

EMERY LORD

Open
Road
Summer

*Your heart will
lead you home . . .*



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Road
Summer

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BLOOMSBURY

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

CHAPTER ONE

Nashville to Charlotte

The fans scream for her, but they don't really know the girl on the magazine covers—the girl with the guitar and the easy smile. Her given name is Delilah, and they think she goes by Lilah. But anyone who really knows my best friend calls her Dee. They think she's seventeen, and she is. But she never acts seventeen. She acts either thirty years old, like a composed professional, in record-label meetings and interviews, or twelve years old, with me—giggling like we did back when she still had braces, back when our summer plans were nothing more than sleepovers and swimming at the pool. They think she wrote the songs on this album while getting over a breakup. But they're wrong. She's not over it. Not even close.

On the side of her tour bus, there's a ten-foot-tall picture of Dee surrounded by a field of wildflowers. The shot captures her hand midstrum against a twelve-string guitar.

Next to the picture, “Lilah Montgomery” is scrawled in a cursive font meant to mimic Dee’s handwriting. Fans wait in line for hours to get that same signature on posters and T-shirts. The newest album is called *Middle of Nowhere, Tennessee*, and the title song has been number one for two weeks already. It’s an upbeat song—a happy one, but it was written more than a year ago.

*Middle of nowhere, Tennessee,
Exactly where I want to be.
Our initials carved in the old oak tree,
And every road takes me back home.
Middle of nowhere, Tennessee,
Dancing on the porch, you and me.
This is where I was born to be,
No matter how far I may roam.*

The song, like so many others, was written for Jimmy.

I feel out of place here, in the expansive parking lot behind Muddy Water Records, outside Nashville. This is the starting point for Dee’s summer tour, and all three passenger buses are lined up, waiting to take us on our way. Dee wafts within the crowd, making cheerful introductions between the families of her band and crew, all here to say good-bye before the buses depart. I’m hanging back, waiting for her, when I sense someone in my peripheral vision. Someone who is not so subtly staring at my legs. There’s plenty to see, since my hemline is pushing the limits of public decency.

“Hey,” the guy says, eyeing me in an overeager way that makes me feel embarrassed for him. “Are you part of the backup band?”

“Sure.” This is a lie. I smirk, but it’s forced. I’m not in the mood, not after the month I’ve had. Besides, he’s not my type. Neatly trimmed hair, tucked-in polo shirt. One glance at him and I’m repressing a yawn.

“I’m Mark Tran,” he says. “I’m the assistant lighting director for the show.”

“Reagan O’Neill,” I reply. Then I launch the grenade. “I’m seventeen.”

It lands. Boom. My new friend Mark pinkens as he mutters something about it being nice to meet me. You can only have so many guys hit on you before it gets terribly, almost insultingly boring. My appearance and collection of tiny clothes are like flypaper, drawing in good boys and bad boys, boys younger than me and men old enough to be my father. Their reactions make it easier to tell the difference between the harmless guys and the ones who are venomous—the ones who will make it sting. But sometimes they fool me.

Dee greets her violinist’s mom with an enveloping hug. The woman looks startled, her eyes widening over Dee’s shoulder. My best friend is a hugger, with arms like an unhinged gate. At the mere thought of embracing strangers, I cross my arms, which triggers a splintering pain in my left wrist. I’m wearing my leather jacket despite the early June humidity, hoping that no one notices how tightly the left sleeve fits over my blue cast. The persistent ache feels like a

reminder that I can't keep making bad decisions without breaking more pieces of myself.

"Reagan," Dee calls, waving me over. "You ready?"

I walk toward her, my tall shoes thudding against the asphalt. This sound is my touchstone, and it follows me anywhere I go. Unless I'm sneaking out of the house. In that case, I use my bare feet to dodge the creaky stairs. Today I chose my heeled motorcycle boots to go with a summer dress made of thin floral-print cotton. Contradiction suits me.

Dee signs a few more autographs for the family members of her band and crew as we try to move toward our tour bus. One girl looks eleven or twelve, and she's trembling like she's had espresso injected into her veins.

"I think you're the prettiest person in the whole entire world," the girl says as Dee signs a photograph of herself, "and I listen to your music, like, every single day."

Though I've seen emotional fans with Dee before, my first thought is: *This is so weird*. Dee doesn't think it's weird. Without a moment of hesitation or a look of confusion, she squeals a thank-you and hugs the girl, who clutches on to her, stunned.

To her fans, Dee is the best friend they've never had, and I guess that part isn't so weird. Dee's the only real friend I've ever had—the one who comes running even though I'd never admit I need someone by my side. She jokes that she keeps bail money in her nightstand; I joke that she'd be my one phone call. Only I'm not joking. She would be.

Dee hooks her arm through mine as we walk toward her family. I already said good-bye to my dad, standing on the

porch of our farmhouse before Dee's mom picked me up. I didn't want to do the drawn-out, forlorn farewell, because neither of us is forlorn. We both know we need a break. He needs a break from my causing trouble and bickering with my stepmom, and I need a break from . . . well, from my whole life, really.

I stay back, crossing my arms again, as Dee hugs her dad—a long, clinging hug that reminds me that leaving isn't so easy for her. Mrs. Montgomery is hugging Dee's aunt Peach, who is our summer chaperone. After Peach boards the tour bus, Mrs. Montgomery waves me over, and I uncross my arms. The casted one aches, of course, but I don't let myself linger on that anymore.

"You girls are going to have such a fun summer." She clasps her hands against my shoulders. "I can't wait to hear about it."

To her credit, Dee's mom doesn't admonish me to behave or warn me not to get Dee in trouble. No, Mrs. Montgomery has never been like that, even though I probably deserve it. She hugs me as she always does, like I'm her own daughter.

"You call if you need anything, okay?" Dee's mom whispers as she releases me. This is such a mom thing to say when leaving a daughter at summer camp or at college or, I suppose, on a concert tour. It's nice to have someone say it to me.

Beside me, Dee crouches down, pulling both of her little brothers into one big hug. She whispers something to both of them, and they nod obediently in response. When she stands back, her eyes are glistening with tears.

“None of that,” her mom says. “We’ll see you opening night. You won’t even miss us.”

That’s not true. Dee would love to have her family on tour, but her parents think it’s important for her brothers to stay grounded in reality. They’re in elementary school, and they should have summers of cannonballs into the pool and makeshift lemonade stands. They should have a childhood that’s based on more than their sister’s fame—a childhood like Dee’s.

Now Dee’s mom holds her close and says something in her ear. Advice, I suppose, or an affirmation of how proud she is. Mrs. Montgomery is a songwriter for a big label on Music Row, but she’s never been a performer. She filled their house with Emmylou Harris and Johnny Cash, and she showed Dee by example that she could make her very own music. Dee’s parents never pushed her toward this career, but her DNA twists into bars of music instead of double helixes.

With one last squeeze, Dee untangles her arms from her mom’s neck. She exhales deeply, linking her pinkie with mine. “Let’s do it.”

So, with Dee glancing behind us one last time, we step into our home for the next three months. My laptop and camera bag are already on board, and my one massive suitcase is packed in the undercarriage of the bus. Dee designed the interior of the bus herself. Both sides are lined with long leather couches—cushy and deep like the one in her parents’ living room. One couch sidles up to a retro dining nook while

the other ends near the compact kitchen area, which is complete with a sink and a well-stocked refrigerator.

I plop down on the right-side couch, cozying against the throw pillows. Dee had them made with a floral fabric to look like the wildflowers on her album cover. There's a full-size bed in the back, where Peach is already lying down, and two bunks tucked into the bus's side wall.

Dee nestles into the couch across from mine, turning so she can look out the tall windows at her family. They can't see her, but she presses her palm against the glass. Her other hand rests on the couch, lingering near her two ever-present cell phones: one for personal contacts and one for work calls. The personal phone holds only a few numbers.

Everyone in the crowd waves as the bus lurches forward. Dee waves back even though no one can see her but me. The bus driver honks the horn a few times, and just like that, we're on our way to everywhere. Dee keeps looking out the window, watching as the scenes of downtown slide into images of our small town on the east side of Nashville. The snapshots of home pass us by—the wide trees and fields of crops and little houses, each with its own American flag. Outside, the sky is darkening, and so is Dee's mood. She's wringing her hands absentmindedly, smoothing a fingertip over her polished nails.

Real-life Dee doesn't have shiny pink nails. She has dirt under her fingernails from playing with her little brothers. She's still in full makeup from the press conference earlier, and, with false eyelashes too dark for her fair complexion,

Dee looks like a higher-contrast version of herself. Her blond hair is in loose waves that end exactly at her shoulders, the same cut and style as my own. The only difference is that Dee's natural coloring looks like an American landscape—country-sky-blue eyes and hair the color of Tennessee wheat fields, golden strands with darker undertones. My hair is nearly black, and I have jealous green eyes. In a fairy tale, she'd play the good fairy. I'd be the evil witch's screwup second cousin.

Dee's working through something in her mind, hugging herself as one hand toys with her necklace. The necklace is her trademark talisman—a thin chain with a tiny horseshoe that rests right on the hollow of her throat. Jimmy gave it to her for her fourteenth birthday, and she's never played a show without it. The necklace suits Dee so perfectly—the gold color and the simple, delicate charm—that it seems intrinsic, as much a part of her as the tiny scar on her chin or the freckles across her shoulders.

"Hey," I say, finally figuring out why she's so preoccupied. "That reporter from earlier . . . she doesn't know anything. I think her hair was proof of that."

Dee tries not to smile, but she can't help it. I like to think of myself as the devil on her shoulder, happy to say the things that she's too polite to think. "I don't want it to be like this, you know. Missing him makes me feel weak and pathetic."

"I know." When she talks about Jimmy, she almost never says his name. She doesn't have to. He's the "him" in every sentence that really matters; he's the "he" in every song.

She shakes her head. “I brought this on myself by writing the songs that I wrote. Of course they were going to ask. I just have to take it.”

Thinking back to this afternoon’s press conference, I bite down on the insides of my cheeks—a habit I’ve developed since I quit smoking last month. The media session, held in the event room of the record label’s building, was mostly uneventful, but one reporter got pushy.

“Your first album was all about falling in love,” the reporter said. “This album seems to be mostly about heart-break. Can you speak to that?”

Dee’s smile stayed glued on, but I know sadness swelled in her lungs. In interview prep, Dee’s publicist quizzes her with painful questions like they’re multiplication flash cards. I knew she could handle this question, but she looked so diminutive up on the platform, sandwiched between her bulky manager and her towering publicist at a long table.

“Eh,” Dee answered smilingly, trying to sound casual. “I didn’t want to be seen as a one-trick-pony songwriter, so I focused on something other than falling in love—falling *out* of love.”

That’s another thing the fans have wrong about her. They think she’s a celebrity, and she is. But she’s also a real girl, one who fake-smiles until she can close her bedroom door and sob.

“Did you recently end a relationship that caused you heart-break?” It was the same reporter, butting in without being called on. My noncasted hand gripped into a fist. “Perhaps a

long-term relationship with a high-school boyfriend, as it's been rumored in the tabloids?"

Behind the microphone, Dee caught her smile right before it dropped to the floor. "The only relationship I'm in is with my guitar. We're still very happy together; thank you for asking."

Laughter spread through the crowd of reporters. Even Dee's sour-faced publicist, Lissa, almost smiled. Dee moved on with press-conference pleasantries, but my edges are harder than hers and always have been. She forgives, forgets, moves on; I smolder quietly like embers, waiting for just enough fresh air to rage into a wildfire. Needless to say, that reporter better hope she never comes up against me. I grew up in a minefield of mean girls, and their snarky shrapnel made me bionic. Now I've got a stockpile of verbal ammunition and a grudge against anyone who crosses Dee.

Dee sighs and slides over to my couch, still with the same solemn look on her face.

"Reagan, I can't tell you how much it helps to have you here." She's the only person I know who can say sentimental things and still sound completely real. She glances toward the back of the bus and says in a quieter voice, "Peach is great, but it's not the same."

Peach is Mrs. Montgomery's youngest sister. When Dee was little, she couldn't say her aunt's real name, Clementine. She called her Peach instead, and now everyone else does, too. Dee takes after Peach, with her fair skin and naturally

blond hair. But Peach is taller, with straightened hair and feathery bangs.

I smile at her. "I wouldn't have missed it."

Actually, I almost did miss it. My dad was reluctant to let me spend my summer traveling the country on a tour bus with only Dee's twenty-six-year-old aunt as the chaperone. He isn't much for parental mandates, so I assume that my stepmother was pulling his puppet strings. Fortunately, they both hated Blake, the guy I was dating at the time, and would have done anything to put distance between us. They finally agreed to the tour when I mentioned college applications. I plan to use the tour as a way to add to my photojournalism portfolio. By summer's end, I should have shots from all over the country.

For me, this summer is more than a pleasant detour; it's a necessary diversion. For the past year, I've been stuck in the life of a normal junior in high school, passing the time with people I don't especially like at parties that aren't especially fun. So I made my own fun, and it did not go very well. Meanwhile, Dee has been performing at award shows, shooting magazine covers, and completing the *Middle of Nowhere* album.

Peach emerges from the bedroom area in the back of the bus. When Dee opened for the band Blue Sky Day last year, she needed a guardian to accompany her on tour. Dee's parents couldn't come because of her brothers, so Peach volunteered. She wound up dating Dee's banjo player, Greg, which

explains her eagerness to join up on this tour as well. Dee requires very little supervision, so Peach spends her time hanging out with her boyfriend and fielding phone calls from Dee's management team.

True to form, Peach is holding a magazine. She keeps up with all the gossip websites, too, checking for articles about Dee. I'm always tempted to read what people say about Dee, but my temper can't handle it.

"Thought you might want one." Peach smiles as she hands me the open magazine. "It's not out till next month, but we got a few first-run prints for approval."

"Thanks," I reply before she retreats to the bedroom. I examine the front of the magazine, which happens to be a favorite of mine. I never would have thought Dee could land the cover of *Idiosync*; she's the first country artist ever deemed cool enough for it. The magazine's aesthetic is edgy and urban, which is how I'd describe my own sense of style—but never Dee's. In the picture, she's wearing red ballet flats and a tight navy blazer over a white collared shirt and jeans . . . while riding a mechanical bull at a Nashville saloon. Instead of some trying-to-be-sexy rodeo-girl pose, Dee's holding on with both hands, head tilted back and laughing. She looks taller than her petite stature—only one inch taller than me—and it makes me wonder if other people in magazines are smaller in real life. *BUCK THE MAN*, the title screams. *Dixie darling Lilah Montgomery talks prep-school style, small-town roots, and bucking off pop music.*

Dee grins at me, pointing at the bold-font headline. "Lissa

is *not* happy, so, naturally, I'm thrilled. She's making them change the title of the article."

Most of Dee's "look" has been a bickering match with her publicist at some point or another. The wardrobe battle raged on for months. Dee has a very specific sense of style, which is inspired mostly by the old movies she watched with her mom when she was little—shrunk blazers; girly skirts or modest, colorful dresses; and delicate ballet flats. When Dee was starting out, Lissa fussed that her style was "too collegiate for our target demographic." The record label wanted her in cowgirl boots, but Dee refused. After her first album, Dee was offered a promotional deal for J.Crew's new teen line. Lissa's eyes spun like a slot machine landing on dollar signs, and she never mentioned Dee's clothing choices again.

I skim the article, hoping the interviewer played nice. *Idiosync* mocks clichés, which is why I like it, but if they made fun of Dee, I'll have to cancel my subscription and send anonymous hate mail.

Country chanteuse Lilah Montgomery is everything you expect and a whole lot more that you don't expect. She is a giggly blond gamine, she is affably coy about her personal life, and she is unpretentious to the point of eating a messy cheeseburger in my presence. In the two hours I spent with Lilah Montgomery at Smokin' Pistols Saloon in Nashville, she proved sweet as pecan pie. But this rising star will raise her voice, all right. Just ask her if she plans to veer her upbeat country-gone-folksy songbook toward the pop music scene.

“Never,” she insists. Her voice carries vehemence, a resounding finality that defies the usual public-relations doublespeak. “No, let me rephrase that. I won’t change the way I write music; I won’t change my subject matter or add bass beats or refrain from using a banjo and harmonica in my backup band. But if people who enjoy pop music also enjoy my music, wonderful. I’m thrilled. But I won’t compromise who I am as an artist or songwriter.”

Industry critic Jon Wallace calls her a “musician’s musician”—an artist focused on instrumentation, on perfecting complicated harmonies and pioneering her own sound. Lilah cites Patty Griffin, Joni Mitchell, and Dolly Parton as her biggest musical inspirations, though her music is pointedly more cheerful than her inspirations suggest. Where does that extra spark come from? Her mother—songwriter Laura Montgomery.

While I read, Dee’s spinning her work phone in the palm of her hand without looking at it. Instead, her gaze shifts around the tour bus as if she’s tracking the flight pattern of an aimless gnat. When Dee’s mind darts around, her eyes do, too.

“Hey,” I say. “Relax.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waves her hand at me. “I’m relaxed.”

This would be a lie no matter when she said it, even in her sleep. The first time I saw a diagram of nerve endings in my biology book, I thought they looked like tiny, splayed-out hands or the bird’s-eye view of a leafless tree. I’m pretty sure Dee’s nerve endings look like coiled springs.

“Terry texted me again. He won’t give it up.” Terry, her manager, is relentless.

“Which ‘it’?”

“Performing ‘My Own.’ Not gonna happen.” She taps her fingers on her phone, standing her ground.

The song is an upbeat powerhouse, complete with hand claps in the chorus.

*On my own, you'll see,
This ain't no Les Miserables.
I'm wild and free and I'm seventeen,
And I'll make it my job
To show you how good my life can be;
Ain't no pain in my alone.
I'm happy to be just little ol' me,
And I'll make this world my own.*

She thought if she could write a song about being happy without Jimmy, maybe it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That plan didn't work, but her label loved the song enough to put it on the record. Dee cares deeply about honest performances, and she can't make herself prance around stage while singing a lie to her fans. When Dee refused to include “My Own” in the tour set list, Terry's face looked like an oven-baked ham—pink and almost steaming.

The sky is nearly dark now, smudges of clouds across an inky sky, and the bus window reflects my image back to me—the sharp collarbones that have long been my least favorite feature, the wavy hair that's hard to manage without the use of my left hand. But, worst of all, behind thick black eyeliner,

my eyes look tired. And I *am* tired—w weary, even—but at least I'm here, hiding in Dee's life until I can handle my own.

As we barrel toward North Carolina, I take in the last glimpses of Tennessee that I'll have till late August. I don't think I'll miss Nashville, except maybe the country sky at night, the way every centimeter is flecked with stars. It's something I could never capture in a photograph, the hugeness of the universe and the smallness of everything else. When Dee and I were little, the world seemed so vast—so impossibly, frighteningly vast that we could never make it our own.

Does the sky go on forever? Dee asked me the summer we met. We were lying on our backs in the cool grass, facing up. She'd gotten a book of constellations for her eighth birthday, and we were using it to search the sky.

Yep, I told her. *It's called infinity.*

Infinity, she repeated. There was a pause as I traced Ursa Minor with my finger, and I could feel her looking over at me. *Do you think we could be friends for infinity?* she asked.

After a moment, I said, *Yeah. I'm pretty sure we could be.* She linked her pinkie with mine, our secret signal, and the planet spun on beneath the starlight. These days, the world doesn't seem nearly big enough to outrun our problems.

My eyes follow a blinking airplane light, and its steady path leaves me thinking about how far we've come. It's no secret that Dee has come a long way from the middle of nowhere, Tennessee, but, as the cast on my arm reminds me, I have, too. The difference is: I still have a lot farther to go.

CHAPTER TWO

Charlotte

I've been to Dee's concerts before, of course, but never like this. *Nothing* is like this. We spent yesterday at the concert hall, as Dee and the band did a final dress rehearsal, but now this place is a never-ending fun house of Dee look-alikes. Younger girls stand with their moms alongside countless girls our age in matching outfits—blazers and horseshoe necklaces and ballet flats. I even spot a decent number of good-looking guys. I'll come back for them when I'm done with my phone call.

I'm hunting for a place quiet enough to wish my dad a happy birthday because even Dee's dressing room is too noisy. When I mentioned that I was stepping out to call my dad, I pretended not to notice Dee's freshly waxed eyebrows lift in surprise. She recovered quickly, though, and gave me an encouraging smile.

Of course Dee doesn't expect me to check in with my dad. My family life belongs in the lyrics of a bad country song. My mom walked out on us when I was eight, and my dad took it badly. He moved the two of us from Chicago to his hometown of Nashville, presumably to be closer to the Jack Daniel Distillery. Even though he quit drinking when I was twelve, enough damage had been done. I was mad at my mom for abandoning us and mad at him for abandoning me emotionally. Not even Dee's good influence could keep me from trying to hurt my parents the way they hurt me. At least that's what my court-appointed therapist thinks, and I hate to admit that she's probably right. I also hate to admit that she's court-appointed.

My track record started with mouthing off in seventh grade and skipping a few study halls in eighth grade. Freshman year of high school, I flirted with senior boys and made out with them in their cars, just to feel that rush of it all. I snuck out of the house to parties, where I smoked, drank bad beer, and needed Dee to help me home. After Dee left on her first tour, I lost my virginity to a guy I barely knew, which was an experience that's barely worth remembering.

An underage-drinking charge sent me to court last fall. I tried to laugh it off when I told Dee, who sighed into the phone from whatever city she was in at the time. I hardly said a word during the sentencing, but somehow the judge dubbed me a charity case. She gave me a community-service requirement and mandated therapy to rehab my attitude. I

set myself back on the straight and narrow, or I tried, at least. But then I met Blake during my community service. He made everything worse.

My list of offenses runs long, and I'm not proud of any of them—except maybe the time I outran a cop while wearing stilettos. But things changed in April, and so did I. I'm trying to get my act together, but I can't be someone I'm not. I still flirt with boys to get what I want, and I still crave the occasional cigarette. I'm just not as bad as I used to be.

I turn another corner, only to find even screechier girls at a merchandise counter. This is getting ridiculous, so I stop dead when I spot a door that says *AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY*. After glancing around for security guards, I decide to authorize myself. I look official enough; I have my most expensive camera and my tour pass around my neck. The latter identifies me as *ALL-TOUR VIP REAGAN O'NEILL*, complete with a grim-faced picture. I wasn't ready when the guy took the photo, the hallmark of someone who is better behind the camera than in front of it. Turning the doorknob, I see that it's the back end of an empty conference room. Perfect.

"Hey, Dad," I say as soon as he answers the phone. "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you, darlin'." He sounds surprised that I bothered to call. "How's everything goin' so far?"

"Good."

"Good," he says after a moment. "You sound tired. Are you tired?"

“Yeah. We’ve been up since five o’clock this morning.”

He chuckles. “Well, now, I don’t think you’ve been up that early since you were a baby.”

I want to say that I’m often still up at 5 a.m. without his knowing it, but I trap the words inside my mouth. That was the old me, and the new me is still learning.

“Is she nervous?” My dad adores Dee—of course he does. Any parent would.

“A little. Mostly excited.”

“Good. Can’t wait to hear about it.” There’s a pause, and he asks, “You stayin’ out of trouble?”

“Yes, Dad.” I can practically hear Brenda feeding him the questions. “So far I’m hanging out with Dee or sitting around. That’s it.”

“Well,” he says, “thanks for checkin’ in.”

“I’ll call in a few days,” I promise, and then he says a hello from Brenda. I swallow hard. “Hi back.”

After I hang up the phone, I’m surprised to find that I actually miss my dad. I have no siblings and no mom, so he’s my only real family. We’ve had our rough spots, but he’s worked hard to change. He’ll show his sobriety chip to anyone, and he turns down drink offers with a smile and a “No, thank you—five years sober.” He’s always wanted people to know, to keep him accountable and understand that they could talk to him if they were having the same kind of struggle.

I sneak back out the door I came in and make a beeline for the nearest group of hot guys. They’re standing in line for Lilah Montgomery merchandise, although one guy is already

wearing Lilah apparel of his own—a homemade T-shirt that reads: MARRY ME, LILAH!

Making sure my press pass is front and center, I make my way toward him. The shirt will make Dee laugh, maybe even ease her nerves. His gaze bounces from my cleavage to my face, as if he noticed but won't let himself look—a decent guy.

“Hey,” I say coolly. “Mind if I get a shot of your T-shirt?”

“Not at all.” He looks pleased. With his arm around one of the girls in his group, he puffs out his chest and gives me a big grin. He's a clean-cut blond, medium height, with an easy smile. If Dee had a type other than Jimmy, this guy would probably be it.

“Thanks.” I rest my camera back around my neck. “She'll like it.”

“You know her?” he asks. All his friends quiet down, watching my face. One of the girls glances at my tour pass. “Wait. Are you *'riding top down with Reagan'* Reagan?”

I shrug, nodding.

Dee penned my name into the lyrics of her first single, “Open Road Summer.” She wrote it when we were freshmen, daydreaming about our summers once we turned sixteen. No offense to her dad's old convertible and the back roads of our hometown, but the reality of our open road summer is better than Dee could have imagined. The song means a lot to me, even if it's weird that thousands of people sing my name.

“What's she like?” another guy asks.

I don't know how to answer that, so I smirk and tell him, “She's all right. Enjoy the show.”

They call after me as I walk away, asking if they can meet her. I ignore them and flag down a little girl dressed up as Dee, complete with a short blond wig and a plastic toy guitar. I'm not much for kids, but this one is cute. The little girl poses next to her mom, hand on her hip.

"I'm going to show her these pictures before she goes onstage," I tell the girl after snapping a few shots.

She gasps, wide-eyed. "Will you tell her my name is Olivia?"

"Sure."

Over Olivia's head, her mother mouths, "Thank you."

"No problem." They both squeal as I walk away. If I'm being honest with myself, I'd probably wish for a mother like that—a mother who could have taken me to concerts, gotten excited about the things I was excited about. That would have been nice, though I'd settle for any mother who didn't leave.

After a few more pictures of beaming fans, I make my way backstage. Everyone rushes around, pushing past one another in a frenetic blur. I find the greenroom door, where a woman with a panicked expression and a walkie-talkie nearly plows me over. Dee's family is on their way out, and her youngest brother has a poster board tucked under his arm.

"Hey, sweetie," Mrs. Montgomery says, swiping my cheek with a lipstick peck as she passes by. "How ya doin'?"

"I'm good. Is she okay so far?"

"She's great. You gonna stand in the front row with us?"

“Yeah, but I’ll watch the first few songs from side stage for the camera angle,” I say, lifting the camera from my neck. “Let me get a picture before you go.”

Her brothers hold up the poster—WE LOVE YOU, SIS in big block letters—while her mom and dad wrap their arms around each of the boys. They beam as I capture the image, but one second later, Mrs. Montgomery dabs her knuckle at the corner of her eye, intercepting a tear.

“Sorry,” she says, laughing. “Allergies.”

Dee’s youngest brother chimes in. “She’s very emotional about this concert.”

“You, hush.” Mrs. Montgomery laughs. “He repeats everything he hears, I swear. See you out there, darlin’.”

Inside, Dee’s wrapped in a robe I bought her two Christmases ago, in full makeup, hair done. People buzz all around her at a speed that feels like fast-forward, but she sits still in a director’s chair, looking at her reflection. Her expression is quizzical, as if she’s searching for something in her own eyes and can’t quite find it.

I walk up behind the chair and touch her shoulder. She startles, glancing up at me.

“You okay?” I frown at her, unsettled by the expression I just saw.

She smiles, but her chest is rising and falling too fast. “I feel like I’m floating outside my body, like this isn’t really happening.”

Her hand is at her throat, twisting at her necklace. She’s not blinking enough, panic prying her eyelids open. Either

that or she's concentrating all her energy on holding up thick false lashes. "They're all here to see me."

Most of the time, Dee seems in awe of her own life, as if she's tripped and fallen into it. But it isn't randomness or luck that got her here, and I wish she knew that.

"Hey," I say. "You've done this a hundred times."

"Not as the headliner! I'm *it!*"

I have to stifle at laugh. "Do you think all those people were trying to buy tickets for a Kira King concert, but—oops—how did they wind up at this Lilah Montgomery concert?"

She rolls her eyes, but the absurdity of my comment must have resonated because the creases in her forehead relax.

Looking at Dee, I can't hear the din of the people bustling around us. The world goes quiet as I watch her face, moments from one of her biggest dreams coming true. I lift my camera and take a picture before she can swat me away.

"At least take one of both of us," she says. I hold the camera up with my good arm—a total photographer no-no—and grin as it clicks. When we survey the final product, it looks like two normal best friends. And we are, I guess, outside of my police record and her superstardom.

"Frame-worthy," Dee decides.

"Hey." I click back to the picture of the little girl in the Dee costume, posing next to her mom. "You have to see this."

Dee laughs and presses the zoom button. "Oh my gosh. So cute."

“Her name’s Olivia.”

“Lilah,” a production assistant says. “It’s time. The local opener’s on in five.”

Dee nods, glancing at me. “I guess this is it.”

“Guess so,” I say as she stands up, taking another deep breath.

She slides off her robe to reveal her first outfit of the night—a bright-red dress with cap sleeves. Dee hugs her arms around my neck, channeling all her nervous energy into an uncomfortably tight squeeze. Quietly, she says, “Infinity?”

“Infinity,” I agree as she releases her grip on me.

“See you after,” she calls, and then the assistant whisks her away. I put my camera back around my neck and glance around. Nearby, Peach is talking to one of the venue managers, explaining something that requires counting on her fingers so he’ll understand. I click a few more pictures of the bustle backstage, capturing images of the backup band tuning their guitars and performing their preshow cheer.

I see it all through the lens of my camera—the flurry of movement, the venue staff in black T-shirts, giving orders into their headsets. As I take it all in, my mind weighs the texture, the composition, the possibility of each changing scene, and I struggle to hold back, to keep my finger from pressing too soon. That’s my biggest flaw as a photographer. I’m impatient—trigger-happy. I want the shot now, now, now, click, click, click, and if I could just wait a second more, the moment would really flourish.

From the wings, I watch as Dee’s band begins the first

song. Even though I know the exact moment she'll enter, it still makes my skin prickle. The opening chords break into the first verse, and her silhouette rises from a hidden compartment in the stage. At the sight of Dee's outlined form, the audience erupts. Screams and whistles lift toward the high ceiling, so powerful that the roof could pop off like a champagne cork.

Dee struts to center stage, singing into a handheld microphone. Now the crowd starts singing along and clapping. Behind Dee, the huge screen bursts into an image of blue sky. She throws her whole body into the music, tossing her hair around. Despite the enormous stage, she looks tall, this tiny girl who can fill a venue with thousands of people and her own music. You'd never know that her nerves are zapping like electrical wiring gone wrong.

Halfway through the concert, I sneak out to the VIP area, which is the floor space right in front of the stage. While I wait, I snap a few pictures of Dee's brothers, who are wearing big headphones to protect their ears from the huge amps. Mrs. Montgomery catches me lurking and waves me over with a wide grin. Dee reenters the stage—this time in a different dress, and the crowd reignites.

"Isn't this amazing?" Dee's mom yells to me over the cheers.

Dee takes a seat on a stool in the middle of the stage with her guitar and starts strumming chords. Her horseshoe necklace glints in the light of the stage.

"This song is called 'Old Dreams.' It's for my mama, and

for all the girls who came here with their mamas tonight—especially Olivia.”

This is what I could have told the guy from earlier, the one who asked what she’s like. Amid the jitters of her first opening show, Lilah Montgomery remembered the name of the little girl who dressed up like her for this show—that is what she’s like.

I wish I could see Olivia’s face, wherever she is in the crowd. I imagine her shrieks of joy, how she’ll run into school to tell her friends. I wonder if her mother feels the same joy, watching her daughter. The same joy all over Mrs. Montgomery’s face. I wonder if my mother thinks of me at all, wherever she is.

For the rest of the concert, I’m rapt as though I’ve never heard these songs before. The first ending comes quickly, and then an encore. When Dee returns to the stage, the background screen changes to a field of wildflowers. Guitar in hand, Dee sings about where we met all those years ago—the *middle of nowhere, Tennessee*.

With a full house and a full heart, my best friend strikes her final pose—arms raised high, head thrown back. She’s doing it, like she always said she would.

The memory comes barreling back to me, from three years ago. I wasn’t surprised that the school counselor called me down to her office to “check in” only a few days into freshman year. Gossip had been following me around since I was in middle school, when a gaggle of mean girls started a rumor that I was anorexic. By the time I hit a C-cup in eighth grade,

they were saying that I'd gotten implants, that I was an aspiring porn star, that I was a slut. Any time I missed school for a dentist appointment, I returned to rumors that I was cutting class to fool around with a senior. I was the girl who had no mom, the girl whose dad was not so anonymously in Alcoholics Anonymous. Even the school counselor believed the rumors about me might be true. I could tell she was fishing around for information about the gossip du jour—that I'd hooked up with a teacher. I was *fourteen* and had only kissed two boys ever. Plus: ew. A teacher?

I sighed, shaking my head at the counselor. "Look, Mia Graziani started that rumor to deflect attention from her own problems. I don't want to gossip, but . . . frankly, I've seen her throwing up in the bathroom twice this past month, so . . . either pregnancy or bulimia. Poor girl."

It was a total lie, and I almost felt bad about it. But I *hated* Mia. I hated her for choosing me as the subject of her cruelty. I hated her more for bringing out the viciousness in me. This wasn't who I wanted to be, but how many times can a dog get kicked before she bares her teeth in return?

I retreated to the girl's bathroom as the bell rang. I went into the stall where "Reagan O'Neill is a whore" was written on the back of the door. In black Sharpie, I spelled out exactly where Mia Graziani could shove it. It wasn't long before I heard the creak of the door and soft footsteps.

"Reagan . . ." Dee always sounds like her mom when she uses her calm voice. "C'mon. Come out."

I complied by kicking the stall door with all my might.

Dee winced at the sound of the metal door slamming against the wall and then surveyed my vandalism. She was holding the bathroom pass from the class we were both supposed to be in.

“They’re just jealous.”

“Why would they be jealous?”

“Because you’re beautiful and smart. They know it. You make them insecure.”

“Yeah, right.” I scowled, kicking the door again, though with less force this time.

Dee caught the door with one hand before it could hit the wall.

“They’re mean to you, too, you know,” I said. They called Dee “Frizz” behind her back and talked about her songwriting contract with air quotes, like they didn’t believe it was real. But it was still unkind of me—attempting to drag Dee along the low road with me. Her cheeks flinched, trying to frown, but she wouldn’t let them. Even then, Dee was strong. Not in the loud, brassy, I-am-woman way that some girls are. She was strong then the way she’s strong now, in a quiet but irrepressible way.

“Yeah, I know,” she said finally. “But my mom says the best revenge is living well, and I believe her.”

And now—arms high and pyrotechnic sparks showering the stage beside her—she’s proving her point. I believe her, too.

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