

SOMETHING HOLY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains two parts: a craft paper on interiority and seven chapters of a young adult social realism novel. The craft paper explores different strategies for “showing and telling” as a means of conveying interiority in faith-based characters, and it analyzes these strategies in two YA novels, *Let’s Call it Doomsday* by Katie Henry and *Autoboyography* by Christina Lauren, both of which center around queer, Mormon characters. The novel chapters in the thesis are from *Something Holy*, which follows Beck Taylor, an eighteen-year-old, mostly closeted bisexual boy who only has a few months until he leaves on a two-year mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Determined to make the most of his time left, he and his cousin Emilia follow Evergreen, their favorite local band, on tour, but when Beck falls for the male drummer Julius, feelings and faith complicate his perfect summer.

DEDICATION

For Alison, Brittany, Livvy, Maddie, Jay, Allie, and myself.

And for all the other queer kids who grew up religious, Mormon or otherwise.

I see you, and I love you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....iv

DEDICATION.....v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....vi

PART 1: CRAFT PAPER.....1

 The Necessity of Showing and Telling: An Analysis of Mormon Faith-Based
 Interiority Strategies in *Let's Call it Doomsday* and *Autoboyography*.....1

 Showing.....2

 Telling.....6

PART 2: *SOMETHING HOLY*.....11

 Chapter 1.....11

 Chapter 2.....22

 Chapter 3.....28

 Chapter 4.....34

 Chapter 5.....45

 Chapter 6.....55

 Chapter 7.....62

WORKS CITED.....68

VITA.....69

PART 1: CRAFT PAPER

The Necessity of Showing and Telling: An Analysis of Mormon Faith-Based Interiority Strategies in *Let's Call it Doomsday* and *Autoboyography*

According to 2022 Story Prize winner and author Brandon Taylor, interiority is a “revelation of a character’s mode of thinking and being” and important in developing characters and exploring internal conflict. Yet this becomes more difficult when creating religious characters, like Mormons, because integrating faith adds another layer of complexity to internal narration. Emerging writers are often advised that, to develop interiority, they should “show, not tell,” as telling does not engage the reader in sensory or other details, leaving the reader disconnected from the character. However, most writers discover that telling is just as important as showing for developing interiority. In Tin House’s *The Writer’s Notebook*, Alex Award winner and creative writing professor Peter Rock says, “telling is the voice of the story; the showing is the character letting loose” (229). A combination of both showing (i.e., bodily response, action, and metaphorical image) and telling (i.e., manipulating narrative distance and thematizing tone in thought) is necessary to create rounded interiority and, in the case of my thesis, to understand and characterize faith identities (Glover; Jauss, 28; Makkai; Taylor; Williams). Two novels that use interiority strategies, featuring showing and telling, to flesh out their Mormon characters, are Katie Henry’s *Let’s Call It Doomsday* and Christina Lauren’s *Autoboyography*. These novels approach the intersection of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) faith and sexuality for a young adult audience in a nuanced way, like I attempt

to do in my thesis *Something Holy*. Because writing about religion is as difficult as writing interiority, Henry and Lauren provided a guide for me, and in this paper, I will examine how they use the showing and telling strategies to portray their characters' interiority.

Let's Call It Doomsday by Katie Henry, follows sixteen-year-old, severely anxious, Mormon, doomsday prepper Ellis Kimball as she and her new non-member friend Hannah try to find "Prophet Dan" and warn people about the snowy apocalypse coming to Berkeley, California. The novel grapples with mental illness, faith, and sexuality through Ellis and her relationships to both family and friends, namely her parents, Hannah, and Tal, the boy she likes. *Autoboyography* by Christina Lauren, the penname for author duo Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings, follows the romance of eighteen-year-old Tanner Scott, a bisexual, agnostic boy of Jewish descent new to Provo, Utah, and his nineteen-year-old writing tutor Sebastian Brother, the strait-laced, devout son of a Mormon bishop, as they navigate a high school novel writing workshop and life in their conservative town. While the novel is mostly from Tanner's point of view, the last few chapters shift to Sebastian's perspective, which is the section I'll focus on in my analysis, since I'm looking at LDS characters specifically. Each novel was released in the last five years, making Henry and Lauren's stories, characters, and craft manipulation relevant to emerging authors like myself, and by analyzing their usage of showing and telling to create interiority, I have learned new strategies and applied them to my own writing.

Showing

In my research, I found three of such strategies for showing a character's feelings and creating interiority, which are bodily response, action, and metaphorical imagery. Rebecca Makkai, author and 2022 Guggenheim Fellow, discusses each of these in her *CRAFT* essay

“Interiority Complex.” She names “specific physical interiority” as a way to create a sensory experience of a character’s feelings. I define this as a physical reaction the character cannot control; it’s how their body reacts without them thinking about it. One of the most popular examples of this is “the old cardiopulmonary check-in” as Makkai calls it, meaning the overuse of a racing heart or heavy breathing. Unfortunately, Katie Henry and Christina Lauren both make these references, such as in *Let’s Call It Doomsday* when Henry describes Ellis feeling the Holy Spirit in a different way than LDS members usually describe it: “I’m kneeling on the carpet on my childhood bedroom gasping for air, flooded with adrenaline and endorphins and that indescribable feeling” (82). She attempts to make it more unique to Ellis by having the Spirit spark adrenaline instead of the typical “peace” stated earlier on the page, setting Ellis apart from the norm, but as Makkai warns, Henry’s example is not reinventive enough to push past the cliché.

However, both authors also follow Makkai’s advice of “pick another body part.” She suggests thinking about specific details that don’t just relay a physical response but define character. In *Autoboyography*, after breaking up with Tanner and being ignored by his own family, Sebastian feels an intense pain, which the narrator describes here, “It always starts beneath his breastbone and then expands downward, black and curling, like a match held to cellophane” (342). In this scene, the outside pressure Sebastian feels makes him ache and curl inward, the bodily response, and the use of a match to cellophane to describe that pain explains how it feels for the church, his family, and he himself to have created this pain. It characterizes Sebastian, shows his grief, and resonates with the reader, which is what good showing should do.

The next showing strategy for interiority is action, or a physical reaction the character does control. In his Substack *Sweater Weather*, author Brandon Taylor says of interiority, “It’s a

bit of a truism that plot is character in action, and that characters best reveal themselves via their actions in scenes,” which is to say that, like the previous strategy, action must contribute in two ways: externally and internally. It is in the internal that characterization occurs. Makkai warns, “We have to be careful, though, of stock-image gestures.” This filler movement (e.g., sighing, blinking, or crossing a room) and the cliché movement (e.g., checking a watch when running late or tapping a foot when impatient) says nothing about the character. While both Lauren and Henry use some of this filler movement in their novels, they do manage to create interiority with specific, detailed action. For example, in *Let’s Call It Doomsday*, after her anxiety and belief in the apocalypse are brushed aside by her parents, Ellis reaches out to her father for comfort. Henry writes, “I grab his hand, and hold on tight, the way I used to when he’d read to me at bedtime. Like if I gripped his thumb hard enough, he’d never turn the lights off. Like if I never let go, he wouldn’t either” (164). Ellis’s vulnerability shines through the action because of Henry’s childhood similes, redefining the movement as not only a cry of desperation, but also one of comfort.

Another way of building interiority in action is through a character’s inaction. Take the scene when Sebastian is reading Tanner’s book from the workshop, which he never turned in for fear of outing Sebastian, for the first time and learns it’s a retelling of their love story; Lauren writes, “The sun starts to break, and Sebastian stares at the screen, eyes blurry. Other than standing to plug in the laptop, he hasn’t moved in hours” (357). All throughout the novel, Sebastian is a busy-body, balancing school, tutoring, soccer, church, family obligations, and the publishing of his book from the previous year’s workshop. Yet here, after reading his own love story, the one he was forced to give up, he is still, unmoving. This shows how meaningful their relationship was to Sebastian and how powerful Tanner’s words are. At the end of this scene,

Sebastian takes the steps to come out to the workshop's instructor in order for Tanner to pass the class, something he was scared and unwilling to do for most of the novel. In both examples from each novel, action is used as more than a plot device, as Taylor suggests, a way to create interiority.

While the first two strategies involve the character's physical state, metaphorical imagery uses external factors to reflect the character's internal thoughts and create interiority. In her essay, Makkai asks, "Can we come up with some figurative language we haven't heard a million times before?" This seems to be the goal of most authors when using metaphorical imagery in their work. There are two ways to do this; the first is Makkai's method, which is to use an "original metaphor" to provide an internal image for an abstract thought—that is, the image is only in the character's head. The following example from *Let's Call It Doomsday* can best explain this. In this scene, Tal, Ellis's crush, is questioning why she still believes in her LDS faith when it's more conservative than she is. She thinks, "I stay in the boat even though the water is rough and the shore looks so peaceful. I work to believe, and that alone should make me worthy" (192). The metaphor describes how she sees herself in her faith in comparison to others, to Tal who's comfortable leaving his Mormon faith behind. It's a characterizing image and provides context to the next line: her interpretation of the LDS faith is that it bases worthiness on effort, which is interiority that further defines her character.

The second method for this strategy is using an external image as a metaphor. In his essay "Indirection of Image," author John Thornton Williams describes this as "an instance in which a writer takes into consideration how a certain character would see (or, for that matter, smell/hear/etc.) a particular setting or image based on his/her emotional state." This method is "a way to take abstract emotions and project them onto something concrete" (Williams). Lauren

does this in *Autoboyography* when Sebastian prematurely leaves his mission call opening to take a breather before the big event and think about what he wants. Instead of driving to church like he intended, he heads to a nature spot down a dirt road he and Tanner used to sneak off to. There, he allows himself to glance at Tanner's Instagram for the first time. Sebastian hasn't seen him in months, and he relaxes as he sees picture after picture. Lauren writes, "His [Tanner's] eyes are luminous, hair shaggier than the last time he saw him, mouth curled into that singular, joyful smirk" (385). Sebastian scrolls until he sees Tanner in a UCLA shirt and realizes he's off living his life and enjoying it. Tanner's Instagram profile is used as metaphorical imagery for what Sebastian's life could be if he accepted himself and chose his own path. The image provides insight to the goals Sebastian hasn't made the reader aware of up until this point because he himself wasn't aware of it before. The interiority here creates a trigger for Sebastian to reflect and then act in order to get what he wants, Tanner. This method, as well as the other showing strategies build interiority and, therefore, facilitates character development, particularly in Ellis and Sebastian's faith identities.

Telling

However, showing cannot carry the entire load of interiority. Author Peter Rock says, "Telling closes the distance between the story and the reader; to me, this means that the story speaks . . . and things can become intimate. . . . Showing does not attend to the reader in quite the same way" (231). This intimacy in interiority is established using two telling strategies: manipulating narrative distance and thematizing tone in thought. Author David Jauss writes about the first strategy in "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction," an essay from his craft book *Alone With All That Could Happen*. In it, he explains the "spectrum

of distances” and how each stage reveals more about the character as the narration “zooms” in on their consciousness, like a film lens (36, 37). The technique is used to “achieve the emotional, intellectual, and moral responses the author desires,” in this case to create interiority (30). In *Let’s Call It Doomsday*, Katie Henry repeatedly shifts from direct interior monologue—or “thoughts presented without alteration, comment, or even attribution by the narrator,” which, for first-person narration, means “the character is not consciously narrating”—to stream of consciousness, which “presents those thoughts as they exist before the character’s mind has ‘edited’ them or arranged them into complete sentences” (51–53). In the previous scene discussing faith and worthiness with Tal, Henry does this to portray how Ellis’s anxiety interrupts her life, and it appears on the page as follows:

. . . I work to believe and that alone should make me worthy. So why don’t I ever feel like I am?

One day your doubt might be stronger than your belief. One day you might not fit your faith.

One day you might not be able to live the life your family wants for you.

There’s a nagging, clawing feeling in the pit of my stomach, and sometimes it feels like it could slice me open entirely. And it can’t, I can’t let it, because who knows what would spill out? (192).

By manipulating narrative distance this way, Henry establishes a main part of the character, which is the war between Ellis and herself. The two distances interact with each other to create dynamic interiority for the character. Her struggle on the page resonates with the reader and meets the goals Jauss outlines in his essay.

Likewise, Lauren takes advantage of the zoom-in lens in *Autoboyography*. Sebastian's chapters are in third-person point of view and use mostly indirect interior monologue, which allows the narrator to "use [the] character's language" and "reflect the character's thoughts," to build his interiority; however, there is one moment in his section where the narration shifts into stream of consciousness (Jauss 45, 46). In this scene, Sebastian finds out his mother submitted his mission application while he was gone on his book tour, and he's not as excited about it as he expects to be because he's missing Tanner and the freedom he had on tour. In desperation for guidance, Sebastian prays, "*Heavenly Father, please give me strength. Give me the wisdom I need, the surety of decision. I'll follow where you lead me*" (379). Even with the deconstruction of his faith throughout his chapters, this still remains, and its inclusion characterizes Sebastian in a complex light. His turning to God in an hour of need speaks to how the core of his faith has survived, even if some of the social principles have not. The use of this strategy, of scaling narrative distances, to navigate interiority strengthens it by creating layers of depth in the prose and, therefore, bridging the gap between the reader and the character.

The second telling strategy is creating interiority through thematic tone in characters' thoughts and reflection. Author Douglas Glover describes this as "anchoring a text in a single emotion, which becomes thematic, explaining or theorizing an experiential context" (5). A character's emotive response can establish a thematic reflection, which builds interiority not only in the text but in its tone. For example, in *Let's Call It Doomsday*, during a conversation with Hannah, Ellis considers the possibility that all of her faults, the anxiety and her burgeoning queerness, might actually fit into the church's idea of being "created in the image of something perfect. That there are no errors in creation. . . . that [she] was fearfully, wonderfully made." Having a fascination with etymology, she reflects on this discovery: "The word *apocalypse*

means revelation, but that doesn't mean every revelation is an apocalypse. Or maybe it can be a little apocalypse. The word *apocalypse* means to uncover what's been hidden. Maybe this time, I'll draw back the curtain and like what I see" (243). Henry inverts Ellis's major fear, the apocalypse, into something positive, creating a hopeful tone and showing Ellis's character development up until this point. One of the novel's major themes is deciphering identity in external and internal pressures, which Henry demonstrates in this excerpt of interiority.

Brandon Taylor speaks to this idea of thematizing tone and says, "When it comes to interiority, it's not just about what the character thinks, but the internally coherent system of intelligence created in aggregate. The vibe, so to speak. The sense of a person evoked by careful observation of their observation." In the case of *Autoboyography*, Sebastian's chapters are tonally gloomy with little bouts of sunshine when he thinks about Tanner, and at the end of his last chapter, the passive, glum tone shifts to active desperation and hopeful uncertainty. Lauren does this by putting Sebastian through a faith spiral; he's finally pushed himself past the point of no return. Lauren writes:

He's gay. He's never been anything else. Tonight they'll all be waiting for Sebastian to give his testimony and speak on how full of joy he is that he's been called to spread God's word wherever He's chosen to send him, and he doesn't even know where he fits into God's word anymore.

What is he doing? (386-387).

Sebastian then approaches his family, and Lauren alludes to him telling them he's not going on his mission and/or officially coming out to them. The thematic tone here provides context to the mental anguish put on Sebastian, or any characters, when his faith combats a core piece of who he is. His observation of this, whether it's an active one or not, allows the reader to interpret the

“vibe,” as Taylor calls it, and therefore, build a connection to Sebastian through his interiority.

I used these strategies, both showing and telling, to create interiority in my thesis. The challenge for me was finding the balance between the two, as the showing came easier to me, but I knew well-written telling was needed in order to establish my protagonist Beck Taylor in these first few chapters of *Something Holy* and create movement in the work as well. My goal was to generate realistic and detailed interiority, as Brandon Taylor describes. Interiority is a space to ruminate in thought and sort through feeling, not static but “vivid and dynamic as a scene. As a narrative in motion.” He says:

“[Interiority] represents a crackling inner life both for [the character] and for the story itself. It is in such moments that a character springs so richly to life. In capturing the way that our feelings about ourselves and others roll over each other, crash and remake each other, one has achieved a dimensionality to storytelling that goes beyond mere efficiency and productivity of scene-making.”

I aspire to reach to that level of storytelling, but until then, I’ll look to Katie Henry and Christina Lauren, as well as the others I referenced, to understand strategies for interiority and apply them to faith-driven characters, as they do in *Let’s Call It Doomsday* and *Autoboyography* and as I attempted to do in *Something Holy*.

PART 2: *SOMETHING HOLY*

Chapter 1

When Beck Taylor's plugged in—headphones on, fingers pressing black and ivory keys—nothing can break his concentration. Not his mother's vacuuming. Not his father's screaming at a BYU football play. Not his four siblings, one older and three younger, fighting over the Nintendo Switch. Not even the fire alarm that time his younger brother Bobby somehow caught a pot of boiling water on fire. The kitchen smelled like melted plastic for hours, and his mother Gretchen cried when she found the tea towel from her trip to England burned to black fibers, and yet Beck didn't register the chaos. Instead, he played the bridge to an indie pop song he'd been working on over and over, changing notes here and there, until he was finally satisfied. Hours later.

But everything has an exception. And Beck's is always his cousin and best friend Emilia. Unapologetically abrasive and undyingly loyal Emilia.

The afternoon sun spills in between each stripe of blinds onto his desk pressed against the window, giving him enough natural light to work. Outside, his littlest sister, seven-year-old Bella, rides her bike with some neighbor kids around their cul-de-sac. School's out for the summer in Logan, Utah, and the sunshine has come out to celebrate. Clouds float over the peaks of the mountains bordering Cache Valley.

The keys beneath Beck's fingers click. The music registers in his ears, and a program records the tune, drawing waves like a polygraph. The melody is slow and deep. A starless night

with light from the full moon engulfed in fog. A boy sitting alone on the hood of his car. His ribs spread wide open. His heart discolored.

Beck can only find the music; he can't find the words.

A tan hand jerks his headphones off, and Beck's soul leaves his body.

"First of all, happy birthday," Emilia says. "Second of all, I have a brilliant plan, and you can't say no."

Beck swivels his chair around in time to catch the headphones his cousin throws at him.

"Em—"

"Legendary, Beck. Epic. Amazing. Incredible. Unforgettable. Historic."

She paces his room, nearly knocking the acoustic guitar that hangs on one wall and also the candle on the dresser against the other wall. Her long, nearly-black, curly hair sways in a wild tangle behind her back. She has on one of Beck's Killers shirts because, of course, she does. They may look like complete opposites—Emilia short, chubby, and brown and Beck tall, lanky, and pasty-white—but they share clothes like siblings because they practically are. He likes a loose fit, and she likes not buying overpriced band t-shirts at concerts. Beck ultimately steals them back though.

"What is so 'epic'?" Beck asks, straightening his glasses.

"This plan, oh my god. You're going to die."

She plops down on the floor and sits crisscross applesauce. She seems excited, but sometimes their conversations start out this way and then they both end up crying, like when he came out as bisexual a year ago after junior prom. She must've thought he was upset about seeing his ex-girlfriend, his first love Shauna, with another guy. Beck was devastated when they first broke up, but he was actually sad about seeing David, a guy from church, dancing with a

girl, which only confirmed what he'd been feeling for months. So he told Emilia, and they both cried. She hugged him and told him it'd be okay.

Likewise, when Emilia waited giddily all day to open the email that told her she got a full-ride academic scholarship to Pitt, but when she finally got it, she was uncharacteristically quiet as she held the phone to her chest and let tears fall. Beck nearly cried, too, because it was yet another reminder they would go their separate ways at the end of the summer.

There's a song there. One about two cousins born two days apart. Emilia the older and Beck the younger, by two days. She the bank robber and he the getaway driver. She the one to push to the front of a crowd, he the one to stand in the back with binoculars. Both have lived in Logan for all of their lives. Their names are always muttered together, "Beck and Emilia." Each one half of Gemini. Cousin Castor and Pollux, Emilia the demigod and Beck the one she drags to immortality.

He has no idea how he'll survive the next few years without her. Especially when he has to serve on a two-year-long mission trip for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the end of the summer, while she goes off to college. In the Mormon church, eighteen-year-old boys, and sometimes nineteen-year-old girls, leave to proselytize about the gospel for two years. It's a commandment that Beck joins the army of men in white shirts and black name tags, but the idea of leaving everything behind is overwhelming.

He can feel the notes in his fingertips. If only he could pause the conversation to test them out on his keyboard...

"Okay, so, look at what Evergreen just posted on Instagram," Emilia says.

He opens the new post on his favorite band's page, ignoring the mesmerizing pictures of Julius the drummer and the cool Polynesian tattoos down his arms, the ones Beck has to stop

himself from imagining tracing with his finger.

“Oh my gosh!”

“I know!”

“Emilia!”

“I know!”

They’re going on tour. The undiscovered, underrated indie band from Provo, Utah, is going on tour. Emilia is right, Beck could die. They first heard Evergreen when they were fourteen and the band only had three members and played house parties. Now they’re playing restaurants in Provo, but in a few weeks, they’ll be playing gigs all over Utah, Arizona, and Colorado. This will get them more exposure, a larger following, and maybe a record deal if the right person is sitting in the crowd. Beck vibrates at the possibility of a label producing a full-length album for them as a result of this tour.

“We’re going,” Emilia says.

“Oh, for sure,” he says as he scrolls through the dates and venues in the caption. “They’re coming to Logan and Ogden, but I bet we could stay with Aunt Angie when we see them in Provo, and we could go to the Salt Lake shows too.”

“No,” she says, conspiratorially, “we’re going to every show. Road trip, Beck. That’s my spectacular, unstoppable, glorious plan. We’re going to make this last summer the greatest ever.”

“You just want to stalk Devin,” he says.

“Oh, please,” she says. “It’s all part of my plan to make him mine: show up at every show looking hot and casually insert myself into every conversation at the end of the night.”

Emilia has never done anything casually in her life. Not when bossing people around as stage manager in their theater class, while Beck was in the tech booth, and certainly not when

talking to Devin.

“You think stalking is the way to his heart?” he asks, but she ignores him.

She’s had a crush on the lead singer and band leader since they first saw Evergreen perform in the basement of one of their oldest cousin Cami’s friends. Back then Devin Green was fifteen and wore jeans so tight his dark brown skin bubbled out of the holes on his knees. His coarse hair was styled in a close fade, and he was shorter than his younger brother Mitchell, who played drums at the time. Now, Devin is tall and lean, and his hair is in a collection of locs, reaching just below his chin. Beck understands why Emilia likes him.

Devin’s voice is even better than it was at fifteen. It’s still deep and raw, but it’s more controlled and maneuvers their indie rock tunes with ease. Thankfully, Mitchell moved to the keys once Julius joined. Beck has mastered every trick Mitchell pulls with the keyboard tech; he can play any Evergreen song from memory now. The other band members, Teague and Sarah, lead guitar and bass respectively, round out their sound to perfection. Or, at least, to the point where Beck and Emilia can’t get enough.

And, of course, there’s Julius Fiefia. The real reason Beck can’t get enough. The Polynesian drum sprite, who’s only a few inches taller than Emilia, mesmerizes Beck with every clash of his cymbals. He has dimples at the apples of his tan cheeks that Beck can’t help but stare at when Julius comes up on his Instagram feed.

Beck draws a breath every time. He catalogs Julius’s wacky fashion statements. His shiny curls. And then he scrolls away and counts the seconds until he can breathe again. He was like this with Shauna too.

A lone drum stick leans against a stack of books on the bookshelf by his desk. Julius gave it to him in October after the last show Beck and Emilia went to. Beck nearly pissed himself

when Julius started flirting with him. That's when his crush bloomed.

That's when he decided to not even tell Emilia about it.

But, geez, the thought of going on tour with them. Beck and Emilia cruising in his fifteen-year-old, silver Chevy Impala. Miles of desert on either side of them. Singing along to folk music and show tunes and Evergreen. Seeing them perform every other night. Seeing Julius.

But it's a pipe dream. Even if they could scrounge up the money and Emilia's parents say yes, no way is Gretchen Taylor going to let her baby Beck go off alone with the cousin she doesn't trust to watch a band he's already seen play a million times. Even though she's okay with letting him leave for two years to somewhere he's never been before, maybe speaking a language he hasn't learned yet, only communicating through emails and weekly phone calls.

The mission is a whole thing he's not entirely excited about.

"There's no way we can do that," he tells her.

"Why not? We're both eighteen now. And we'll have the money after tonight."

Their shared family birthday party. Every one of his father's five siblings, including Emilia's mother, are coming to his house with their spouses and children to celebrate their birthdays. Each one of them will tote an envelope with a check like they've done since Beck and Emilia grew out of toys. Their grandparents' will be the biggest of all.

"Em, my mom," he says. Gretchen Taylor may be half a foot shorter than him with a kind smile perpetually painted on her face, but when she gets that "mom" look, he's the one who has to look up to her.

"Let me handle Gretch. I got this," Emilia says, pumping up her fists, gearing for a fight.

She tells him about all the research she's done, including a tentative list of cheap motels and camping sites along the tour route, while he fiddles with a pen at his desk. It sounds perfect.

Having another way for them to squeeze more memories with each other before they each have to grow up at the end of the summer.

“I just think that we need this, you know?” Emilia says. “When you’re in god-knows-where, bothering strangers about Jesus, and I’m in Pittsburgh being amazing, we’re not going to talk every day.”

She won’t ever admit she’s scared about the future, but the flicker of worry in her voice whenever she talks about Pitt gives her away. Beck knows the feeling.

Emilia waves her emotion off. “If we’re stuck in a car for a month, we’re going to want to kill each other. So, you know, we’ll be glad when the summer’s over. Just like if I were doing this with Gretchen.”

“You think it’d be like going on a road trip with my mom?”

“Well, you can be a major buzzkill.”

He throws the pen at her.

“I still don’t think we’ll be able to pull this off. I only need my dental records, and then I can turn in my mission papers. After that it’s only a few weeks until I get my call,” Beck says.

A mission is the bridge to the rest of a Mormon kid’s life, at least that’s how he sees it. He resigned himself a long time ago that he’d have to push through his minor introverted tendencies to do the job, but it’s not all that worries him now.

Beck is queer.

The church is very clear on what it thinks about that, no matter their performative actions in the press, at least that’s what Emilia calls it.

If Beck were to fall in love with a man, he wouldn’t be able to get married in one of the sacred temples. If he doesn’t marry a woman in the temple, he can’t go to the highest degree of

heaven when he dies. He wouldn't see his family again or reside with Heavenly Father in eternal peace.

He doesn't know if that's true, but it's easier to go along with what he's been taught his whole life while he figures it out. So, he's choosing to keep it quiet. To shove it on a shelf with the other church things he's not sure about, like its wishy-washy history. He hopes it doesn't break under the weight.

Emilia is the only one who knows he's bi, which is enough. It has to be.

"Your call can wait. This is Evergreen."

For someone who likes to argue, apparently Emilia thinks that's persuasive enough. And she's not wrong.

"I got you something," Beck says.

Emilia perks up. "Oh? What is it?"

He swivels his chair back around to face his laptop, pulls up a few tracks he's recorded, and presses play. A familiar Evergreen tune plays from the small speaker, but it's not Evergreen. It's Beck. Well, it's Beck's arrangement, softer than the band's alternative rock sound. Devin still sings the track.

"Oh my god, is this a new version? How did you get this?" Emilia asks.

Instead of singing along like she normally does, Emilia closes her eyes and bobs her head.

"This is good."

"You like?"

"I love," she says. "It's better."

He was so nervous to share music with her because she can be intimately critical,

especially about his position in the church, but Evergreen is their safe haven. It's the best birthday present he could come up with.

"It's mine," he says.

Her thick eyebrows furrow. "What?"

"I isolated the vocals and recorded a new arrangement."

He kept the tempo but highlighted the piano more than the band did. His guitar skills are mediocre—not like the god Teague is—and the drums are synthetic, from a drum pad, but he's proud of what the song became. Devin sings about a lying lover, and Beck matches the angst with his keyboard.

He added his own background vocals, but he's not telling Emilia that. He's not ready to share everything. Just like his totally-not-a-crush-but-definitely-a-crush on Julius.

"No shit, really?" Emilia says.

He smiles and nods.

"That is amazing. Why didn't you tell me you could do this?"

He shrugs. "Happy birthday, Em."

"Fuck my birthday, Beck!" She flails her arms. "This is cool. I knew you weren't wasting all that equipment, but I had no idea you could do this."

She squints. "What else have you been hiding?"

A secret TikTok with song covers in his own voice and a couple thousand followers. But Beck doesn't say anything. He posts under his middle name, *@harrisonmusic*. It's private. Practically nothing.

In a dream world, Beck would be a songwriter and a producer. Performing sounds terrifying, but writing for other people, creating songs every day and listening to artists

interpretations of it feels like summiting a mountain, something grand and incredible. He wants to live in a studio and fall asleep with sheet music draped over him like a safety blanket.

But while his parents support his music hobby, that's all they want it to be. He can't take care of his future family as an artist, unless he gets famous, but everyone knowing his name and his secrets scares him to no end. He has to be more practical.

And, anyway, he's not a lyricist. No matter how much he tries to be.

"The only thing I'm hiding," he says, "is that I did two more songs."

"Put them on my phone right now," she says and shoves it in his hands. "I'm going to post them on TikTok and tag Evergreen."

"Please don't."

Gosh, if any of them saw it, if Devin or Julius, he'd ram his head into the salt flats to quell the embarrassment.

"Ugh, fine, we'll play it for them in person. There'll be plenty of chances."

He groans but doesn't argue. She'll go back and forth with him until he gives up. But he won't let her share them. If he sincerely asks her, she won't.

It's how they work.

Emilia ditched the church sophomore year because she found it "racist, patriarchal bullshit." To add to it, when he came out to her, she tried to convince him he needed to step away too. But when he asked her to stop and to accept staying was his choice, she did.

The thing is, the LDS church is ingrained in his family's culture. His mother put a picture of Jesus Christ in every room. She teaches piano lessons with the hymnbook. His father spends his days off from the hospital helping church members move furniture or clear branches or change their oil. Even before Brig left on his mission, he went to every youth activity at church,

and so do Beck and his younger siblings. His aunts and uncles and cousins all do the same thing.

The Taylors define their love by their faith.

Beck does the same. He knows no different.

And in Utah, it feels like everyone else does too.

The church is in everything Beck does, in every choice he makes. Not swearing. Not drinking. Not dating boys. Going to church on Sunday morning even though he was out late with his theater friends. Going to a camp-out instead of a concert. Going on a mission even though he doesn't know how he'll teach people something he's unsure of himself.

He can't untie his identity from the church. From his family. He's read the horror stories of parents kicking their kids out and siblings cutting them off. Beck can't risk them doing the same. He loves them too much.

But he can't spiral right now or it'll ruin his birthday.

That's what midnights are for. Praying and waiting for help from Heavenly Father.

"Did you get me a present?" Beck asks.

"My presence is a present."

He rolls his eyes.

"Kidding. There's a new Evergreen shirt in my bag with your name on it. It's downstairs."

The band following is too small to have their own merch, so Emilia makes her own and occasionally for Beck as well.

"You can wear it on tour," she says.

"If we can go."

"Oh, ye of little faith."

Chapter 2

After an hour of scheming, Beck and Emilia are summoned downstairs by his grumpy little brother Bobby. All the brothers are different. Bobby, fifteen, is the guy to paint his chest at a football game; Brig, twenty, is the guy on the field; and Beck's the guy to avoid the game all together because the sports bug missed him completely.

The three teens are all too ready to stuff their faces with Gretchen's baked ziti as they rush down the stairs. They pass a big painting of Jesus hanging in the hallway. He's surrounded by children of different nationalities dressed in their cultural clothing, like a German boy in lederhosen and a Japanese girl in a kimono. It's one of Beck's favorites, even though the artist painted Jesus as a white man with brown hair and brown eyes, which has rubbed Beck the wrong way since realizing in high school, Jesus would've been brown. But it reminds him of being little and singing hymns in children's Sunday school when a warmth surrounded his body like a hug. His love of music blossomed from those songs.

In the living room, there are twenty-nine Taylors: his father Matthew's five siblings, their spouses, and their children. The only two missing are Brig and Emilia's brother Liam, both on missions. In a sea of pale blond, Emilia and her father André stick out with their dark brown hair and tan skin. Emilia's mother Rachel met him on her mission to Peru. They snack on his homemade tequeños and Peruvian guacamole. Two of Beck's younger cousins wrap around his legs as he stomps around the room. Some of his uncles and his grandfather chat about BYU Baseball losing out of the Western Coast Conference playoffs. Most of his aunts are in the

kitchen with Gretchen and Rachel, probably getting plates together for their kids before family prayer. Gram snuggles a baby to her chest on the couch as she watches a toddler play on her phone. Matthew squeezes the back of Beck's neck, his signature "dad" greeting.

"Happy Birthday, bud," Matthew says.

His blond hair grays by his ears and is gelled back smooth; he's still dressed in navy scrubs and clunky, white sneakers. He likes helping people, not just as an anesthesiologist but also as a handyman for neighbors or church members. He has a way of making people feel safe by just putting his arm around their shoulder, even if after he'll show them a TikTok compilation of people tripping.

"All right, everyone!" Gretchen claps her hands to get all the Taylors' attention. "Time for prayer. Matthew?"

Beck knows as the priesthood leader, the patriarch of the house, Matthew has the ultimate authority, at least according to the principles of the church. Everyone here knows it's Gretchen who runs the family. If being a professional mother was possible, she'd have a six-figure salary, easy.

That's just how most Mormon families work. Of course, everyone's different. Husbands and wives lead their families together, but only the men hold the priesthood, God's power given to men to act in his name. All the leaders of the church hold the priesthood, and at certain ages, every other man gets it too. Beck has it, though he's only used it to bless the bread and water during the sacrament service.

Matthew asks Beck's thirteen-year-old sister Brynlie, who prefers Bryn, to say a blessing on the meal. Beck knows his father means well, but Bryn's shyer than Beck is. Red splotches, like paint splatters, flush up her pale arms, neck, and cheeks. It fills up the Sharpie drawings on

her arms like the shader of a tattoo gun. If he had to guess, she'd rather be in her room, sketching with Billie Eilish cranked up to an ear-piercing decibel. But instead, she bows her head and folds her arms like the rest of the Taylors, and stutters out a prayer.

Between the “Dear Heavenly Father” and the “Amen,” Beck peaks through his eyelashes at each of his family members and smiles at the wiggling children. One of his aunts sways as she bottle feeds her infant. One uncle gives his child a firm head shake so she'll still. When he looks at Emilia, she catches Beck's disobedient gaze and smirks, so he closes his eyes. He can hear everyone's breaths and feel the strength formed by their tight bond. Every holiday is like this. A thunderstorm of children, food, and laughter. Their love is the best kind of lightning strike.

This is why Beck is going on a mission. He loves his family. He loves that they're tied together by their faith, like this moment as Bryn's words weave a spiritual tapestry. It wraps around each of their ankles, traces the baseboards from the living room to the connecting kitchen, into the adjacent dining room, and finally to the piano room. Gretchen teaches lessons to children in their church there. She taught Beck to play there. He can practically smell the subtle hint of spruce from the Kawai upright piano and the vanilla candle she burns in there during practices.

While he prefers sunrises with his keyboard, his favorite memory is sharing the bench with Gretchen when he was eleven years old, playing “Dawn” from the *Pride and Prejudice* soundtrack because it was one of her favorite songs. He'd learned it for Mother's Day and wanted to surprise her by playing it perfectly. He did stumble but played through like she'd taught him. When he finished and wanted to apologize for messing up, he turned to her, and his normally warm yet stoic mother placed a soft hand on his back and asked him to play it again. Her golden blond hair, braided down her back, reminded him of Elsa, and the worn lines on her

face looked like snowflakes and the princess's swirling magic. For a moment, neither of them noticed the sounds his father and siblings made as they carried on outside the piano room's glass doors. They just felt the music blow through their hair like a breeze through sagebrush.

When Bryn finishes, a chorus of "amens" sounds, and the family devours dinner, during which they talk about Cami's upcoming wedding. Beck wants to ask if she'll come with them to at least one Evergreen show since she discovered them and shared them with her younger cousins, but when Emilia keeps quiet, he does too. After a brief intermission for presents in the form of checks, cash, drawings from the little cousins, and masterful crochet creations from their Gram, Beck and Emilia blow out the candles on their cake Rachel made. As they munch on the chocolatey goodness, Cami's mother Angie asks what they're going to do with their newfound riches.

"It's funny you should ask," Emilia says. "Do you remember that band we like, Evergreen?"

André snorts. "Do we ever?"

Cami stops reapplying her lip gloss. "Oh, I know where this is going," she says.

"I thought you were going to save it for college and your mission," Gretchen says.

Beck bites his cheek and chews on the flesh. They did say that's what they'd use the money for, but the way Emilia put it when they talked about that in his bedroom is that their part-time jobs at a cookie shop during the school year covers what they need it to. Emilia has a cushion with her scholarship, and Beck has saved what his parents deem his cut of his mission. They'll cover the rest, just like they did with Brig. Still, Gretchen's mention of the mission leaves him itching for a change of subject.

"Actually," Emilia says, "we're going to use it for something else."

She dives right into the tour details and her research of places to stay and other things to do. She gives them a timeline and a budget. Her biggest mistake is offering up the information that most of the venues in Arizona and Colorado are bars.

“No,” Gretchen says.

“What?” Emilia asks.

“You’re not traipsing around the country for a *month*, going to *bars*, where there’s *alcohol*. That’s not going to happen,” Gretchen says.

“We’re not going to drink. Even if we wanted to, they card. We’ll stay in safe places. We’re eighteen. It’s not a big deal,” Emilia says.

They go back and forth a few rounds, and Beck can feel the opportunity slipping away. He tries to calm Gretchen’s worry by promising to stick together and call as often as she wants. He swears he won’t drink, not that he wants to anyways. But nothing stops her protest, especially when she points out that even with tonight’s gifts, they won’t have enough money for a month on the road, until Matthew speaks up.

“Gretch, maybe we should talk about this,” he says.

“You can’t be serious?”

“We could help with some of the funds, and, you know, it would be good for them to have some fun before life starts,” Matthew says. “Rachel and I drove to New York before my mission, and that was a blast.”

“Times are different now. Less safe,” Gretchen says.

“But you’re letting me go on a mission?” Beck asks before he can stop himself.

Everyone’s going to take it as a way to reason with her, but it feels more desperate than that. His hands twitch under the table, so he presses the chord progression to “Be Still” by the Killers on

his knees, like playing a keyboard. It's his ultimate trick to get out of his head and relax.

"Don't use that attitude with me, Beck Harrison Taylor," Gretchen says. "You are this close to not going to any of the concerts at all."

"I'm sorry. But please, Mom. There's got to be a compromise here," he says.

"Let's talk about this another time, okay? The family is here, so let's just enjoy that, and then we'll discuss what concerts you can attend."

Emilia looks like she wants to jump out of her seat and keep fighting, but Beck shakes his head. They cool off as the others clean their place, and Matthew pulls out Catch Phrase, which makes some at the table groan. However, Emilia rubs her hands together like she's about to enact an evil plan.

"If you're not on my team, you're going down," she says and high fives Rachel.

They play boys versus girls, and yes, Emilia and the women crush the men. Beck would never have guessed that she and Gretchen fought just minutes before if he hadn't seen it himself. After the game, everyone says their goodbyes.

"Don't worry," Emilia says. "I'll think of something to get us on that tour."

"I think we should approach this a little more graciously," Beck says.

"I promised us an epic summer, and I'll give us an epic summer. By any means necessary."

"You're going to get us in trouble."

"Definitely. And it will be awesome."

Chapter 3

Later that night, clad in his *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* cast t-shirt from freshman year and a pair of basketball shorts torn from yard work, Beck sits on his bed and prays.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for this day and for my family. Thank you for all of my many blessings.

He was taught his prayers should start with gratitude before diving into what he wants or needs, but lately, all of his prayers have started exactly the same so he can jump to the point. It's probably bad, and he should probably put more thought into it. But next time.

If Emilia gets her way, I'll see him all the time. I'll talk to him. I may stray. And if I do, then what?

Please bless me with the strength to do what is right. Please help me know what that is.

I feel like I'm being pulled in different directions. Piece by piece.

What happens when there's nothing left of me?

Help me not fail you. Help me not fail my parents.

Please give me something to keep going.

Beck's not supposed to ask for "signs." Prayers are mostly answered with promptings or feelings from the Holy Spirit. Or sometimes God answers them with people saying exactly what Beck needs to hear.

So before he closes his prayer, he waits. For something. For anything. For the calm of the

Spirit to come over him and make him feel safe even though everything feels chaotic right now.

But nothing comes. It hasn't for a while. Not even on the darkest nights when he asks Heavenly Father to take his attraction to boys away. To change him into something better.

The only thing that eases his hopelessness in this silence and uncertainty is music.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Beck pops off his bed, gets his acoustic guitar off the wall, and sits back down. He picks at the instrument, and the tension between his shoulders is temporarily relieved. But it'll be back.

He's not as great at guitar as he is with the piano, but he's had an easier time learning it than he expected, thanks to YouTube lessons, his ability to play by ear, and his perfect pitch. Apparently, Heavenly Father decided music would be Beck's greatest talent.

There's a knock at his door, and then his parents poke their heads in. Gretchen's soft blonde hair looks freshly brushed on top of the shoulders of her Disney pajamas. In a matching set because Beck's parents are grossly in love, Matthew pushes past her to sit on the bed next to Beck.

"What was that you were playing?" he asks.

Beck sets the guitar to the side as his cheeks heat. "Just something I've been messing around with."

He has this idea for a song with a cool dynamic between the piano and acoustic guitar, like a duet with the instruments instead of words. Because, of course, he can't think of any words. Or he can, but they suck. He writes them down in a notebook, hates them, and tears the page out. Balls of wadded paper clump together in the trash can under his desk.

Matthew smiles widely and shakes his head. "You are one cool kid, you know that? I couldn't imagine doing the things you can. You and Bryn and your mom, the artists. If only I had

an ounce.”

“I’m hardly an artist,” Gretchen says, blushing just like Beck, red dusting her cheeks, as she closes the door behind her and scoots next to her son. “But, yes, Beck, you’re blessed with so much talent. I’m not even mad you surpassed my capabilities with the piano.”

She nudges his shoulder with hers. His belly warms like he just drank hot chocolate. He loves his parents so much because this is what they’re like every day. They make him feel like the luckiest kid in the world. Even having to share them with four, soon to be five, siblings, they always make sure each kid gets some one-on-one time with them. Bed time always takes a long time in their house because it’s usually the only time they can do that check-in.

“So, listen, your mom and I have been talking about the whole tour thing, and we’ve come up with a compromise that Rachel and André have already agreed to.”

Beck perks up and looks from his father to his mother. There’s no way. Gretchen had said no. Matthew must have performed a miracle.

“I still don’t like this, but it’s something I can live with,” Gretchen says but then holds up a finger in warning. “Only if you adhere to our rules, and even though we won’t be with you, Heavenly Father is always watching.”

He’s already nodding. Whatever it is, he’ll do it. Obviously, God’ll understand.

“You can go to the Utah shows,” Gretchen says. “You can stay here for the Logan and Ogden ones, family for the Provo and Salt Lake ones, and we’ll get you a place for St. George.”

It’s not perfect—Emilia certainly won’t be happy with this compromise—but it’s seven shows, which is good enough for Beck.

“I’m thinking we could get you a couple nights in St. George, so you and Emilia could do some of the parks—Zion’s fairly close—or some of the museums or something. I don’t know,

but it could be fun,” Matthew says.

There’s no way Emilia’s going to want to do anything outside in the boiling heat of St. George in the summer, but maybe he could try to get her to Zion National Park. He’s always wanted to go. He might be able to entice her with some more Evergreen covers. This weird keyboard arrangement idea he has for “Desert Valley Death” won’t get out of his head.

But not the time.

“Thanks, guys,” he says. “This sounds really fun.”

Matthew claps his hands. “Excellent. See? I knew it’d work out. Now, I’m excited for this trip. Kind of jealous I can’t go with you.”

Beck would roll his eyes if it weren’t for his father being completely genuine. On paper, he and Beck are very different, save a few bands and musicians they both like, but Matthew has never made him feel like those differences matter. His father may prefer watching football and playing disc golf with Brig, practically his clone, or riding bikes with Bella, but he also likes to wander into Beck’s room just to listen to him play. He’ll sit with Bryn at the desk in her room as she explains her drawings. He’s known to battle Bobby in Mario Kart whenever possible and loses every time. Between that, church, and the hospital, the man has no free time. Just like Gretchen, who makes it possible for any of the Taylors to do anything.

“At any rate,” his mother says, “just remember: no drinking or smoking or whatever Emilia has up her sleeve.”

Beck shifts away from her. He hates when she does this. Ever since Emilia came out in her own right as an ex-Mormon, Gretchen has criticized every move she makes and assumes that she’s going to jump into the deep end of sinning, as if Emilia hasn’t loudly voiced her goal to become a superhero, a.k.a. an immigration lawyer, to keep families together, since hers got lucky

with her father's K-1 fiancé visa. All of this means she must keep a squeaky-clean record for scholarships, internships, and law school.

"We're trusting you to represent yourself and this family well while you're away," Gretchen says. "It's important to remember that over these next few months. It'll be good prep for your mission.

Despite her words, it sounds a lot like she doesn't trust him, which is as annoying as the Emilia thing. But the mission thing may take the cake.

"Nothing that you wouldn't approve of will be happening, I promise," he says, "and you know Emilia wouldn't do anything that even had a chance of jeopardizing school."

He hopes that's not a lie. Devin and Evergreen are big weaknesses for her. But even if it is lie, he'll never not defend Emilia. He owes her so much for being the lighthouse in the foggy of his life at the moment.

"Regardless, be cautious."

"Gretch," Matthew says.

She rubs her pregnant belly. "I know, I know. He's grown up and all that. Can't I still be a mother?"

Matthew chuckles and squeezes her calf. Beck puts his arm around her because he can't stay mad at her.

"What's that book you used to read us? 'I'll love you forever. My mother, you'll be,'" Beck says.

"Oh," she fans her eyes, "don't you bring up that book. Even without the pregnancy hormones, it makes me cry."

"Why did we read that to you? She dies at the end. What a morbid bedtime story,"

Matthew says.

“It’s beautiful. Outlines the entire circle of life for a mo—Don’t you start.” Gretchen points the warning finger again, effectively cutting Matthew off from his rendition of “The Circle of Life” he was undoubtedly about to perform.

“All right, fine. But that’s goodnight for me. I have a shift at seven,” Matthew says and stands up. He points to Beck. “I love you. Sleep well.”

“Love you too,” Beck says.

Gretchen kisses his forehead and tells him she loves him, which he returns. Matthew helps her off the bed before they say a final goodnight and leave the room.

Beck finds his phone and is just about to Facetime Emilia with the news when Gretchen swings the door open once more.

“I forgot to mention Bishop Kelley emailed me a list of books you should read before your mission. He said they could help you feel more prepared to plan and teach lessons,” she says.

His voice cracks when he thanks her, and they exchange another pair of goodnights before she leaves again. He decides to ignore the new ache in his neck from the mention of his mission in favor of dialing Emilia and focusing on the tour.

When she answers, he says, “First of all, happy birthday, and second of all, I have a brilliant plan, and you can’t say no.”

Chapter 4

“Can you see my husband anywhere?” Emilia asks.

“Please, don’t call him that here,” Beck says, “and, no.” He doesn’t see Julius either.

He holds onto Emilia’s shoulders as she steers them through the crowded Provo restaurant, Muzik’s Bar & Grill. He really should be leading because she can’t see over the shoulders of people taller than five-six, but when he suggested it, she said, “You’re too chickenshit to get us close enough.” Whatever. Following her is second-nature for him at this point. It’s how they ended up at this concert to begin with.

Muzik’s is packed because it’s the second week of their summer concert series where dozens of Utahn bands headline open-mic nights. The restaurant is split in two sections: the left entry with the bar and dining tables and the right with a stage and an open area that today has no tables. A vintage jukebox stands out of commission for the time being by the bar, and mosaics made of painted broken records decorate the walls in a retro wave pattern in the performance space. A sultry folk singer picks at a worn guitar as people bustle around trying to get drinks or talk to their friends.

This isn’t Beck and Emilia’s first time at Muzik’s. Evergreen has played at the open-mic nights before, but the logistics with all their equipment made for weird lulls in the lineup. This time though black sheets cover their instruments behind the singer like antique furniture in an old rockstar’s estate, and Beck’s toes buzz in anticipation of the amount of jumping he’s about to do.

“Any closer and people are going to complain about me standing in front of them,” Beck

tells her as they reach about five feet away. Evergreen is due soon if they start right at eight like the Instagram post said.

“Too bad, so sad,” she says and readies herself to push through a group of high school girls, all dressed in fishnets, jean shorts, and crop tops. Apparently, there’s a dress code Beck and Emilia missed the memo on.

He squeezes Emilia’s shoulders and pulls her back. Those girls will definitely have words with them if they go any farther, and he really doesn’t want to get kicked out when Emilia makes at least one of them cry.

She’s about to protest when the house lights in the performance room dim, leaving the restaurant space to cast warm light on the crowd, which lets out a preemptive cheer as bodies shuffle on stage and uncover the instruments. Beck might not be able to see the band members’ faces in the shadows, but they’re undoubtedly Evergreen.

Electricity zings up Beck’s back as they turn on amps and situate their instruments. Emilia bounces in her sneakers, probably clenching her fists so hard she’ll leave crescent imprints when she finally relaxes. She always gets like this when Devin’s about to sing, even when it’s just on TikTok.

The teen girls in front of them pull out their phones and hit record, but like the older people in the crowd, Beck and Emilia leave theirs in their pockets. They have a concert pact to always enjoy the first and the last song on their own. Let the band build the moment. And live in it as long as possible.

It might be Beck’s favorite feeling in the world.

“Provo,” Devin says into the microphone. His deep voice silences the crowd. “We are Evergreen.”

The stage lights flip on in an instant as Teague shreds the intro to “To the Moon,” and each of the band members join in with their instruments, except Devin. He holds onto the microphone stand downstage and bobs his head, and there’s no smile on his face as he sings the first line of the anti-love, indie rock song.

Emilia screams and shoots her arms in the air.

Beck feels it too, that adrenaline boost that makes him forget everything but what he’s doing right now. Just Beck and the music. The drums and bass beat through the floorboards and pound up through his legs. The guitar and keys wind up the walls, to the ceiling, and he reaches for them with his fingers. The lyrics billow over the crowd like a parachute.

In this room, with these people, surrounded by this music, there’s no church. No mission. No college. No end of summer.

He taps Emilia’s shoulders and smirks as he points in front of them. She throws her head back and laughs but shoves her way forward. Beck ignores the teen girls’ scowls as they make their way to the front, close enough to touch Evergreen’s shoes if they want.

The cousins stand side by side and shout the lyrics back to the band. Beck smiles as wide as he ever has while he jumps to the beat of each song. His glasses fog up and sweat drips down his back, but he only stops dancing, and sways instead, when the band slows down six songs in.

Devin croons about an ex as Emilia stares at him dreamily. Beck takes the opportunity to snap some pictures of the band, so he can go back to dancing when they pick up the tempo. One of Teague, the non-binary guitarist, and the easy confidence they play with, towering over both the crowd and the band with their height. One of Sarah, the bassist, who looks like a goth, pink-haired Tinkerbell. One of Mitchell, the goofy keyboardist and Devin’s little brother. One of Devin and the serious look on his face as he sings.

Just as Beck takes Julius's picture, the drummer eyes the phone and sticks his tongue out. If Beck wasn't already flushed from dancing, his cheeks would inflame from getting caught. He meets Julius's eyes, and the boy winks at him, freezing Beck in place as if Julius were a really hot, drumming Medusa and, instead of snakes, had dark brown, quarter-sized curls and Beck were the mere mortal desperate to twirl one around his finger.

Panic sparks in pain in his forehead, but he shakes it off and focuses back on Devin, trying to ignore the weight of Julius's gaze. However, when Beck can't help but look back Julius is looking somewhere else as he pounds out a new, faster beat. His arms flex with each strike, and Beck might fall over if someone bumps into him because nothing is more important than staring at the movement.

The shock of Mitchell's keys brings him back to earth, and he resumes his terrible dance party with Emilia for a few more songs. At least they're on beat, which can't be said for everyone in the crowd. Still, his body hums with a need to look at Julius again, to get his attention.

It's like when he scrolls across Julius's pictures on his Instagram feed and gets the urge to message him, to ask him about his day or what songs he's working on, but that always makes him feel like a creepy fan, so he listens to one of Julius's Spotify playlists instead.

And now, he pointedly doesn't focus on the drummer as the band gives fake final bows before their obligatory encore. They haven't played their most popular song, "Love Lies," yet, so it can't be over. And Beck doesn't want it to be. If they only get to go to a few more of these shows, he wants it to last forever.

Emilia wipes sweat from her forehead and checks her smudged eyeliner with her camera app.

“God, I look like a racoon. I need to stop by the bathroom to fix this before we go talk to them,” she says.

The pain in Beck’s forehead returns. “We’re still doing that? Haven’t we annoyed them enough?”

Emilia likes to be the creepy fan Beck refuses to be and talks to Devin until he not-so-subtly runs in the other direction. Beck usually chats with Mitchell about music equipment since he’s the band’s tech guy. His tips have helped Beck with his desk setup. The only time he’s talked to Julius was last October when Julius flirted with him and gave him the drumstick that now sits on the shelf in his bedroom. He tries not to think about it too much because he’s watched Julius flirt with other guys, so obviously, Beck isn’t special.

But still, he replays that moment sometimes. He remembers stuttering a lot, but he also remembers the thrill, like when he nails a tough chord progression. Like he felt right before he kissed Shauna for the first time.

The panic comes back. He doesn’t need these feelings turning into anything that could jeopardize his standing in the church or delay his mission. Because, truthfully, if given the chance to explore this part of himself, Beck might not be strong enough to say no. He’s always imagined what it would be like, but never beyond that. Too risky.

“Why don’t we just talk to them after a later show? I’m sure they’re going to want to hang out by themselves. You know, come down from the adrenaline high?”

“All the more reason,” she says. “Plus, it’s been a while.”

Which is true. The last couple of shows they’ve been to, their ride, usually one of their relatives, needed to leave as soon as it ended.

But Emilia will get what she wants, and he will have to buck up and try to ignore the

kneading in his stomach as Julius and the band come back on stage.

Devin asks the crowd if they want more, and when all of them cheer in response, Emilia the loudest of all, the singer shrugs his shoulders and points to Julius who counts them in with his sticks. They play a cover of “Mr. Brightside,” and the whole crowd sings it back to them. It’s not that different from the original, so everybody can sing and dance along, not just the big Evergreen fans at the front.

They close the show with “Love Lies,” their top streamed song on Spotify, which comparably to bigger artists isn’t a lot, but the eighteen-thousand streams are well-deserved. It’s heavy on the drums and guitar, but Mitchell brings in some cool production on the keys. The lyrics are more bitter words about love, and Beck wants to know what happened to Devin to make him write so many break-up songs. If Emilia knew, she would’ve told him already.

The teen girls scream when Teague nails their solo. Sarah and Julius back up the next riff with a simple rhythm. Devin jumps to the beat as he sings, and Mitchell headbangs and plays a pattern of three chords.

Beck can feel those chords spark on his fingertips, like steel striking flintstone. He imagines what it would be like to perform on stage. To write a song, perfect the arrangement and the lyrics, and play it in front of a crowd. It’s terrifying. All those people watching him. No big piano, 200-year-old hymns or off-key choirs to hide behind like his performances at church. But people aside, he’d have to bear his soul, project his innermost thoughts on the wall like a movie theater.

Evergreen does it. They’re up there right now, captivating sixty people in a Provo restaurant, the stage lights reflecting off their skin like disco balls.

The whole thing is impossible. He only just shared his Evergreen covers with Emilia. All

of his TikTok content is basically anonymous. That has to be enough for now. The thought of anything more induces a cold sweat on the back of his neck.

When the show ends and Evergreen gives a real final bow, the stage goes black, and the band clears out. The crowd slowly disperses as some people leave and others go back to the main room for drinks or stay to talk to their friends.

But Emilia reaches onto the stage and pulls at a piece of paper taped to the ground.

“Seriously? The setlist?” Beck asks.

“It’s Devins copy. Plus, we can memorize it now and be even more prepared for the next show,” she says as she folds it up and shoves it in her back pocket. “Ooh, maybe you could, like, put your own little spin on it.”

“What?”

“Add some Beckiness.”

“That sounds like a disease,” he says, but he’s already thinking of ideas to mess with their arrangements. He always sees the need for more keys, and they severely under use Sarah on the bass.

“Whatever. I’m going to the bathroom to fix all this. You good by yourself?”

She’s always treating him like he needs her babysitting, but despite his stage fright and stuttering with Julius, he’s usually pretty good at handling himself in a crowd, barring confrontation, of course.

Beck waves her off and heads to the bar to get some water. He wipes his glasses and scrolls through the pictures he took as he waits. When the one of Julius sticking out his tongue comes up, Beck zooms in on his face. Julius’s sweaty hair sticks to his forehead. The lighting angle creates shadows that block out his eyes, but highlight his pink tongue and glossy, brown

lips. Beck touches them with his thumb and fights the shooting stars in his stomach.

He shuts his phone off and puts it in his pocket when the bartender asks him what he wants. After getting water, he shuffles his way through the crowd to the jukebox, which is now back in commission, and flips through the songs while he waits for Emilia to look Devin-ready. It's filled with mostly new 45s, but they have some vintage stuff.

Beck selects "Heart of Glass" and jumps when a deep voice says, "Interesting choice, but respect. My auntie loves Blondie."

Julius ruffles his sweaty hair and leans against the jukebox, and Beck wishes his water could magically cure blushing.

"Did you enjoy the show?"

The concert or Julius's arms flexing as he crosses them over his chest?

"Yep."

"Get a good picture?" He winks.

Beck watches the ice in his glass swirl. "Yep."

"You have a way with words."

"Sorry," he says. "It was great. You guys are awesome, but that's not news to you."

"Still nice to hear."

"You like your ego inflated, huh?"

"Especially by cute guys."

He says it as Beck takes a sip of water and then promptly chokes on an ice cube. Julius is making it really hard to pretend they're not flirting.

"Hey, it's one of our biggest fans," another voice says. It's Mitchell, who then pounces on Julius.

Teague pulls him off and pats the top of his head. “Stay, demon.”

Mitchell throws an elbow but then focuses back on Beck. “We’ve missed you guys. Started to think you forgot about little ol’ us.”

“We live in Logan, so we can’t get down here a lot,” he says.

“Where’s your sidekick?” Mitchell asks. She’d punch him if she heard him call her that.

“Oh, Emilia is—”

“Remind me of your name,” Julius says. He’s so suave with his smirk and hot stare. Beck has no idea where anyone gets that confidence.

“It’s Beck.”

“Beck,” Julius repeats. “Such a short name for such a tall person.”

Beck tries to look anywhere but Julius’s eyes as he very obviously checks him out. Beck’s t-shirt feels like it’s compressing him, so he tries to loosen it.

“Flirt with him on your own time,” Mitchell says. “We’re catching up.”

They talk about equipment when Beck mentions he got a new launchpad for Christmas a few months ago. Mitchell can’t seem to stand still. If he’s not finicking with his hair, he’s rocking back and forth, and Teague stands mountainous beside him like a bodyguard. Julius picks the next song on the jukebox, and when “Loser” by Beck plays. Mitchell thinks it’s hilarious and actually giggles.

“I couldn’t help it,” Julius says.

“Such an overused joke,” Beck says, but they’re both smiling. The more they talk, the better he feels.

“Hey, it’s your theme song,” Emilia says and slaps him on the shoulder. She took her bun out in the bathroom, and her eyes no longer have black smudges around them.

“Also an overused joke.”

Emilia ignores him. “Where’s Devin and Sarah?”

“Sarah’s making out with her husband backstage, but Devin’s here somewhere,” Teague says.

“Oh, yeah?” she says and looks around Muzik’s, uninterested in hearing Mitchell whine about how Sarah flipped him off when he suggested they stop macking and start packing up.

“So, do you write music then?” Julius asks Beck.

“No, no,” he says quickly, “I just mess around, you know? Covers and stuff. It’s a hobby.”

“Pretty expensive hobby even with Mitchell’s thrifting powers.”

“I grew up playing piano, so it kind of stemmed from that. Nothing major.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Emilia says, seemingly resigned to wait until Devin makes his way over to the group. “Beck is, like, a piano prodigy. He can play anything. He has, like, perfect pitch or something.”

“That’s not true,” he says. It is, but it feels braggy to admit. And anyway, this conversation is treading dangerously close to something he’d rather not talk about.

“It so is. He can play all of your songs.”

“Emilia.”

“In fact, he made some cool new arrangements with his own setup, and even I think they’re better than yours.”

“What’s better than ours?” Devin asks.

Emilia’s eyes widen.

“Apparently, Beck, here, can play our stuff better than we can,” Julius says. His eyes

crinkle from trying not to laugh.

“No way! I did not say that.”

“That’s true. It’s Emilia who thinks so,” Mitchell says, like he knew it’d make her cheeks and forehead all splotchy. “But I totally want to hear what you’ve done.”

Emilia, apparently shocked into silence, doesn’t defend herself as she stares at Devin, so for once, Beck comes to her rescue.

“Maybe another time. We have to get going. Our ride is here.” Which isn’t true since they took Beck’s car.

“That’s too bad,” Mitchell says and frowns, leaning on Teague’s shoulder. He’s like a little terrier, and Teague’s his owner.

“We have to pack up anyway,” Devin says and drags his brother and Teague off.

Julius steps away from the jukebox. He scratches the back of his neck. “Will we see you at the Logan show?”

“We’ll be there,” Beck says and nods goodbye, pulling Emilia behind him.

“See you, Beck,” Julius calls after them.

Outside, the clear night sky sparkles above them. Beck feels like he can finally take a deep breath, but he also can’t help but revel a little bit at Julius’s flirting for one night. He’ll shut it down next time now that he can successfully get through a conversation with him.

“That was a disaster. I couldn’t even say anything. Why am I like this around him? I’m either zero or a hundred,” Emilia says as they walk to the car.

“Luckily, you can make it up at the next show.”

“You’re right! Just two days, and then I’ll be good.”

Chapter 5

The next day, Beck stares at an Instagram notification for seven minutes before he opens it.

Julius Fiefia has requested to follow you.

He got the notification during the two-hour drive back to Logan, so he didn't see it until after he got home and checked in with Gretchen, who sent him up to his room to unpack and sort his dirty laundry for her to wash. He wanted to put on some music while he did it, but then he saw the follow request, and he's been frozen in place ever since.

It doesn't mean anything more than Julius wanting to be friends or something. He wants to follow Beck because Beck's a fan, and Julius is nice like that. But then Beck thinks of the night before. Of Julius leaning against the jukebox like he's an extra in *Grease*, ready to pick apart the orchestra geek in the glasses. Beck's not clueless. He knows what flirting is. But was it flirting for interest or flirting for fun?

He wishes he could ask Emilia, but that would mean admitting that he's interested in knowing the answer, which would lead into a talk about sexuality and why Beck should go for it and ditch the church. And then they would argue, like they usually do with this topic.

It was so bad once. He and Emilia didn't talk for days after she basically called him a bigot for staying in the church. Beck's not ignorant to the doctrines of the church being outdated and exclusionary to queer people, like not allowing them to enter the temple if they identify differently from the gender assigned at birth or act on their attraction to people of the same

gender. The church also has a history of treating non-white members badly, waiting until 1978 to give Black people the priesthood.

Beck hates it too, but he doesn't see it in the same black and white that she does. The church has a lot of problems, but it also has a lot of beautiful parts. It's the foundation of his family. Because of it, there's a priority to maintain their closeness. His father spends his time off with them, no matter how tired he is from the hospital. Matthew has never missed one of Beck's plays, even though he's not even on stage. He and his mother make a point to play together at least once a week. It's usually hymns or showtunes or something classical, but the tune doesn't matter. Beck just likes having a few minutes alone with Gretchen when he can.

Because of the church, he places his priority on family too. He and Brig have taught all their younger siblings how to ride a bike. He listens to Bobby complain about bad movies, and he lets Bryn draw in his room as he practices. He walks with Bella as she rides around the neighborhood, and he's already planning what he'd like to do with the newest little Taylor when they're born, even though he'll be on his mission by then.

Maybe all of that also would be true if they weren't LDS to begin with, but regardless, Beck knows he could lose it. The church and his family are two hands with fingers interlocking, and he refuses to break the tight grip. Not for something as trivial as liking boys. Especially when he still likes girls.

But if it is so trivial, why can't he stop thinking about it? Why is it still a fight with Emilia any time they talk about it?

Beck hovers his finger over the notification. Behind it is his screensaver of the Killers on stage at the concert he and Emilia went to last year. She would tell him to accept the request, even without knowing the full story.

It's really not that big of a deal. It's not like they'll message each other or whatever. It's just a follow.

A few hours later, after unpacking and helping Gretchen with the laundry, he writes a few notes beside a copy of Evergreen's setlist he'd written in his notebook. "To the Moon" could really use a groovier bassline, but he can't figure it out until he knows what to do with the chorus.

Beck rubs his eyes and tries to find some inspiration in the flashes behind his eyelids. His phone chimes on the edge of his desk. He would assume it's the group chat he and Emilia have with their friends coming to the Evergreen show tomorrow, but it's not the right ringtone: the Addams Family snaps for their senior show from April.

His hands twitch when he sees it's a direct message from Julius.

Julius: What songs did you fix?

No "hi" or "hey," just jumping in, like what he's asking is so important he can't wait for pleasantries. But it fits into the narrative Beck wants this to be: Julius only wants to talk music. That's fine. That's safe.

It still takes a few minutes before Beck can answer. The base of his spine tingles like he's doing something he's not supposed to do.

Beck: I didn't "fix" any. I just fiddled with a few.

Julius: Let's have it then.

Beck: Um, no. It's just something I did for Emilia's birthday.

Julius: If I lie and say it's my birthday, can I hear them? At least one? 🙏

He can't show them to Julius, can he? It would be nice to have another musician's opinion. Maybe he could give him some advice to improve. Beck could apply it to a different

song and upload something to TikTok. It's been since before finals that "Harrison" has posted.

But if Julius hates it, Beck could never show his face at an Evergreen concert ever again.

Beck: It's not your birthday though so sorry. Next time.

Julius: I will get it out of you. Mark my words. Got to hear what the piano prodigy can do.

Before Beck could respond, Julius messages again.

Julius: You and your sidekick should get to Rocky Mill early so you can get barrier.

Would love to see our biggest fans at the front. 😊

Beck could already feel his nerves start to bubble. At least, he'd only have to deal with it for a few more shows. Once Evergreen left St. George, there'd be a state between him and Julius.

Beck and Emilia stand in line with their friends outside Rocky Mill, an old warehouse someone converted into an entertainment venue. A lot of weddings happen here because the space can be turned into anything. One of the Logan high schools used it for prom one year when they couldn't get a ballroom at Utah State University.

The exterior is big and boxy with beige siding matching the dusty valley dirt. It sits on a stretch of bare land in North Logan, but it's not far from some subdivisions. Cars and trucks park in a dirt lot as more people pull up. Tonight's not like Muzik's. Evergreen is opening a three-tier lineup, ending in a local DJ Beck and Emilia don't like, so they're only here for their favorite band.

Once they're allowed inside, Emilia directs their group to the stage, so they won't have to fight anyone to the front. Not like it'd be hard anyways, most of the people are only here this early to pregame.

The stage itself is a temporary one. It looks like a bunch of tables stuck together with a set of four stairs leading to the top. Evergreen's gear is already set up. Tall black curtains section off the "backstage" from the rest of the space, and metal barriers leave about three feet between the crowd and the stage.

Emilia does a victory dance when she touches the barrier directly in front of where Devin will stand. She and Beck mess around with their friends as they wait, but like most conversations with their theater friends, they end up bringing up their senior show. They're waiting for their director to post the recording to YouTube so they can have a sing-along watch party.

Beck checks his Instagram messages to see if Julius has replied to his "break a leg," but it's only marked "seen." He tries not to let that disappoint him, just like he pretends he didn't put more effort into choosing an outfit, only to settle on what he would've worn anyways: cuffed jeans and a graphic tee.

There's a loud crash backstage, followed shouting and an amplified "Fuck!" Beck and his friends hear it because of how close they are, but the rest of the crowd doesn't seem to notice. He opens Instagram again.

Beck: "Break a leg" isn't meant to be taken so literally.

He doesn't expect a response so close to the start time, but the app shows Julius is typing.

Julius: Emergency! Need you back stage ASAP!!

Beck: What?

Julius: Look up.

Beck scans the black curtains and sees Julius pop out from the left side of the stage. He waves for Beck to come to him. Beck interrupts Emilia's debate on Sondheim versus Lloyd Webber with one of their friends and drags her with him. He needs a buffer if he's going to talk

to Julius.

“What’s going on?” she asks, as she waves back.

“I don’t know. He messaged me that there’s an emergency.”

“He messaged you?”

They don’t have time to get into this, so he just tells her about accepting the follow request. Julius opens the curtain for them to come backstage. A bunch of people stand around Mitchell who’s holding his right hand close to his chest and whimpering. Teague rubs his back and looks like they might cry. Sarah asks Mitchell some questions, and a scowling Devin walks over to Beck, Emilia, and Julius when he sees them.

“What happened?” Beck asks.

“I guess Mitchell saw someone take one of our cases, so when he was getting it to bring back to our van, he tripped over a cord or something and landed wrong on his hand,” Julius says.

“Oh, no! Do you need me to call my dad? He’s an anesthesiologist, but he could get Mitchell in the ER pretty fast,” Beck says. He should get it checked out, and if the injury is bad, Mitchell probably can’t play for a while.

“That would be awesome, but we actually called you back here for something else,” Julius says.

“Whatever you need.”

“We need you to play tonight,” Devin says.

Beck’s thoughts skip like a scratched record. Anything but that.

“That is if you play as well as your friend says,” Devin challenges.

Beck’s already shaking his head when Emilia says, “Of course he does. He knows your songs inside and out, and it’ll take him five seconds to learn Mitchell’s setup, since he uses the

same gear anyways.”

“Stop, Em. I can’t play up there. I haven’t practiced with them. I don’t know the transitions. And all those people out there—”

“Will love you because you're awesome,” Emilia finishes for him.

“You just have to get us through this gig,” Julius says, “and let’s be honest, most of them out there aren’t here for us. So only your friends will probably be listening.”

“You can’t suck though. We have a reputation to build and uphold on this tour,” Devin says.

Which is exactly why Beck needs to go back to the crowd and stay there, or offer to take Mitchell to the hospital. They’re better off going with a backing track or letting Emilia bang on the keys.

“Not helping.” Julius elbows Devin.

“I’m just saying, if he says no, or if he says yes and is shit, we’re fucked in Logan. You know we’re trying to get booked at USU’s Big Agg Show next fall and Logan City Limits next summer,” Devin says.

Beck’s been to both music festivals before, and they’d be huge for Evergreen. He can’t screw that up for them, but he also can’t ignore the cool sweat dripping down his back like the condensation on a Coke can.

A stagehand dressed in all black interrupts them. “You have five minutes. Are you going on?”

Julius, Devin, and Emilia look at him, and Beck has no idea how they think he can do this. His hands shake as he tries to play a scale on his thighs to calm down.

He’s about to tell them he can’t when Emilia once again butts in. “They’ll go on at the

last possible second, but it'll happen."

The stagehand looks apprehensive but moves on. Emilia pulls out her phone and pokes at it before she plays his cover of "Love Lies." He wants to vomit as he watches Julius and Devin listen. She stops it after thirty-two seconds.

"That's him. He's good. He can do this." She turns to Beck. "You can do this."

Julius nods enthusiastically as a grin grows on his face. "Absolutely. That was sick. Right, Dee?"

"You can't play it like that. It has to be the original," Devin says.

"He'll do it right," Emilia says. Beck never thought she'd use that harsh tone with the man she regularly calls her husband.

"I'd like to hear it from him, thanks."

Beck still wants to say no, but a tune that sounds a lot like the *Jaws* theme echoes "What if?" over and over.

"Two minutes!" the stagehand says.

"Look, play like you love it," Julius says and squeezes Beck's arm. "I know you do. Or you wouldn't have made something like that. In just that little bit, I could tell."

Beck traces the stripes of Julius's vintage collared shirt with his eyes. He follows the black ink of his tattoos down to the wrists. Julius taps two drumsticks in his other hand to the tempo of a silent song. Beck feels a hum in his chest.

Maybe the drummer has a point. Beck loves to play. When he feels tingles in his fingertips and hears a melody in his head, he has to touch his keyboard. He has to get it out, like Old Faithful every forty-four minutes. He thinks in music. He feels with music. Not a day goes by that he doesn't sit at his piano or pick at his guitar or mess around in Logic Pro. He needs it

like Emilia needs to win, like Gretchen needs to mom.

Like he needs air.

When he can't even turn to God for comfort, he can turn to music.

The idea of performing in front of a crowd, however, makes him squirm like a tadpole.

"It's one show," Emilia says. "Pretend it's just me listening like on your birthday. It's no big deal if you mess up."

"Yes, it is," Devin says.

"Do you want him to save the show or not?" She snaps.

Devin finally shifts from quiet anger to mild shock. He may not remember Emilia's name, but he knows she has a crush on him and doesn't normally talk to him like he's an annoyance.

She really wants Beck to do this. It might be so she can enjoy another Evergreen show, but he suspects it's something different. Maybe she wants him to do it for himself. She knows the equipment on his desk and the instruments on his walls are not just for show. She played proof a few minutes ago. Emilia believes in him. Despite their differences, she always has. He could try. At least for her.

And Julius. No matter how messy his head is about the drummer, Beck would hate to disappoint him before they even have a chance to be real friends.

Also, Evergreen playing Logan City Limits would be pretty freaking cool.

"Okay," Beck says. "I'm sorry in advance."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Emilia squeals and hugs him, and Julius whoops with joy before tapping a drumroll on Beck's shoulder. After that, everything moves really fast. The band talks Teague into playing when they really want to rush Mitchell to the

hospital, but Sarah's husband offers to take him after Beck called his father and asked for the favor. Before they leave, Mitchell talks Beck through some logistics, but he's not confident he'll remember everything. Emilia agrees to stay with Beck until he steps on stage, and then she'll rush back to their friends so she can watch.

In the moments before they go on stage, Beck prays.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Please don't let me throw up all over the stage. I can't mow enough lawns to cover the cost to replace the equipment. And the embarrassment might kill me. If my pounding eardrums don't do it first.

Please don't let me ruin this for Evergreen. And Emilia. And Julius.

And please don't let my mom find out about this. Gretchen Taylor would kill me if she found out about this.

Please let me be good. This may be my only chance.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The stagehand cues them, and Sarah, Teague, Devin, and Julius walk out.

"You got this," Emilia says.

"I so do not have this," Beck says, but he steps on stage anyway.

Chapter 6

When Barbara Streisand was twenty-five, she forgot the lyrics to a few of her songs while she was recording her live album in Central Park. She didn't perform live for nearly three decades after that, and only if a teleprompter was present. She still gets sick to her stomach before a performance and requires limited eating and meditation to calm her down before a show.

If that happens to an EGOT award winner, what kind of chance does Beck have to survive this plague of cold sweats and tangling intestines?

Julius and Emilia were right at least. Only twenty-three people linger near the stage to listen to them play. The rest of the crowd is in the back, mingling, getting a drink, or taking photos against the event's backdrop by the door. Twenty-three people is less than a fourth of the crowd he plays for on the Sundays he's on the program. He can do this.

Beck takes a breath and releases it as he steps up to the keyboard. He flexes his fingers and finds Emilia with their friends in the crowd. It takes a second, but there she is, screaming so loud the people next to her group give her a dirty look.

Which reminds Beck he's not alone in his bedroom or in front of his home congregation or faceless on TikTok. These people will hear him play. He can't do this.

"Hey there, Logan. We're Evergreen," Devin says. "My klutz of a brother, Mitchell, took a nasty fall, so our buddy Beck here is filling in. Give him your worst."

Julius kicks off the song. Sarah, pink hair reflecting the stage light, starts in with the

bassline, and Teague joins her with the guitar. The keyboard is supposed to be set for the first song, so all Beck has to do is play when it's his cue.

Except every piece of musical knowledge leaves his head in an instant.

He stares at his fingers on the keys. His foot taps to the beat so he knows when his part is coming, but in a few measures, he'll be frozen like Han Solo in carbonite.

Beck tries to keep his breaths in time with the song, but the concentration throws him off. He misses the cue by a hair, but it's enough for him to notice. And when he presses the keys, it's set to the piano, not the synth he needs for the song.

A chill creeps up his neck and stabs his scalp like an ice pick. What the heck is he going to do?

He looks to Devin for help, but Devin only glares at him, probably wanting Beck to get it together. Devin waves for the band to continue the intro before he starts singing, and Beck scrambles to fix the keyboard, which turns out to be as easy as pressing a button and making sure it's still in key. He presses a chord and gives Devin a thumbs up when it's done.

Beck starts the count to his cue again. He still has to play, but he can't do it alone.

He finds Emilia again, and instead of looking at the lead singer, she looks back at him. Her smile is as large as it was the day she sent her confirmation to Pitt. She's proud and excited, even after he messed up.

And like usual, she's right. If he wants to try again, to calm down and play, he needs it to be simple and familiar.

Beck closes his eyes and pictures his room. The Killers poster above his bed. The record player on his shelf. The picture of Jesus holding a lamb. The keyboard on his desk. The window framing Castle Rock peak. He imagines Emilia sitting on the floor while he plays.

His cue comes, and he presses the keys. The notes flow out of him. The cadence weaves through the crowd as Beck chances a look. They dance to the song. Emilia pulls out her phone to take pictures or maybe record him, breaking their first song rule.

Beck doesn't even care because he's doing this.

And it's not bad.

When the song ends, the crowd applauds, and a swarm of pride buzzes throughout his body. From his head to his toes, his nerves light ablaze with anticipation for the rest of the set.

Is this what Julius feels when he's on stage? And Devin, Teague, Sarah, and Mitchell?

This adrenaline high rushes through his veins like a Disneyland ride, and he can do anything.

He plays the next few songs with ease; he doesn't have to think about the notes before he plays them, just adjusting the keyboard to the right settings. He bobs his head and shakes his shoulders to the fast songs, and sways a little for the slower ones. At one point, Devin takes the microphone from his stand and leans against Beck's back as he sings emotional lyrics accented by the piano. Devin slaps his back at the song ends, and Beck beams back at him.

Nothing has ever made him feel this good. Not even playing alone in his room can match the way Beck's heart soars during this performance.

All this time, he thought he wouldn't be good at it, but really, he was just scared.

And now that he knows what this feels like, can he go back to playing for himself and a few people on TikTok for the rest of his life?

Does he want to?

It's still terrifying, but the thrill combats the fear in an epic battle that leaves Beck victorious, like he's fighting alongside the Muses themselves. This must be why Barbara came

back to performing even after that day in 1967. Beck understands why someone would want to chase this feeling because he might want to, too.

There's just a lot of other stuff he has to think about, like his mission, which won't even allow him to keep up daily piano practice, but that's a concern for another time, when he's off stage. When he comes down from the high.

If this show is the only one he gets, at least for the next two years, he's going to savor it.

Evergreen and Beck close the show like they did in Provo. They're lucky Beck is only a smidge less obsessed with the Killers than Evergreen because he already had "Mr. Brightside" down when he was thirteen. When the crowd sings the lyrics back to them, Beck's chest flutters giddily. Their words stimulate something in him that screams, "More!"

What would it feel like if they sang Beck's lyrics?

He'd have to write some first, but the possibility overwhelms him with the need to put even more of himself in this performance.

He jumps in place to the tempo, not missing a single key. His sweaty hair is plastered to his forehead. His glasses sink down his nose, but he throws his head back just as Devin belts a long note and Julius bangs on the drums. Teague falls to their knees with a heavy thump as they shred notes on the guitar. Sarah grooves to her bassline, her eye makeup streaked down her face. In the crowd, Emilia dances like no one's watching, which still manages to look like she's following choreography. Sometime during the set, she wrangled her hair into a large bun, and it moves on its own as she twirls.

The whole crowd, small as it is, radiates electricity. The energy is stronger than Beck's ever felt, so much so that when the song ends, when the crowd stops cheering, when they leave the stage, he still feels it.

“Not bad,” Devin says as he ties his locs out of his face. If Emilia were here, she’d choke on her tongue.

“You did great,” Teague says, nearly breaking Beck’s spine when they hit him with their plate of a hand. Teague tugs on their *Gravity Falls* t-shirt to fan themselves and pulls out their phone to probably check on Mitchell.

“We were lovely as always,” Sarah says and stretches. She winks at Beck. “You really saved our asses. Are we drinking to celebrate?”

“Teague and I are going to the hospital as soon as our Uber gets here. You and Julius are in charge of break down,” Devin says. His brow furrows as he looks at his phone. Based on how serious Devin takes Evergreen, Beck thinks there’s a chance he’s concerned about Mitchell’s playing ability, but the gentleness on his face suggests he’s actually just worried about his brother.

“Fine, I’ll get started,” Sarah grumbles and goes back to the stage, while Devin and Teague go outside to wait for their ride.

“So, how’d that feel?” Julius asks when they’re alone. He wipes the sweat off his face with a towel.

“Incredible,” Beck says. “I didn’t know I could feel like that.”

“Pretty amazing, huh?” He reaches up and wipes Beck’s face with the other side of the towel.

If his cheeks weren’t already red from the performance, Julius would know he’s blushing. Beck’s skin zings where Julius’s fingers brush over.

“Yeah, amazing,” he mutters.

Up close, Julius’s eyes look more than just their normal black. They’re a rich, dark

brown, like coffee with no cream or sugar. Beck's never wanted to try coffee more than he does right now. To hell with the church's dietary rules.

Someone tackles Beck in a hug from behind.

"That's the greatest shit I have ever seen in my life," Emilia says. "Seriously, dude, that was so good. You were *so good*."

"Thank you."

He doesn't know if she knows how much her approval means to him, but it makes this experience ten times better knowing she thinks he did well.

She releases him. "If we were twenty-one, I'd buy you a drink."

He feels a pinprick in his eye, like he does any time she attempts to push him out of his faith. It may be a joke, but it stings just the same. He wishes she'd let up, but that's not Emilia's way. So to keep the peace, he jokes back.

"If we were twenty-one, I still wouldn't drink it."

Julius laughs. "You two need a podcast or something."

"For sure," Emilia says. "We'd go viral and smother all of those dudes who say women should make them sandwiches and not talk to any other man ever."

"Instant subscribe," Julius says, slinging an arm around her shoulder.

See, now, this is awesome. Performing was next-level, but this, the friendly banter, would be the rest of the shows he can go to, if they can keep up the friendships. Hanging with Emilia and Julius and the rest of Evergreen. That'd make a perfect summer, even if it was a short time.

Emilia and Beck help Julius and Sarah pack up their van and send them off to the hospital with the promise of getting an update on Mitchell. Surely, that's the only reason Julius asks for their numbers and texts Beck a winky face to make sure he also has his.

While Beck waits for the next artist, Julius sends him a screenshot of his contact on Julius's phone. It reads "Beck (not a loser)" with the piano emoji. Beck renames him "Julius (not Caesar)" with the drum emoji, sets the picture from the Provo show as his contact picture, and sends him a screenshot.

Julius (not Caesar) 🎹: Lol never heard that one before.

Julius (not Caesar) 🥁: Great pic btw! 😊

The electricity Beck felt when Evergreen first walked on stage at Muzik's returns and tingles at the base of his spine. Like when he messaged Julius yesterday.

Before he can stop himself, he holds up his phone and takes a selfie. A kaleidoscope of colors tints his blonde hair and face, making him look alien. His smile is small and doesn't show any teeth, but it's more genuine than he's looked in a long time. Beck sends it without a second thought.

Beck: And here's one for you.

Chapter 7

Beck is still buzzing when he gets home after the concert. He and Emilia ended up staying for the mediocre DJ because he was too hyped up to leave early. He and his friends danced the night away, and when the DJ remixed a club song into “Dancing Queen,” they all roared with excitement and proceeded to perform the ensemble choreography from their production of *Mamma Mia* from sophomore year. Beck’s never had so much fun.

“How was it?” Gretchen says from his bedroom doorway.

Beck can’t hide his smile. “It was a blast.”

“You seem happier than last time. Was it because your friends were there?” She walks in, and before sitting down on his bed, she smooths out the wrinkled comforter.

He mentally thanks her for the easy out and tells her about the concert, highlighting the “Dancing Queen” performance and not mentioning he actually played real music on a real stage. Not that hymns aren’t real music, but they’re not what he wants to write. And maybe perform someday. That still seems like a big mountain to climb, harder than performing someone else’s songs.

He changes into pajamas in his closet and then joins his mother on the bed after taking off his glasses and plugging in his phone, making sure the ringer is on.

“I’m glad you had fun,” Gretchen says.

“Thanks, I’m looking forward to the next show.” If Mitchell is okay. It’s been a few hours but he hasn’t heard anything yet.

“Listen, I know you’re a little disappointed about not being able to go on the whole tour, but I’m proud of you for accepting this compromise. You’ve always been good about prioritizing what’s important to you,” Gretchen says.

Right, the reason this is for the best is his safety, supposedly, and saving his money for his mission. His mother’s words sober him, reminding him he can’t avoid the inevitable.

“You get to have everything you want. That’s pretty lucky,” she says.

Beck knows he’s lucky. On the privilege scale, he is pretty high up there. But he can’t help but feel that the “everything” she’s talking about is from a blueprint he didn’t design. It’s something that doesn’t fit who he is anymore but still has to use.

He thinks about telling her. Not coming out and not about the show. But maybe how he’s scared about the mission. How sometimes when he’s in church on Sundays, he feels like his skin is peeling.

But instead, he agrees with her. He thanks her again. He hugs her and says goodnight, and she leaves the room.

He can’t shatter the perfect family his parents have created. They don’t deserve it just because he feels a little bit different. It’s not fair because she’s right, he is so lucky to have them.

Fifteen minutes later, after scrolling through TikTok to get his mind off his mood dip, he gets a FaceTime request from Emilia. When he answers, Emilia pops up, and her hair is wet and wavy, like she just took a shower.

“Don’t freak out,” she says. Which is exactly what she shouldn’t say if she wants him not to freak out.

“What’s wrong?” He turns on his lamp and sits up in bed.

“Nothing’s super wrong, okay? This actually turned into an interesting opportunity for

us,” she says with a suspicious grin. “Hold on, though. I’m going to add Julius.”

Before he can panic and ask why, the drummer joins the video call. It looks like he’s in a car, but even with the bad lighting and presumably hours at the hospital, he looks good. The shadows stick to his cheek dimples like two piercings, and Beck immediately wants to end the call and scream into his pillow.

“So that’s what you look like without glasses,” Julius says.

Beck can’t deal with the flirting right now. “What’s going on? Is it Mitchell?”

“Bingo,” Emilia says.

“Don’t sound so excited,” Julius says. “Anyway, we sort of need your help again, Beck.”

“What do you need?”

“Well, Mitchell is messed up pretty bad. He has fractures in one of his arm bones, his wrist, and he broke his finger. I don’t know how the dude managed that by tripping, but here we are.”

“That sucks,” Beck says.

“Yeah, he’s going to be in a cast for weeks, so we kind of need you to fill in again. If you can. Emilia said you guys were going to come to all our shows anyway.”

Beck looks at his cousin who doesn’t seem remorseful at all for lying.

“Why didn’t you ask me before you talked to her?” Saying no is going to be so much harder with her here. And he has to say no, right? Gretchen made it pretty clear what she expected.

“I figured I’d need back up. Though, I sort of hoped tonight would be reason enough,” Julius says.

Tonight had been amazing. Even after his conversation with his mother, he can’t deny

how much he loved playing with Evergreen.

“Our parents won’t allow it. They already told us we couldn’t go. We are just supposed to see the Utah shows.”

“I hate to be the guy to say ditch your parents, but Beck, you’re eighteen. If you can afford to come out, like Emilia says, and you want to come, you can go. You can choose what you want,” Julius says.

Can he? Beck’s never done anything like that before. He’s a rule follower.

But tonight felt big enough to change his life. And now he’s at this crossroads, right to follow his parents and left to follow Evergreen and Emilia. To follow Julius.

This is dangerous. This is a time to turn to Heavenly Father in prayer like he did at the concert, but he’s afraid of the answer he’ll get. If he even gets one. God’s been quiet lately.

“I need to think about it,” he says.

“That’s not a no,” Julius says.

“That’s actually ‘Beck’ for ‘hell yes!’” Emilia says.

“No, Em—”

“We’ll see you in Ogden, Julius,” she says.

“We have a few days until the show. Think about it, and let me know,” Julius says. “But Beck?”

“Yeah?”

“I really hope you do it,” he says and smiles, and then, “Goodnight, you two.”

When he hangs up, Emilia rambles for eleven minutes, first trying to convince him to say yes and then launching into what they’ll do in each place. Beck lets her speak, but he’s already spiraling down his own imagination.

Beck stands at the keyboard in some Arizona or Colorado venue. The crowd's only a little bigger than at Rocky Mill, but they dance as enthusiastically as the one at Muzik's. Devin works the stage as he sings, captivating the audience with his voice. Teague and Sarah take turns dominating with their instruments. Julius bangs on the drums with a big smile on his face, his dimples out in full force. Emilia and Mitchell cheer from the crowd. And Beck feels that unmistakable, addicting high of performing.

Emilia and Julius will still have to talk him down before each show, but he'll be soaring afterwards. Because that's what every show will feel like, right?

He could find out for sure. He could tell Evergreen and Emilia that he'll do the tour. He would be disobeying his mother, but he'd have the summer of a lifetime.

There is, of course, his mission call to think about. Pretty soon, he'd get an email telling him his status has been updated and his assignment is waiting, complete with a report date to the Missionary Training Center. He'd have a concrete end date for the summer. The thought anchors his stomach to the floor.

But Beck could ignore it for a while. Pretend it wasn't happening and play this tour. He'd only need to check in with his parents every so often after they got over the initial shock. He'd have to keep his feelings for Julius in check, but that'd be worth it to keep playing.

He has to know if performing will make him feel like snowboarding down a mountain at a hundred miles an hour every time. He has to know if he can do this.

It might be more important than the whole mission thing.

At least, it would give him something to look forward to after.

He and Emilia say goodnight and end the call. But before he sets his phone down, Emilia sends him a text.

Emilia: Please, really think about it. You deserve more of this.

Attached is a collection of pictures and videos from tonight's show. Beck must admit he looks a little noodly in his movements, but he can't deny the unusually large smile on his face as he presses the keys and plays off the others' cues. He could have this again.

Emilia barged into his room a few days ago and said she had a legendary, epic, amazing, incredible, unforgettable, and historic plan, and it might just come true. He just has to make it past Gretchen Taylor.

Every instinct in him tells him he can't play another show, like a toddler tapping the side of his brain for attention, but he finds himself ignoring it and choosing what he wants.

Before he can change his mind, he texts Emilia and Julius.

Beck: I'm in.

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VITA

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