much ’cept a friend like you. To laugh with and cry with and sing with too,” she felt the lyrics in her heart. She couldn’t wait to perform the song onstage with her band.

