



Perfect Rhythm

JAE



Chapter 1

CHANTS OF “JENNA, JENNA, JENNA!” echoed through Madison Square Garden. Even after a ninety-minute concert, the crowd apparently couldn’t get enough of her. Goose bumps erupted all over her body as twenty thousand people were cheering, clapping, and shouting her name.

Well, not really her name—her stage name.

No one had called her by her real name—Leontyne or Leo—for more than a year. When she was on tour, she became Jenna Blake, pop icon.

Other voices added screams of “Butterfly Kisses,” the title of her top hit, to the cacophony.

From his place next to her in the wings of the stage, Ray groaned. “If I have to play that song one more time...” He lifted one of his drumsticks and pretended to stab himself. “It’s part of our playlist already. Why do they want to hear it again?”

Leo sighed. After performing the song in one hundred and eighteen concerts during the past thirteen months, she was pretty sick of it herself. “If that’s what the fans want, that’s what they’ll get. Come on.” She clapped Ray’s shoulder. “One last encore and we can all go home.”

She took a sip of her lukewarm water before putting the bottle down and lifting her hand to signal the tech crew.

The lights in the arena went out, leaving just the glow of thousands of cell-phone screens. Smoke-machine fog billowed out from behind the amplifiers.

Leo handed her guitar to her guitar tech, stepped out from the wings, and felt her way up the few steps to the dark stage.

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Who the hell thought this was a good idea? She mentally cursed her knee-high stiletto boots and the skintight halter-neck jumpsuit as she made her way blindly along the catwalk connecting the main stage to a smaller platform.

As soon as she reached it, a lone spotlight flared on, bathing her in purple, and the huge video screens behind her exploded with colorful fireworks.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Derek played the opening notes of “Butterfly Kisses.” The bass notes mingled with the beat of the drum, and her body shifted into the song’s upbeat rhythm as if on autopilot.

When Leo pulled the cordless microphone from its stand, her pop-star persona slid into place as easily as the mic slid between her fingers.

Her sultry, husky voice filled the arena as she dove into her hit song and gyrated to its seductive beat. She strutted across the platform and paused tantalizingly close to its edge. Within touching range of her fans, she dropped her voice to a sexy croon and sang directly to them.

Hands reached out for her.

Before anyone could make contact, she drew back with a playful flick of her hair and belted out the chorus.

The lights were hot on her skin, but she ignored the sweat soaking her costume and focused on her dance moves and the lyrics.

The crowd below her writhed, clapped, and sang along.

When she got to the chorus again, she held out the microphone to have them sing it. Blinded by the stage lights, Leo couldn’t make out faces. All she saw were hands holding up cell-phone flashlights. Every now and then, when spotlights panned over the crowd, she caught a glimpse of someone wearing a T-shirt with her face or name on it.

Even after more than a dozen years in the music business, she still hadn’t gotten used to that.

Gazing out over this undulating sea of people, knowing they were there just to hear her, and having them sing along with her... For a moment, she felt a flash of the old excitement as the crowd’s energy flowed over her.

Finally, the song came to an end.

Her fans stomped and clapped, making the stage tremble beneath her feet.

“I love you, Jenna!” a girl in the first row shouted. Others echoed the sentiment.

“I love you too, B—” She caught herself just in time. Nope, not Boston. That had been yesterday. Today, they were in New York. Home. “Beautiful.” She somehow managed to make it sound as if that was what she’d meant to say all along.

“Thank you, everyone, and good night.” The mic seemed as heavy as an anvil as she placed it back onto its stand. With a bow and a few quick waves in all directions, she sauntered offstage as fast as her stiletto boots would allow.

A black-clad security guard led her through the winding corridor and past techs, backstage-pass holders, and pictures of artists who had played Madison Square Garden before her.

She kept her Jenna Blake smile pasted to her face as crew members and fans called out “congratulations” or “great show.” Only when the door of her dressing room closed behind her did she allow herself to relax. For the first time in what felt like forever she was alone, without anyone vying for her attention. She took out her ear monitor and set it on the dressing table. Her gaze fell on the large, lightbulb-framed mirror.

Damn. She looked like shit. Maybe there was something to be said for the heavy makeup they made her wear for the show. It concealed the dark shadows beneath her eyes, at least from a distance. If she wasn’t careful, the usual rumors would start—that she was doing drugs or spending her nights at wild parties.

As if. She plopped onto one of the three chocolate-colored leather couches. Within seconds, she had wriggled out of the instruments of torture adorning her feet and buried her bare toes in the plush carpet.

Her eyes fell closed. *Heaven.* As the adrenaline high of being onstage ebbed, exhaustion crashed down on her. She could have sat there forever, just enjoying the peace and quiet, but the creaking of the door caused her to open her eyes.

Saul, her manager, entered the dressing room and pushed past wardrobe stands with a wide grin on his bearded face.

His assistant and one of the makeup artists followed him in.

“You were great out there.” He gestured toward the huge flat-screen TV showing the stage. “They loved you.”

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Leo said nothing. They loved the carefully constructed image of sexy pop star Jenna Blake, not her. Without getting up, she bent over her bag and rummaged around for a sweatshirt. She couldn't wait to get out of the jumpsuit that stuck to her damp skin—and to get rid of the makeup.

Saul pulled the bag out of reach. "That'll have to wait. You've got to go to the meet-and-greet in a sec and then make an appearance at the after-party."

"I'll change for the after-party, but do you honestly think my fans care what I'm wearing when I'm popping in to say hi for a second?"

"They care," Saul said. "I doubt they paid extra to meet the butch version of you."

As a kid, Leo had practiced raising one eyebrow in front of the mirror for hours, and now that skill came in handy. "Since when are jeans and a sweatshirt considered butch?"

"Have I ever steered you wrong?"

She sighed. Saul had gotten her where she was today; she knew that, but she was no longer so sure that was where she wanted to be. "I'm tired, Saul."

"I know. It was a long night."

"A long year," she murmured.

"But it's over now." He waved a hand as if that could wipe away the stress of touring for more than a year and traveling from city to city until they all blurred together. "And you'll cheer right up when you hear what great new opportunity I secured for you." He bounced over to her, and she could practically see the dollar signs popping up in his eyes.

Great. What did he have in store for her now?

"I got you a spot as a judge on *A Star is Born*." He spread his arms wide, clearly expecting an enthusiastic response. "The auditions start in January. That gives you six months. If we get Irene and the rest of your songwriting team together, that should be enough time to put together fifteen songs and then go back into the studio to—"

"No. I told you I'm tired," she said, louder this time. "I mean it. I need a break."

Saul glanced at the makeup artist. "Could you give us a minute?" He waited until she'd left the room before he faced Leo again. "Fifteen minutes with the fans and a little chitchat with the record label execs at the after-

party, then I'll have a driver take you home. A good night's sleep, a nice breakfast and you'll feel much better."

"No, Saul. You're not listening. I need more than eight hours of sleep and an egg-white omelet." She shoved a damp strand of hair out of her face. "I'm tired. Tired of it all."

Deep lines etched themselves into Saul's forehead. "You don't mean that."

She held his gaze. "I do. Maybe I'm getting old."

His lips twisted into an amused smile. "You're thirty-two. Not exactly old."

"It is when you're supposed to be a sexy pop star. I hung in there until the end of the tour, but I can't keep doing it. I'm this close to burnout." She held her thumb and index finger a fraction of an inch apart.

"All you need is a little pick-me-up." He pulled a sterling-silver pillbox from the inside pocket of his custom-tailored suit jacket and snapped it open.

Leo jumped up without taking a look at what was inside. She didn't want to know. On her way to fame, she'd seen what that stuff had done to other musicians. "You know I don't allow drugs on my tours. If you don't get that shit out of my dressing room this instant, I'm gonna—"

"Who said anything about drugs? I'd never give you anything illegal. This is just a pill to help you—"

"I don't need that kind of help. How often do I have to tell you? I need a goddamn break." Her bare foot hit one of the stiletto boots, kicking it across the room.

Saul's new assistant winced. He probably thought she was some kind of diva throwing a tantrum, but she didn't care.

"Suit yourself." With a shrug, Saul put the pillbox away. He sank onto the couch and patted the space next to him.

She glared at him for a few seconds longer before pointedly choosing to sit on the other couch.

"Listen, Jenna." He put his elbows on his thighs, leaned forward, and regarded her across the glass-topped coffee table. "I know you could do with a week of sipping cocktails on some tropical beach. By God, we all could. But you haven't had a number-one hit in more than three years."

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A low growl rumbled in her throat. “I’ve spent half of those years on the road to promote my last album.”

“I know.” He held up both hands, palms out. “I’m not accusing you of being lazy. But this is not the time to take a break. You were lucky you didn’t lose your entire fan base when you came out to the public—against my advice, I might add—but you won’t be that lucky twice.”

“Lucky?” Leo echoed. “I worked hard to—”

“Hard work isn’t enough. You know how fickle fans are. If there’s a new hottie on the horizon who can hold a note for more than a second, they’ll forget about you faster than you can say *career slump*.”

Leo sighed. As much as she hated it, he was right. Before she could think of something to say, a phone rang.

Saul fumbled for the ever-present cell in his pocket, but it wasn’t his.

The tones of Aretha Franklin’s “Call Me” drifted over. Few people had Leo’s number. She hadn’t heard her own ringtone in so long that it took her a few seconds to react. Thankful to escape the discussion and get a moment to think about how to answer Saul, she moved to get up.

But he was already waving at his assistant. “Get that, will you?” He turned back toward her. “We’re in the middle of an important discussion. This can wait.”

She sank back down. He was right. She had told him she needed a break before the world tour she had just wrapped up, but apparently, she hadn’t gotten her point across. This time, she had to get through to him. She needed one month away from it all, or she’d go crazy.

The assistant put down his clipboard, picked up her cell phone from the dressing table, and slipped out of the room to take the call outside. But before she could get anywhere with Saul, the young man was back, holding out the phone with a helpless expression on his face.

Saul glared at him. “That better be the president of the NFL, wanting her to sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl!”

The assistant gulped audibly. “Uh, no, it’s some woman. I didn’t catch her name. She says she wants to talk to a Leontyne.” He pronounced it to rhyme with Valentine, as if he hadn’t paid any attention to the way the woman on the phone must have pronounced it.

“Le-on-teen,” Leo automatically corrected.

"Um, yeah, I think that's what she said. I told her she's got the wrong number, but she insists—"

She waved her fingers at him. "Give me that phone."

The assistant hurried around the glass table and handed it over.

A woman asking for Leontyne could only be one person. She braced herself. "Mom?"

Saul's assistant gaped at her.

What? Had he thought she had been grown in a lab, with no parents?

"Leontyne?" It was her mother's voice.

A lump lodged in her throat. They hadn't talked in five years, so if her mother was calling her now, something must have happened. "Yes. What's wrong?"

"I was wondering if... Do you have...?" Her mother gulped in a breath of air. "I would really like you to come home."

"What? Come home?"

Saul's eyes widened. He urgently shook his head. "Absolutely not," he said, probably loud enough for Leo's mother to hear. "This isn't a good time for family visits. You're supposed to lay tracks for your next album."

Leo stuck her finger in her ear to drown him out. "Maybe I can come visit next—"

"I really think you should come see your father now," her mother cut in. "He had a stroke."

Chapter 2

HOLLY LEANED AGAINST THE EXAM table and glanced from her mother—the only vet in Fair Oaks—to Mrs. Mitchell and the cat carrier in her hand.

If Holly had ever seen an aptly named pet, it was this one.

As soon as Mrs. Mitchell put down the carrier on the stainless-steel table, Diva twitched her whiskers as if in disgust, turned around, and presented them with her butt.

Mrs. Mitchell chuckled. “Please excuse her manners, Beth. She doesn’t like going to the vet.”

“I’ll try not to take it personally.” Holly’s mother grinned wryly.

Now that Mrs. Mitchell’s hands were free, she walked toward Holly.

For a second, Holly was afraid that her former math teacher would pinch her cheeks as if she were still a child, but instead, she gave her a hug.

“I haven’t seen you in a while, dear. I guess taking care of poor Gil keeps you busy...or have you decided to take over your mother’s practice after all?” Mrs. Mitchell swept her arm in a gesture that included the exam room and the rest of the vet’s office.

Holly laughed. “Oh no. I’m a nurse, not a veterinarian. I’m just helping out for a few hours because Susan called in sick.” As she helped her mother get the hissing, growling cat out of the carrier and onto the exam table, she congratulated herself on making her own career choice instead of following in her mother’s footsteps. Her human patients were usually much more compliant—and they didn’t have needle-sharp claws.

Diva let out a deafening shriek, as if she were being tortured, and puffed up her fur until she appeared to be twice her already-impressive size.

Holly started to sweat as she tried to hold on to the cat without getting clawed to death.

“Hey, hey,” her mother crooned. “No one’s gonna hurt you.”

That promise seemed to be pretty one-sided. Diva flicked her tail, which at the moment looked like a bottle brush, and tried to bite.

Holly’s mother took the cat’s neck in a gentle yet firm grip. With practiced ease, she palpated Diva’s abdomen, listened to her heartbeat and lungs, and then checked her ears. Holly struggled to hold on to the spitting cat, who sent her an unhand-me-this-instant-you-brute glare.

Finally, her mother stepped back. “Everything looks just fine, Thelma. But Diva could stand to lose a little weight.”

A little? That was the understatement of the century. The cat was at least twenty pounds of attitude. She wouldn’t turn into the feline version of Kate Moss anytime soon.

“Didn’t you give her the special diet food I recommended when you brought her in for her shots last month?” Holly’s mother asked.

“I tried, but she won’t touch it.”

“Try again. She will once she realizes her usual food isn’t coming, no matter how much she pouts. Trust me. It worked with this one too when she was a kid and didn’t want to eat her green beans.” She nudged Holly.

“That’s what you think,” Mrs. Mitchell said. “In the school cafeteria, she always traded her apple for Amber Young’s cookie.”

As her cheeks heated, Holly cursed her fair complexion. At least Mrs. Mitchell didn’t seem to suspect that she and Amber had also traded their homework: Holly had done all of Amber’s science and math while Amber had written her English papers. “Hey, leave me out of this, you two.”

Her mother and Mrs. Mitchell chuckled. Diva hissed again, and they returned their attention to the cat.

“What if she refuses to eat?” Mrs. Mitchell directed a concerned gaze down at Diva. “Isn’t it dangerous for cats to go on a hunger strike?”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. Let’s try another flavor of the diet food. You can mix it with her usual food and then shift the ratio a little more every day.”

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Mrs. Mitchell nodded. "I can do that."

"Great." Her mother's white coat rustled as she turned toward Holly. "You can put Diva back in her carrier now."

The cat had calmed down a little under her steady grip, but as soon as Holly's mother let go and Holly lifted her off the table, Diva lashed out with one front paw.

Holly flinched back but wasn't fast enough. One sharp claw caught her jaw. Pain flared, making her stumble and nearly drop the cat.

Resolutely, her mother took over, and within a few seconds, Diva was back in her carrier. "Are you okay?" Her mother's usually steady hands trembled a little as they flew over Holly, as if she were dealing with a saber-inflicted wound.

Since her dad's accident, her mother tended to freak out over the smallest injury. "I'm fine, Mom. It's just a little scratch." Although it burned like crazy. She fished a tissue from her jeans pocket and pressed it against her jaw.

"Let me see."

"It's fine. I'll put disinfectant on it in a second. No big deal."

"Let me see," her mother repeated in her no-nonsense-mom voice.

Sighing, Holly lowered her hand with the tissue.

Both her mother and Mrs. Mitchell crowded closer, fussing over her.

Holly's cell phone rang to the tune of Aretha Franklin's "A Natural Woman."

Saved by the bell. Thanks, Aretha. She gently warded off her mother's hands and glanced at the display. The name flashing across the small screen sent her pulse racing. "It's Sharon. I have to take this."

Instantly, her mother and Mrs. Mitchell backed away and started to exchange the newest town gossip about Sharon's famous daughter, Leontyne.

Holly didn't listen. She quickly lifted the phone to her ear. "Sharon? Is Gil okay?"

"Oh, yes, dear. He's napping. I hope I didn't worry you."

"No," Holly said, but they both knew it was a lie. It took a few seconds for her heart to settle into a calmer beat.

"Listen," Sharon said after a moment of silence. "Is there any way you could come in a little early today? Leontyne is coming home, and I'd love

to make a strawberry-rhubarb pie. It's her favorite, you know? Well, at least it was when she was growing up, but I bet she still likes it."

Holly barely heard the rambling about the pie, her mind still stuck on one thought. "Leontyne is coming home?"

Behind Holly, her mother and Mrs. Mitchell fell silent. Even the cat stopped grumbling.

"Yes," Sharon said quietly, joy and worry mixed in her tone. "I don't know for how long, but...yes. She's coming."

"Oh, how wonderful," Mrs. Mitchell whispered, clutching her hands together.

Holly scrunched up her face. As much as she tried, she couldn't share that sentiment. Leontyne should have come home much sooner—last year, when her father had suffered his first, milder stroke, or even in May, after the second stroke, when he'd spent weeks in the hospital and then in a rehabilitation facility. She should have been there when her mother had broken down and cried on Holly's shoulder.

But, of course, Leontyne—or rather Jenna Blake—had been too busy traipsing all over the world, enjoying the limelight, to care about what happened to her parents. She hadn't even called, as far as Holly knew.

"So?" Sharon said when Holly remained silent. "Can you come?"

Holly turned a questioning gaze on her mother, knowing she had listened in on her conversation. "Do you still need me to...?"

"Go," her mother said. "I'll handle things here."

"If you can't, it's fine too," Sharon said. "I know you're already doing much more for us than is covered in your contract."

"Sharon, I'm not some hospital nurse you barely know. I consider both of you friends. Heck, I'm basically living with you. So forget the contract and just ask for help whenever you need it, okay? Now, would you like me to go by the store on my way over, or do you have what you need for the pie?"

Sharon exhaled audibly. "Holly Drummond, you're a godsend. I hope I'm telling you that enough."

"It's okay, really. I don't mind." Holly chuckled. "Plus I still owe you and Gil for what you had to endure when he tried to teach me how to play the piano."

Sharon's laughter reverberated through the phone—a sound that had become much too rare in the past two months since Gil's second stroke.

Smiling, Holly jotted down the shopping list, ended the call, and said goodbye to her mother and Mrs. Mitchell.

"What about your scratch?" her mother called after her.

Holly waved over her shoulder. "I'll live." At least after handling Diva, the demon cat, dealing with a spoiled pop star should be a piece of cake, right?

* * *

Leo sped north on Highway 169, glad to escape the airport and its crowd of people asking for autographs and pictures. *Slow down.* She eased her foot off the gas and set the cruise control. It wasn't as if she was in a hurry to return to Fair Oaks, the place she had fought so hard to get away from fourteen years ago. There was nothing left in that small town for her, certainly not a great relationship with her father. Hell, he was probably glad she'd stayed away all those years, and she wasn't so sure he'd want her around now that he was sick. Her father had never been one to show any weakness.

She sighed and gazed through the windshield.

The hills of northwest Missouri rolled like gentle ocean waves, and the white wind turbines dotting the landscape like masts of ships only added to the feeling of being far out at sea. The farmhouses and silos sprinkled along the highway seemed like isolated ports, their long driveways with mailboxes at the end extended toward the road like jetties.

She had forgotten how beautiful this part of the country could be.

Fields stretched on both sides of the road—golden wheat almost ready to be harvested, green rows of soybeans, and stalks of corn that looked to be already taller than Leo's five foot ten.

It reminded her of summers, twenty years ago, when she had earned some extra money by "walking beans" on the farms in the area. Cutting out weeds in the summer heat, up to her waist in soybeans, hadn't been her idea of a fun summer break, but her father believed in teaching her good work ethics. "If you want some spending money, Leontyne, you've got to earn it," he'd said.

Wow, she had forgotten all about that. She snorted. *More like repressed it.*

Walking beans was exhausting. She'd always ended up dew-soaked up to her waist, with a sunburned neck and her hands covered in blisters and cuts.

She lifted her left hand off the steering wheel and glanced at it. No blisters and cuts now, just calluses on her fingertips from the strings of her guitar. Saul would kill her if she came back with mangled hands, unable to play. Not that she intended to help out the local farmers again. She would stay just long enough to make sure her father had what he needed. Mingling with the locals wasn't on her to-do list.

As if on cue, her cell phone rang through the rental car's speakers, and her manager's name flashed across the dashboard display.

For a few seconds, she considered ignoring him, but if she did, he'd probably be on the next flight to Kansas City to hunt her down. Sighing, she pressed the phone button on the steering wheel to stop the music on the radio and accept the call.

"Are you there yet?" Saul never bothered with a *hi* or *how are you?*

"Not yet. It's a ninety-minute drive from the airport." She turned right onto the state highway that would connect her to Highway 136.

Saul clucked his tongue. "I still can't believe you're doing this. Going to Bumfuck, Kansas, when you should be laying tracks on your new album."

"It's Missouri, not Kansas, and trust me, it's not my idea of a fun vacation either."

A tractor appeared in front of her, hauling a trailer piled high with hay bales.

"Great," Leo muttered. She wasn't in a hurry to arrive in Fair Oaks, but that didn't mean she wanted to crawl along the highway at ten miles per hour. "Welcome to small-town America."

"Excuse me?" Saul said.

"Nothing."

The tractor driver pulled onto the shoulder of the road a little more so she could pass.

Leo stepped on the gas and gave a grateful wave as she passed.

"This sudden family emergency...it's not just an excuse to get away for a while, is it?" Saul asked.

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She clutched the steering wheel as if attempting to throttle it. “Jesus, Saul! You were there when my mother called. You think I would fake something like that?”

For several moments, only silence answered. “Well...”

Thanks a lot, asshole! She swallowed the words before she could utter them. It already felt as if her career was teetering on the brink, so there was no use in alienating her manager.

“It’s just that the few times you talked about your father, it sounded as if he were already dead,” Saul said.

No. It’s more like I’m dead to him. But she didn’t feel like getting into it. “I have to go, Saul. I’ll be there soon.”

“All right. Please try to work on a couple new songs while you’re holed up with the family, okay?”

“I’ll try,” Leo said, even though she had a feeling she wouldn’t be in the mood for composing upbeat pop songs.

When she ended the call, the radio came back on, playing the last notes of some country song. She pulled off the highway onto a narrow two-lane road riddled with potholes. To the right, a large, white sign announced *Welcome to Fair Oaks, hometown of Jenna Blake.*

Leo snorted. Fair Oaks hadn’t been her home in many years, and no one there had ever called her Jenna.

Next to that sign, a smaller one said *City limits of Fair Oaks, population 2,378.*

City limits? Her lips twitched. *That’s stretching it.*

Just as she passed the two signs, the opening lines of “Butterfly Kisses” drifted through the car’s speakers. Groaning, she turned off the radio and drove through town in silence.

It had been five years since she had been back for her grandmother’s funeral. Fair Oaks hadn’t changed much, but somehow it felt foreign—so different from the skyscrapers and bright lights of New York City. The water tower carrying the faded high school mascot appeared on the left, while the red brick spire of the courthouse towered over the town on the right. Several buildings at the edge of town appeared to be abandoned, their windows boarded up.

Leo halfway expected a tumbleweed to blow through. She encountered only a white pickup truck that pulled into Ruth’s Diner. The guy behind

the wheel stared at her, probably because he didn't recognize her car, which gave her away as an out-of-towner.

Her fingers around the steering wheel grew damp as she approached her childhood home. It was right across the street from her old high school. The sight of the brick building with the brass bell displayed on the front lawn didn't make her feel any better. She hadn't fit in with her small class any better than she fit into town now.

Gravel crunched as she turned into her parents' driveway. When she turned off the engine, the sudden silence felt strangely loud.

Reluctant to leave the sanctuary of her rental car, she stared through the windshield toward the house. Like the town, her childhood home was almost exactly the same as Leo remembered. Despite the money she had sent her parents over the years, they hadn't added to their two-story house. It was only after a few minutes of silent staring that she detected some changes: The weathered windowsill on the dormer window jutting out from the roof had been replaced; the house had gotten a new paint job, and the trees shading the front lawn had grown taller.

She took a deep breath, as if about to go underwater, and opened the driver's side door. The July heat slapped her in the face, but she couldn't hide out in the air-conditioned car for the rest of the day, so she braced herself and climbed out. The sound of the car door slamming shut was like a rifle crack, making her flinch.

Leo opened the trunk and lifted out her suitcase and her battered guitar case.

The porch swing creaked in the breeze as she walked up the path toward the house. The lawn she had mowed every Saturday throughout her teenage years was neatly trimmed, and she wondered who was taking care of it now.

On the porch, she set down the suitcase but kept gripping the guitar case. She needed its familiar weight to calm her down. Ringing the doorbell felt strange, but even if she still had a key, she couldn't imagine just walking in, especially since she had no idea what would greet her inside.

Bleak mental images of her father being attached to beeping machines assaulted her, and she shoved them aside. If he were that bad off, the doctors wouldn't have released him from the hospital.

Her father had never been sick. In his forty-year career as a music professor and concert violinist, he had never missed a single day of work

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or a Sunday playing the organ at church. Mind over matter; that was what he always said.

Whatever had happened, he would make a full recovery. Before she knew it, he would drive her crazy with his opinions on her songs and popular music in general, his disparaging glances at her guitar calluses that would mess up her violin playing, and his none-too-subtle nudges for her to go out with one of the Wilson boys, no matter how often she told him she was a lesbian.

With a hand raised toward the doorbell, she hesitated. *Come on. You've sung in the biggest arenas in the country—you can do this.* Her heart beat a crazy staccato as she rang the bell. Her knuckles on the handle of the guitar case turned white while she waited for her mother to answer.

Footfalls approached, and the door swung open, but the woman standing before her wasn't her mother. A stranger in her late twenties stared back at her.

Her nerves frazzled, Leo said the first thing that came to mind. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Holly." At Leo's blank stare, she added, "Holly Drummond."

The name sounded familiar. "Drummond? Wait, you're Zack's baby sister, aren't you?"

Holly grimaced. "He likes to tell people that, but I prefer the term *younger sister*."

Yeah, she definitely wasn't a baby anymore. Leo remembered her as a skinny, awkward teenager. Now she was all grown up, with generous, feminine curves. Her faded T-shirt only hinted at full breasts, though, not flaunting them as the women in Leo's world did. Over the years, Holly's carrot-red hair had darkened to a rich auburn, which framed her pretty face in a soft pixie cut and formed a striking contrast to her pale skin.

Leo was used to people looking her up and down, but Holly's vibrant blue eyes never moved from her face. Definitely not a lesbian or bi or pan, she concluded.

Instead of welcoming her home, Holly hovered in the doorway like a pit bull guarding a bone.

Leo felt like an idiot as she stood on the porch, clutching her guitar case. Who the heck had appointed Holly guardian of the house? She hadn't

even been aware that Holly and her mother knew each other. But then again, everyone in Fair Oaks knew everyone else.

“Um, may I?” She gestured at the house behind Holly.

“Oh, sorry. Of course.” Holly shuffled backward, making room for her to enter.

An avalanche of memories hailed down on Leo as she picked up her suitcase and stepped inside. The house smelled of mouthwatering pie and her mother’s lavender perfume. Classical music drifted through the main floor. After a moment, she recognized it as Pachelbel’s “Canon in D,” one of her father’s favorite pieces.

“Your mother is in the kitchen,” Holly said.

Leo set down her suitcase, propped the guitar case against the stairway curving up to the second floor, and moved past Holly, glancing back to see if she would follow. Maybe having someone else there would make the reunion with her mother less awkward.

But Holly stayed behind as Leo walked toward the kitchen.

Her mother stood with her back to Leo, wiping down the same gray-and-white-speckled Formica countertop they’d had fourteen years ago.

Leo paused and stared across the bar separating the kitchen from the dining room area. When had her mother gotten so old? Her hair, formerly the same honey shade as Leo’s own, was now streaked with gray, and she seemed thinner than Leo remembered. Her mother had always prided herself on her youthful appearance, but now she looked much older than her sixty-five years.

As if sensing Leo’s gaze on her, she turned around. Her mother gasped and dropped the rag she’d been holding as if surprised to see her, which was strange because she must have heard the doorbell. Had she doubted that Leo would actually come and assumed it was a neighbor?

Leo stood frozen, not sure how to greet her. The bar between them wasn’t the only thing separating them.

Finally, her mother took the initiative. She rushed over and engulfed her in a tight embrace.

After a moment, Leo’s arms came up to hug her back. Had her mother felt as fragile in the past? She didn’t think so.

Her mother stepped back but kept her hands on Leo’s shoulders, holding her at arms’ length to look her over. “Your hair... It looks so different.”

Leo tucked a strand of her tousled, shoulder-length mane behind one ear. “The label thought it was a good idea to add a few golden highlights for the cover of my last album, and then we decided to stick with it.” It occurred to her that even now, as an adult, she wasn’t the one who got to make the decisions about how to wear her hair.

“It looks good,” her mother said.

“Thanks.”

Silence fell like a suffocating blanket between them.

“How was the flight?”

“Fine.”

“And the drive up?” her mother added.

“That was fine too.” Leo heaved a sigh. She was too tense to muddle through the usual small talk.

Her mother finally let go of her shoulders and hustled back into the kitchen. “Did you eat? I’ve got a pie in the oven, but it still needs twenty minutes before I can take it out. I could make you—”

“No, Mom. I’m not hungry.” She wiped away a bit of flour her mother’s hug had left on her tank top and wished the awkwardness would be as easy to shake off.

She let her gaze roam the kitchen. Everything looked the same here too: the glass-fronted oak cabinets with their brass handles, the four-burner stove, and her mother’s spices neatly lined up on a shelf. Then her gaze fell on the back door, and she spotted something new through the screen. A wooden ramp had been laid over the three steps leading to the patio.

A lump lodged in her throat. Was her father so bad off that he was bound to a wheelchair or had to use a walker? She hadn’t asked a lot of questions on the phone, not sure if she was ready to deal with the answers.

Her mother followed her gaze and walked back around the bar. “Why don’t you go wash up before you see your father?” she asked quietly, the forced cheerfulness gone from her tone. “He’s taking a nap in the downstairs bedroom.”

“Downstairs bedroom?” Leo croaked out through the lump.

“We converted the music room into a bedroom for your father since he can’t manage stairs anymore,” her mother said.

“Oh.”

“Holly will help you get your baggage upstairs.”

Leo waved away the offer. "I can manage, Mom."

"Nonsense. Holly doesn't mind, do you, dear?"

When Leo glanced over her shoulder to where her mother was looking, Holly stood in the dining room, her arms crossed over her chest. She watched Leo with the wariness other people reserved for a growling Doberman.

Please don't tell me she's one of the locals who think lesbians should be burned at the stake. Leo already had enough to deal with; she didn't need this too.

"No, of course I don't mind, Sharon." Holly's cheeks dimpled as she smiled at Leo's mother.

Sharon? Not Mrs. Blake? Why the hell were these two suddenly acting as if Holly were part of the family?

"Come on." Holly turned and walked toward the staircase without waiting to see if Leo would follow.

Sighing, Leo marched after her. She hadn't even been back for ten minutes, but she already couldn't wait to get the hell out of Dodge.

* * *

Before Holly could reach out to pick up the guitar case, Leontyne shouldered past her. "Let me take that."

Holly gritted her teeth. If only Leontyne had been as worried about her parents as she was about her precious guitar. *Don't say anything. If you chase her away, it'll break Sharon's heart.* So she bent and picked up the lone suitcase instead—just one, which sent a clear message. Leontyne didn't intend to stay for long.

She never had. Holly's brother Zack, who'd gone to school with Leontyne, had often joked that she'd been born with two things in her hands: a guitar pick and a map out of town.

They started up the stairs at the same time, nearly bumping into each other.

Holly waved at her to go first. Neither of them spoke a word as they climbed the stairs and headed down the hall.

When they got to the second of the upstairs bedrooms, Leontyne opened the door. But instead of entering, she leaned a trim hip against the doorframe and took in her old room. Was she reliving her youth or comparing her childhood home to her luxury condo on Park Avenue?

Holly couldn't tell. She put down the suitcase and watched her.

It was strange to see the face that was plastered on billboards all over the country. In a gray tank top, well-worn cowboy boots, and a pair of jean shorts that clung to a slim waist and left her long legs bare, she looked more like a country singer than a pop star—minus the big hair. She wasn't wearing makeup, so the dark smudges beneath her olive-green eyes were easy to spot.

Had she spent her last night in New York partying, or had she lain awake, worrying about her father?

If the fresh citrus smell was any indication, Sharon must have cleaned the room to make her daughter feel welcome. With its posters of pop stars, the room looked like a shrine to Leontyne's youth, but she still eyed it as if it were the anteroom of hell. It reminded Holly of the way animals looked entering the waiting room of her mother's practice.

Finally, Leontyne set one of her booted feet into the room, followed by the other. She put the guitar down, turned toward Holly, and took the suitcase from her. Belatedly, she muttered a "thanks."

Clearly, Ms. Pop Princess was used to being treated like royalty and having her baggage carried for her.

The door clicked closed between them, leaving Holly to stare at the wood.

* * *

Slowly, Leo let the suitcase sink to the floor. She'd been so sure that her parents would turn her old room into an office or a guest room the moment she'd left town, eager to erase the existence of the daughter they didn't approve of.

Instead, they had kept her room exactly as she remembered it—except a lot tidier. It felt as if she'd stepped into a time capsule. Her old desk was perched in the niche beneath the dormer window, next to the rocking chair in which she'd spent countless hours learning to play chords. The bookshelf still held her novels and CDs. She flopped down onto her single bed and stared up at the posters of Pink and Destiny's Child pinned to the sloped ceiling.

The pillow beneath her smelled of clean cotton and fabric softener. Not a hint of dust in the entire room. Maybe it should have made her feel

good to have her mother clean the room so thoroughly, but instead, it made her feel trapped. It was just one more indication of how much her mother wanted her to stay.

Suddenly, the room felt even smaller and more stifling than it actually was. She jumped off the bed and nearly ripped the door off its hinges as she tore it open.

Holly, who had reached the bottom of the stairs, turned and stared.

Heat rushed into Leo's cheeks. Was she actually blushing? It had been a long time since that had happened. She shrugged it off. It was probably being back in her childhood home that made her more emotional.

She put on her impenetrable pop-star mask and followed Holly down the stairs. Her muscle memory made her avoid the steps that creaked, and she realized that Holly must have done the same since she hadn't heard the stairs creak. *What the...?* How much time had Holly spent in the house to become so familiar with it?

It didn't matter now. She focused her attention on the door to the former music room.

Before she could work up the courage to open it, Holly took hold of her arm and held her back. "Wait!"

Leo glanced down at the hand on her arm.

Quickly, Holly let go. "Did your mother tell you what to expect?"

She shook her head. Her mother hadn't told her much beyond recounting that scary moment when she'd found him on the floor, unable to move or speak. Or maybe she had, and it just hadn't penetrated through the fog that had filled her head after hearing the word *stroke*.

"After the stroke, his right side was completely paralyzed," Holly said. "He's getting some function back in his leg, but it's a very slow process. The physiotherapist thinks he can eventually get him to where he can get around using a walker."

Her proud father shuffling around with a walker... She didn't want to believe it. "What about...?" She had to clear her throat before she could finish the sentence. "What about his arm?"

"It might get a little better too, but right now, he can't use it at all, so he needs help with everyday tasks like getting dressed."

Which meant he wouldn't be able to play his beloved violin. Leo curled her hands into fists as she imagined how it would feel. As much as she

wanted to get away from music for a while, the thought of never touching an instrument again was as foreign to her as never breathing again.

“If he’s that bad off, why isn’t he in a hospital or in a rehab center?”

“He was,” Holly said. “That’s where he spent the last two months.”

Last two months? Leo’s head spun. Her father’s stroke had happened two months ago, and no one had thought to call her until now?

“Recovery will be a slow process, and there’s not much a rehab center could do for him that we can’t do at home,” Holly cut into her thoughts.

“We?” Leo repeated. Why was Holly talking as if she were part of the family?

“I know I don’t look like it...” Holly glanced down at her jeans and the faded T-shirt. “But I’m a home-health-care nurse. Since I’m here on a full-time basis, your mother told me not to wear scrubs. She wants your father to feel like he’s at home, not in a hospital.”

“You’re a nurse? I didn’t know that.”

Holly shrugged. “How could you? You haven’t been home in fourteen years.”

Leo ground her teeth at the blatant reproach in Holly’s tone. “I was here five years ago, when my grandmother died.”

Holly pressed her lips together and said nothing.

“Okay.” With a stern nod, Leo reached for the door handle that had replaced the old brass knob, but once again, Holly held her back with a touch to her arm.

“There’s more.”

Oh hell. With jerky movements, she turned and waited for what else Holly had to say.

“He’s got aphasia.”

“Aphasia?” Leo repeated. “Does that mean...he can’t talk?”

“Not much. He can understand most of what you say to him, especially if you keep your sentences simple, but he struggles to get even a single word out. He knows what he wants to say, but he can’t access the words. Most of the time, he refuses to talk to anyone and doesn’t like being around people. I think he’s embarrassed.”

Leo could imagine that. Her father had always hated for anyone to think he was less than perfect. “But he wants to talk to me?”

Her mother joined them in front of the bedroom, and Leo turned toward her. “He knows I’m here, right?” If he unexpectedly came face-to-face with his lesbian pop-star daughter, he might have another stroke.

“He knows,” her mother said.

That didn’t answer her other question, but flying back to New York without seeing him was not an option. She gripped the door handle with sweaty fingers and opened the door inch by inch. The doorway had been widened, probably to accommodate the wheelchair that stood by the hospital bed in the middle of the room.

Even Holly’s explanation couldn’t have prepared her for the sight of her father in that wheelchair, his body slumped to one side and his right arm resting limply in his lap. He absentmindedly kneaded his fingers with the other hand. His face, which had always looked as if chiseled from a rock, was now drooping on the right. His mustache, formed like an albatross in flight, was gone. With his bare upper lip, he looked strangely vulnerable. Instead of the pressed trousers and the starched shirt she was used to, he wore sweatpants and a creased short-sleeved button-down.

Her stern, unyielding father appeared human—mortal—for the very first time.

Leo paused in the doorway. What was she supposed to say to him? She’d never known how to talk to him in the past, and now it certainly hadn’t gotten any easier.

She felt her mother step up behind her. Her hand on Leo’s shoulder cemented her in place, as if her mother was afraid she would turn and flee otherwise.

That actually sounded like a pretty good idea. She swallowed, and it sounded much too loud in the silent room. “Um, hi, Dad,” she finally said.

He stared at her but didn’t answer or nod to acknowledge her presence. Did he even recognize her?

“Come on, Gil,” Holly said. “I know you want to talk to Leontyne.”

Gil? To her knowledge, no one had ever called her father anything but Dr. Blake or Gilbert.

He looked from Leo to Holly and then back. The muscles in his jaw worked. He opened his mouth, and after two seconds, a simple “hello” came out. It sounded more like “a-no,” so Leo hoped it was a greeting, not his way of saying *no way do I want to see you, much less talk to you.*

Perfect Rhythm

She took a hesitant step into the room. “How are you doing?”

Again, he looked as if he needed to search his mind for the right word. “Fine,” he finally said. The corners of his mouth, even the side that wasn’t drooping, didn’t lift into a smile.

At least that one thing hadn’t changed. His expression had always been naturally disapproving when he’d looked at her.

He jerked his chin at her.

Was he trying to return the question and ask how she was doing? “I’m fine too,” she said.

He nodded once.

They stared at each other from opposite ends of the room.

What else could she tell him? She shifted her weight. Great. Now she was struggling just as much as he was for something to say.

To her surprise, it was her father who broke the awkward silence. “Music...” He paused and seemed to search for the right word. The kneading of his fingers became faster, more agitated. “Um...music no.”

She had no idea what he was trying to say, so she took a guess. Maybe he was asking about how her career was going. “Yeah, no more music for a while. I just wrapped up a world tour. Mom caught me right after the last concert in Madison Square Garden.”

Her father didn’t look impressed.

What did you expect? He had a stroke, not a personality implant. Nothing short of a concert in Carnegie Hall could ever impress him.

He shook his head. “No, no. Music bedroom. No listen.” He waved his good hand at something Leo couldn’t see.

God, this was like charades, and Leo had never been good at guessing games. She realized that she didn’t know her father well enough to guess what he was trying to say.

“Music. Put.” He tapped his fingers on the wheelchair’s armrest in a demanding rhythm.

“Oh.” Holly stepped next to her. “You want us to turn the music back on. Is that it?”

Her mother had turned off the classical music that had been playing in the background.

The tapping stopped, and he nodded.

"But it's hard to talk with the music on," her mother said softly. "You know you can't focus if there's too much background noise."

He tapped the armrest again, harder this time.

Leo pressed her lips together. *Message received.* Clearly, the conversation was over. She was dismissed.

Her mother hooked her hand into the bend of Leo's elbow. "Come on. You can talk more tomorrow. I'm sure you want to get unpacked before dinner." She led her to the door, turning the stereo back on in passing.

Not that Leo needed to be dragged. She was more than happy to get out of there. At the door, she glanced back at her father, who sat with his eyes closed as if wanting to block out the world and focus on the music.

Holly followed them out and closed the door behind herself.

"Is he getting speech therapy?" Leo asked.

"Yes," Holly said. "An hour of speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy five times a week."

"If his insurance doesn't cover it all, I'll foot the bill. Or if he needs a motorized wheelchair or something. Whatever he needs. Money is not an issue."

Holly's brow contracted. "You know, not every problem can be solved by throwing money at it." She clamped her mouth shut.

What the fuck? Leo turned toward her with her shoulders squared. "That's not what I'm doing, but my mother called me for a reason, so I'm trying to figure out what needs to be done."

"There are other ways to—"

"Now, let's not fight, girls." Her mother patted Leo's arm. "We all want what's best for your father."

Something clattered to the floor in the bedroom.

"I'll go," Holly said and slipped back into the room.

Leo stared after her. "Is she always such a ray of sunshine, or is it just me she doesn't like?"

"Holly is a lifesaver," her mother said. "We couldn't have managed without her. She's a lovely girl, really. I hope you two can get along."

She shrugged. It didn't matter. Whatever Holly's problem was with her, she didn't intend to stay long enough for it to become an issue.

* * *

Gil had wanted to be brought back to his room after dinner, and Leontyne had retreated upstairs, but Sharon was still puttering around the kitchen, running the rag across the countertop, even though it was already sparkly clean.

Holly gently took the rag from her and draped it over the faucet. She leaned against the counter and studied the woman she had come to regard as a friend. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Sharon sounded anything but.

“I thought you would be happy and finally get to relax a little now that Leontyne is home.”

“I am happy. It’s so good to see her.” For a moment, the old spark returned to Sharon’s eyes, but the familiar expression of worry soon smothered it.

“But?” Holly prompted.

Sharon trailed the tip of her index finger over the counter, watching its path instead of looking Holly in the eyes. “No but. I just... I guess I’m afraid she’ll leave and I won’t get to see her for another five years.”

Holly bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop herself from saying what was on her mind. Sharon had been through so much. How unfair of Leontyne to make her worry about yet another thing.

“Hey.” Sharon grasped one of Holly’s hands and held it in both of hers. “Please don’t be mad at her. I really didn’t expect her to come home and help out with her father. Her life is too busy and...complicated.”

So what? Holly didn’t care how complicated Leontyne’s life might be. Who else was there to help out Gil and Sharon since Leontyne was their only child? The boatload of money Leontyne sent wasn’t really what they needed, even if it could buy help like hers.

But saying so wouldn’t do any good. Sharon didn’t need to deal with Holly’s anger on top of everything else. She squeezed her hands, then let go. “Go get some rest. I’ll take Gil to the bathroom and get him settled for the night before I go to bed.”

“Are you sure you want to stay the night? I called you in earlier than expected today, so if you want to take the night off and get a good night’s sleep without having to keep one eye on the baby monitor...”

"And miss your wonderful breakfast?" Holly grinned. "No way! If you give me a few minutes so I can take a quick shower, I'll be ready to earn my pancakes."

Chuckling, Sharon leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, sweetie. I'll go see if he wants some company before bedtime." She squeezed Holly's shoulder and then walked down the hall.

Holly watched her for a few seconds before kicking herself into motion.

A couple of minutes later, she climbed into the shower and sighed in relief when the hot water rained down on her. Taking care of a patient with hemiparesis, helping him from his bed to the wheelchair and back, was hard work. Although he might look thin and fragile, Gil still had forty pounds on her. Her eyes fell closed as she stood beneath the spray and let the heat soak into her aching muscles.

She could have stayed there forever, but she knew Sharon and Gil were waiting downstairs, so she reached for the shampoo and washed her hair.

Just as she rinsed the last suds from her hair, a draft of cool air brushed over her, making her wet skin pebble.

What the...? Spluttering, she lifted her head from beneath the spray and wiped suds from her eyes so she could see.

On the other side of the fogged-up glass, a blurry figure stood in the doorway. "Oh. Uh, I'm sorry." It was Leontyne's voice. She jumped back and pulled the door toward her until just an inch of space remained.

Even though Leontyne could no longer see her, Holly turned off the water, snatched the towel from its place over the glass door, and covered herself with it.

"Sorry," Leo said again. "I guess I was distracted, so I didn't hear the shower running, and I...I...I didn't know you would be...um, here. Are you...staying the night?"

Her stammering was almost cute. Almost.

Holly had been in such a hurry to get back downstairs that she hadn't even thought of locking the door. After three weeks in the house, she had gotten used to having the bathroom to herself and had all but forgotten that the guest room where she stayed and Leontyne's room shared a bathroom.

"Yes," she said. "Your mother was running herself ragged, not sleeping enough, so we worked out a schedule. I stay here three nights a week to keep an eye on your father so she can get some rest."

“She didn’t tell me that,” Leontyne grumbled.

Was anyone talking to each other in this family? It was so different from Holly’s own family, which you couldn’t get to shut up even if you tried. Everyone was in each other’s business all the time.

The steam surrounding Holly dissolved, and cooling water dripped onto her shoulders, making her shiver. “Sorry. I thought you knew.”

“No. But I’m glad she’s got some help. I, um, will let you finish your shower now. Again, sorry for walking in on you.” The door clicked shut.

Holly slowly loosened her grip on the towel. Well, now she could say that superstar Jenna Blake had seen her naked...kind of. With a shake of her head, she unwrapped the towel from around her body and began to dry off.

* * *

Jesus! Leo dropped down on her bed and rubbed her heated face with both hands. For the second time today, she was blushing. *Oh, come on. What’s there to blush about?* She had hardly seen a thing through the fogged-up glass, just a blurry outline of Holly’s body.

Her very naked, very wet, very curvaceous body.

She had stood there like an idiot while the vanilla-and-coconut scent of Holly’s shampoo or shower gel wafted around her.

It wasn’t as if she’d never seen a woman naked before. Hell, once, a fan had thrown her top and bra at her during a concert, leaving herself naked from the waist up. But this wasn’t some stage. This was Fair Oaks. Being in her hometown and seeing her parents again had obviously thrown her off her game.

She stared up at the poster of Destiny’s Child. “Did you ever have to deal with stuff like this?” she muttered up to them.

Of course, neither Kelly nor Beyoncé answered.

“Thanks a lot, girls.” Sighing, she climbed off the bed to ask her mother for the Wi-Fi password. She hoped the Internet connection in Fair Oaks had gotten better since her high school days.

Chapter 3

THE CHEERFUL CHIRPING OF BIRDS woke Leo. No traffic noise filtered in from outside. She opened her eyes, pushed up on her elbows, and looked around, disoriented for a moment. Bright sunlight fell into the room through a dormer window. While she was used to waking up in unfamiliar beds, this clearly wasn't some hotel room in London, Berlin, Barcelona, or Sydney.

After a second, she remembered.

She was in Fair Oaks, in her old room.

As much as she didn't want to be here, at least it meant she didn't have to rush to meet the band for rehearsals and sound checks, attend interviews or CD signings, or have lunch with execs from the record company. She let herself fall back against the pillow and closed her eyes.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and the scent of frying bacon drifted up. Leo had nearly forgotten that everyone got up at the crack of dawn here. She yawned widely.

A knock came at her door. "Breakfast is ready," her mother called, just as she had for nearly every morning of Leo's childhood.

What a strange *déjà vu*.

"I'll be right there," Leo called back. She climbed out of bed and listened at the door to the bathroom for a moment to make sure she wouldn't walk in on Holly again. When all remained quiet, she entered and quickly brushed her teeth and washed up. Her clothes were still neatly folded in her suitcase. No sense in unpacking since she had no idea how long she would be staying. She picked a clean T-shirt and got dressed, knowing her father didn't allow pajamas at the table.

Perfect Rhythm

Only when she was halfway down the stairs did she remember that her father no longer had a say in what she wore for breakfast.

Holly was already in the dining room, pushing his wheelchair to the table. Once again, she was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, white sneakers, and no makeup. Clearly, she dressed to be comfortable, not to impress anyone. Somehow, Leo found it to be a refreshing change from the women she knew.

"Good morning," Leo said.

Her father didn't return the greeting.

Holly straightened from where she had set the brakes on the wheelchair.
"Morning."

Leo walked toward her seat, the chair where she had sat as a child—and promptly collided with Holly, who had taken a step toward it too. Apparently, it was her seat now.

Holly grabbed hold of Leo's arms to keep her balance, and Leo instinctively rested her hands on the nicely curved hips. *Mmm.* Her perfume or shower gel or whatever it was smelled good.

"Sorry." Holly quickly stepped back and chose another chair.

Her mother entered the dining room with a stack of pancakes. "Good morning." She kissed Leo's cheek, but all Leo could feel were the ghost imprints of Holly's hands on her arms. She shook herself out of her strange daze and sat too.

The table in front of her was loaded down with buttermilk pancakes, hash browns, fried eggs, and bacon—a far cry from the egg-white omelets, granola, and grapefruit she usually had for breakfast. The mug of coffee with cream her mother set down in front of her was usually a big no-no too since coffee irritated the throat and dairy produced phlegm that could affect her voice.

"Yum." Holly rubbed her hands. "Breakfast heaven."

Leo's mother beamed at her from across the table before turning toward Leo. "When was the last time you had a homemade meal?"

"It's been a while." After eyeing the food for a few more seconds, Leo pierced a pancake with her fork, lifted it on her plate, and squeezed a dollop of maple syrup on it. Her nutritionist would have a heart attack if she could see her. The first bite nearly had her moan out loud. The taste

immediately evoked memories of her childhood, and she had to admit with some reluctance that not all of them were bad.

“Quiet night?” her mother asked Holly.

“Pretty much. We got up once. I think it was around three, right, Gil?”

Leo’s father grunted something that could be interpreted as a confirmation.

She sat at the table, as quiet as her father, while her mother and Holly chatted about the weather, town gossip, and all the good players the Kansas City Royals had lost this season. Their small talk was so far removed from Leo’s world, where the only topics were album sales, sexy costumes, and concert attendance numbers.

It occurred to her that Holly appeared much more like a family member than she did. Holly cut her father’s pancake into small pieces that he could eat more easily, while her mother stirred just the right amount of cream into his coffee. They worked together like a well-established team, as if they had done this exact thing hundreds of times already and no longer needed to speak or even think about it. In comparison, Leo felt discordant, like a badly tuned guitar.

The pancake sat like a ball of lead in her stomach, and she wasn’t sure if it was all the sugar and fat or the out-of-place feeling she couldn’t shake.

She was glad when everyone else finally cleared their plates and breakfast was over.

Her mother started to stack the dirty plates, but Holly stopped her. “You made breakfast. Let us clean up.”

Jeez, was she trying to be on her best behavior because Leo was here, or was she always like this? In Leo’s experience, no one was this nice without wanting something in return. She just hadn’t figured out yet what it was that Holly was after. Was she trying to get into her parents’ good graces so she would one day inherit some of the money Leo had sent them?

While her mother wheeled her father into the living room, Holly and Leo cleared the table and carried the breakfast dishes into the kitchen. She rinsed the plates and handed them to Holly so she could load the dishwasher.

Their hands brushed. Warmth climbed up Leo’s arm and flowed through the rest of her body. She looked up, but Holly continued to put the plates into the dishwasher, completely unaffected.

“What?” she asked as if sensing Leo’s gaze on her.

Leo quickly directed her attention to the dirty forks and knives. “Nothing. You just...um... You’ve got a scratch on your chin.”

“Oh. That.” Holly fingered the inch-long, scabbed-over scratch that stood out against her fair skin. She closed the dishwasher and leaned against it. “Kitty love bite. I was helping out my mother yesterday, and one of her feline customers didn’t appreciate it.”

Feline customers? Oh, right. Beth Drummond was the only veterinarian in town.

“You helped out your mom yesterday?” Leo’s mother said as she stepped into the kitchen. “Holly, you’re working too much. Why don’t you take the day off?”

“No, I—”

“I insist.” Her mother’s glance traveled from Holly to Leo. “In fact, why don’t you two head into town? Holly could show you around and point out what has changed, and you could have a nice lunch at the diner—my treat.”

Yeah, right. Sightseeing in Fair Oaks. That would take all of two seconds.

Holly didn’t look any more enthusiastic than Leo felt. “I don’t think I’ll want lunch anytime soon after all those pancakes, Sharon.”

“Mom, I hardly think Fair Oaks has changed that much. I can get around on my own. Holly doesn’t need to play tour guide on her day off.”

“Nonsense. She spends too much time with sick people and not enough with people her own age.” Her mother spoke right over both of their protests. “Go and have fun. Maybe you’ll meet some former classmates.”

That wasn’t Leo’s idea of fun either. What could she still have in common with her classmates who had never left their small town?

Relentless, her mother shooed them out the door.

When it clicked closed behind them, Leo clutched the porch rail. *Damn.* Even her manager usually couldn’t steamroll her like that. She turned toward Holly. “You don’t need to babysit me. I can find my way around town just fine without a guide.”

A wry smile brought out Holly’s dimples. “Has it been so long that you forgot how things work around here? If we go our separate ways, how long do you think until word gets back to your mother that I abandoned you?” She shook her head. “No, thanks. I want to keep eating those delicious pancakes.”

Pancakes. Holly didn't really expect her to believe that was all she wanted from the parents of filthy rich superstar Jenna Blake, did she?

"I have to run some errands anyway." Holly tugged on her arm. "Come on. I'm driving."

"Why are you the one who gets to drive?"

"Because I fall asleep within a minute of getting into a car if I'm not the one driving." Holly strode toward a red Jeep Liberty parked at the curb. It was an older model but looked well cared for.

Leo stared after her, then jogged down the stairs to catch up. "You're kidding, right?"

* * *

As Holly parked her Jeep in the small town square, the canopy of gray clouds hanging over Fair Oaks parted, and the July sun cast shadows across the pockmarked asphalt of Main Street and its cracked sidewalks.

Downtown consisted of a single row of stores, all housed in old brick buildings: Ruth's Diner, a little mom-and-pop grocery store, a beauty salon, a hardware store, the grain and feed, a tiny pharmacy, Johnny's Bar & Grill, a bakery, and a body shop with tires piled up in front.

On the other side of the square, behind the courthouse, were the library; the post office; Casey's gas station; and the Fair Oaks Ledger, the town's tiny newspaper.

"Wow," Leo muttered as they crossed the street. "I forgot how small this town really is. It's claustrophobic."

"It's endearing," Holly corrected.

Leo shot her a disbelieving glance. "If you say so."

As they strolled through town, memories played through Leo's mind like snapshots in a photo album. There was the bar—the only one in town—where she'd had her first gigs. Not that the locals had really appreciated her guitar riffs or her choice of music. People here mostly listened to country, not pop. But maybe that was a good thing. Here, she wasn't a big star; she was just the Blakes' daughter who had returned because her dad was sick.

A gray-haired man waved from behind the counter of the hardware store.

Perfect Rhythm

Leo stared. Was that Mr. Gillespie? He'd already been older than Methuselah when she had graduated from high school. *Must be the fresh country air.*

Holly waved back. That was what people did here.

When Leo had first moved to New York, it had taken some time to get used to people not nodding or waving at each other in passing.

Just when Leo thought they might actually make it to the grocery store without anyone stopping them, two women in their mid-twenties rushed toward them. "Excuse me... Are you Jenna Blake?"

For a moment, Leo was tempted to tell her she wasn't, but lying to someone who might be a fan wasn't her style, so she flashed her well-practiced pop-star smile and nodded.

One woman elbowed her friend. "See! I told you it was her. I'm a big fan. I have all of your albums. They're so awesome. Could we get an autograph?"

"Sure. Got something to write on?"

The two women rummaged through their purses and then held out a pen, a magazine, and a scrap of paper.

Leo signed the autographs and then handed pen, paper, and magazine back.

"Hey, Holly, would you mind? I'd love to get a picture with Jenna." The two women held out their cell phones.

Holly patiently snapped pictures.

"Thank you so much!" One of them gave a little hop like an excited teenager.

Two retirees on a bench across the street watched as if they couldn't understand what was so exciting about the return of the Blakes' daughter.

"You're welcome. And thanks for listening to my music." Leo continued down the street, walking at a faster clip. If they didn't make it out of here, other autograph hunters would follow. "You said you had errands to run?"

Holly smiled as if she knew exactly why Leo had reminded her of the errands. "I just need a few things from the grocery store. Want to come or wait out here?"

If she stayed outside, she would draw attention. "I'll come with you."

The bell above the door jangled as Holly pushed open the store's front door.

Two middle-aged customers blocked the aisle, little shopping baskets hanging from their arms. “Did you hear about Lizzy Wilmers?” one of them said. “Her dog pooped on the front lawn of the courthouse.”

“Again?” The other one laughed.

Leo struggled not to roll her eyes. What Fair Oaks lacked in size, it made up for in gossip. It was one of the many things she didn’t miss about the place.

“Hi, Sheryl. Cora.” Holly gave them a bright smile.

Leo could feel their gazes burning into her as they squeezed past. The whispers started before they even made it around the corner. She tried to ignore them as she followed Holly down the aisle.

Thankfully, Holly seemed to know exactly what she needed and was done within minutes.

The woman behind the cash register stared at Leo while she rang up Holly’s purchases. Just when Leo thought she would ask her for an autograph, the woman said, “Oh my God, Leo, is that you?”

Truth be told, Leo had no idea who the woman was. Her blonde hair seemed to be bleached, so maybe she had looked a lot different fourteen years ago. “Um, yeah. It’s me.”

“So you’re back?” the woman asked.

Leo rocked on the heels of her boots. “Just for a little while.”

The woman’s gaze raked over her. “Yeah, you look like you could use a break. I guess being a superstar and touring all over the world takes a lot out of you.” She giggled like a teenager.

Great. People in small towns weren’t any better than tabloid reporters who felt free to comment on the way she looked.

“Everyone’s going to be so excited to see you.” The woman clapped her hands. “A bunch of us get together every Saturday at the bar. You should come and catch up.”

Holly had bagged her own purchases while the cashier had been busy talking to Leo. “She’ll make sure to do that,” she said and pulled Leo from the store.

Leo exhaled sharply. “Thanks for the rescue.”

“You have no idea who she is, do you?” Holly laughed.

Perfect Rhythm

They effortlessly fell into step as they walked toward Holly's Jeep. For a moment, Leo faltered, amazed to feel in sync with someone from Fair Oaks, even for a few seconds.

"Nope. Should I know her?"

"I'd think so," Holly said with a grin. "You and Jenny were in the same class all the way from kindergarten to high school."

Leo stared back toward the grocery store. "Jenny? That was Jenny Keller?" *Great.* Jenny had been the town busybody even back when they were teenagers. *So much for staying under the radar. By lunch, everyone will know I'm here.*

"It's Jenny Bonnett now. She and Travis got married right out of high school."

No surprise there.

"You know, Jenny meant it." When they reached the Jeep, Holly unlocked it and placed her purchases in the back, next to neatly sorted medical supplies. She closed the rear hatch, turned, and leaned against the car. "You really should come have dinner with some of your old friends."

Leo managed not to grimace out of politeness. "No, thanks."

"What? Now that you're a star, you're too good to hang out with us little people?"

"It's not that. I just... Jenny and I have never really been friends. She and her girlfriends never gave me the time of day when we were in high school...unless they could gossip about me." When she had come out to Ashley, her best friend back then, Ash had told Jenny. The next day, the entire town had known—including her homophobic father.

"I didn't exactly have a lot of friends in high school either, but people can change, can't they?" Holly said softly.

"In my experience, they usually don't."

"After your father's stroke, Jenny brought over her famous green-bean casserole. She and the rest of town made sure your mother ate. They were there for her."

And you weren't.

Holly left it unsaid, but the unspoken words hung in the air between them.

God, she was so sick of the reproach coloring Holly's voice and the looks she'd been giving her since the moment she had rung the doorbell.

She abruptly turned and marched away from the Jeep and its owner. But, of course, she knew she couldn't escape her in this small town. Holly was her father's nurse, so she needed to deal with her.

"Come on," she called over her shoulder. "I need some coffee." What she really needed was something stronger, but it was too early for a drink. Besides, she didn't want to start any rumors about Jenna Blake having an alcohol problem. For now, coffee would have to do.

* * *

The familiar smell of grease and brewing coffee teased Holly's nose as she followed Leontyne into the diner.

"Morning, Holly," Ruth said from behind the long counter. She adjusted her glasses and stared. "Leontyne Blake, is that you?"

Leontyne's shoulders heaved beneath a silent sigh.

What the heck was wrong with her? It couldn't really be so horrible to be back in Fair Oaks and talk to the locals for a while, could it? Or was it because she was just Leontyne here, Sharon and Gil's daughter, instead of superstar Jenna Blake?

Somehow, Holly had a feeling that wasn't it.

"How's life treatin' ya in the big city?" Ruth asked.

"Can't complain too much," Leontyne said.

Ruth smiled. "That's what your father always said when I asked him how he's doin'." Her smile waned, and she glanced from Leontyne to Holly. "How is he, honey?"

"Hanging in there," Holly answered. "And he says thanks for the pie you sent home with me last time."

He hadn't really said that, and they both knew it, but Ruth grinned and nodded anyway. "I'll get you a piece to take home with you—blueberry, his favorite. Take a seat anywhere you like. I'll be right with ya."

Leontyne stepped past the glass-enclosed pie case without giving the displayed desserts a glance.

The other patrons of the diner watched as she settled into a booth along the back wall. Holly nodded a greeting in passing before sliding into the booth opposite her. She leaned her forearms on the table, and it took her a moment to realize that Leontyne had done the same. They were unconsciously mirroring each other.

She slid one arm off the table and leaned back.

The swirling of the ceiling fan overhead and the chatter in the background were the only sounds interrupting the silence between them.

She was grateful when Ruth stepped up to the table, pulling a small notepad from her apron pocket. “What can I get you, honey?”

“Just coffee,” Leontyne said.

“For me too, please.”

Ruth pressed her notepad to her ample chest. “No breakfast? But, honey, we’ve got biscuits and gravy as our daily special today.”

The mention of her favorite breakfast made Holly’s mouth water, even though she wasn’t hungry at all. “I know, but I already had breakfast with Sharon and Gil...and Leontyne.”

“Are you sure?”

Holly nodded and patted her belly. “I’m still stuffed to the gills.”

“All right. Just holler if you change your mind.” Ruth marched away and returned with their coffee. She flipped over the white mugs on the table and poured coffee from a glass pot.

Leontyne doctored her coffee with creamer, took a sip, and then grimaced. Probably not the low-fat decaf latte she was used to. She put down the mug and looked across the table at Holly. “Leo.”

“Um, excuse me?”

“You called me Leontyne. Other than my parents, no one calls me that. If you’re going to judge me, you might as well call me Leo.”

Blood rushed to the surface of her skin. “I...I’m not judging you.”

“Oh yeah? Totally feels like it.”

Holly opened her mouth, but before she could answer, someone stepped up to their table.

Chris, who worked in the kitchen, shyly grinned at her and placed a chocolate milkshake onto the table in front of her. “Your mother mentioned you were on night shift when she dropped by earlier. I thought you could use this.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“I made it extra-thick.”

What was she supposed to say to that? She didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but she had no desire whatsoever to go out with him—or anyone

else. Even without glancing up, she could feel Leontyne's...Leo's grin. "Thank you, Chris. That was very, um, nice of you."

He smiled broadly and lingered next to the table for so long that she started to fear he would ask her out again, but then he tipped an imaginary hat and went back to the kitchen.

Holly slumped against the back of the booth and stared at the extra-thick milkshake.

"That was Chris?" Leo asked, staring after him. "Chubby Chris with the braces?"

"Yes, that's Chris. He lost the braces—and forty pounds." Which didn't make her any more interested in him.

"You know," Ruth commented as she passed their table with a couple of dirty dishes, "you should really give him a chance. That boy is crazy about you. A pretty, young thing like you shouldn't be alone."

Holly bit back a groan. Not that again. She ignored Ruth and stirred her milkshake with the straw. "Want some?" she asked Leo.

"Nah. He's so not my type. Wouldn't want him to think I want a piece of his extra-thick anything."

Holly's first sip of milkshake nearly shot out of her nose. She sent her a glare but couldn't help chuckling. Leo might be a spoiled egomaniac, but she had a great sense of humor. "He's not mine either...my type, I mean."

"No?"

Leo studied her, clearly waiting for her to elaborate, but Holly didn't want to get into her complicated love life—or lack thereof—with Leo, so she shook her head.

"Maybe you should tell him that...him and Ruth."

"I did—repeatedly—but..." Holly shrugged.

"Don't you mind that half of the town is poking their noses into your business?" Leo ran one hand through her honey-blonde hair. "It used to drive me crazy."

"I'm not a fan of their matchmaking attempts, but that's their way of showing they care."

Leo snorted into her coffee. "That's their way of satisfying their curiosity."

"Wow." Holly regarded her with a shake of her head. "You really hate this town, don't you?"

Perfect Rhythm

“Let’s just say the feeling’s mutual. There’s not much love lost there for me either. I never fit in.”

That wasn’t the way Holly remembered it. She knew what it felt like to be an outsider, and she had never thought of Leo as one. The locals talked about her with pride.

They drank their beverages in silence for a while.

From behind the counter, Ruth lifted the coffee pot invitingly. “How about a refill? Or some breakfast after all?”

“No, thanks. I think we should get going. Looks like we’re going to get wet if we don’t hurry.” Leo waved her hand toward the diner’s large front windows.

A curtain of dark gray clouds loomed directly overhead, blocking out the sun.

Holly’s eyes widened. *Oh shit.* How had she missed that? If they didn’t make it to the car within the next minute, they’d get drenched.

They put some money on the table, scrambled out of the booth, and rushed to the door.

“What about that piece of pie for Gilbert?” Ruth called out.

“Next time,” Holly shouted back before the door closed behind them.

* * *

Side by side, they hurried toward the Jeep. Leo slowed a little so she wouldn’t leave Holly with her shorter legs behind.

The air was thick with the threat of impending rain. A gust of wind rolled a Coke bottle down the sidewalk. Thunder rumbled not too far off in the distance.

As they crossed the street, the first drop splashed on her head and then trickled down her scalp. Leo winced. Then the second droplet hit her nose. Within seconds, the sky opened up, and rain pelted down on them.

“Run,” Holly shouted.

They sprinted the last few yards toward the town square. Holly blindly pressed the button on her key fob, and they tore the doors open and dove onto the Jeep’s front seats.

Breathing heavily, they sat in the car. Water dripped down Leo’s hair and trickled into her shirt. Not that it mattered. She was soaked to the bone anyway.

Holly hadn't fared any better. Her wet T-shirt clung to her full breasts.

Leo tried not to stare. She really tried. But Jesus... No wonder good, old Chris was so smitten. Holly might not look like a runway model, but there was something about her that captured Leo's attention—and it wasn't just her breasts.

Unlike Leo, Holly didn't seem to have a problem keeping her eyes to herself.

Her poor gaydar, which normally was very reliable, was having some kind of early midlife crisis since she had met Holly. At first, she had assumed Holly was straight, but when they had talked about Chris in the diner, Leo's gaydar had insisted that Holly wasn't interested in him because she was attracted to women. But then why didn't she even glance in Leo's direction? *Maybe she's just got better manners than you do.*

Holly started the Jeep and carefully backed out onto the street, where large puddles were quickly forming.

The windshield wipers slashed back and forth across the glass, set to top speed. Holly's knuckles turned white as she clutched the steering wheel. She leaned forward and squinted through the rain-smeared windshield.

Leo hoped Holly could see more than she could. She could barely make out the road in front of them.

A flash of lightning burst through the clouds, and thunder boomed above them.

No way would they make it home in this weather.

"Why don't you pull over?" Leo raised her voice over the thunder and the low music playing on the radio. "You can't see a thing. We're going to end up in a ditch!"

Holly stopped the car at the side of the road. She waited a few seconds, but when the thunderstorm showed no signs of letting up, she turned off the engine.

They sat in silence, which was interrupted only by the drumming of the rain on the Jeep's roof.

Under different circumstances, it would have been a strangely romantic moment. *This would make a good song.* The thought surprised her. She hadn't written a new song—a least nothing worth recording—in what seemed like forever.

Holly ran her hands through her short hair, which now stuck to her head in sodden, dark auburn strands. She shook herself like a dog, showering Leo with raindrops.

“Hey!”

“Oops.” Holly flashed her a mischievous smile. “Sorry.” She still had barely glimpsed in Leo’s direction, instead watching the play of lightning outside.

Leo peered down at herself. Her white T-shirt was nearly see-through now, revealing the outline of her bra and her hardened nipples. The paparazzi all over the world would have paid a fortune for a snapshot like this, as would her fans, men and many women alike.

But Holly wasn’t interested in her involuntary wet-T-shirt contest. It was a refreshing change from being ogled twenty-four/seven, but it stung that Holly didn’t seem inclined to help pass the time by talking to her.

“What exactly is it that you don’t like about me?” The words burst out of her almost without conscious thought.

Holly turned her head and stared at her. “What? I don’t...”

“Is it that I got out of here,” she swiped her hand in a gesture that included the entire town, “and you didn’t?”

“Who said I didn’t get out—or that I wanted to?” The thunderstorm nearly drowned out their voices, so they had to shout at each other to be heard. “I got my bachelor of science in nursing at Mizzou. I *chose* to return, as hard as it might be for you to understand that.”

“What is it, then?” Leo shouted over another bout of thunder. “My music? My sexual orientation? My—?”

“Nothing. I like you just fine.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Holly’s knee bumped into the middle console as she whipped around to face Leo. “If you really want to know... I hate the way you abandoned your parents.”

“Abandoned? I’m here, aren’t I? Stuck in Fair Oaks, in this car. How is that abandoning them?”

Holly let out an unladylike snort. “Yeah, you’re here, but for how long? I bet my meager paycheck against your millions that you haven’t even unpacked your suitcase so you can hightail it out of town all the faster.”

Leo had already opened her mouth for a snide response, but what could she say without lying?

“Come on, admit it.” Holly’s gaze pierced Leo, her vibrant blue eyes relentless. “This is just another one of your drive-through visits.”

“So what if it is? You don’t know anything about me. Did it ever occur to you that I have my reasons for not wanting to stick around? What makes you think you can judge me?” Leo thumped her fist against the middle console. She was shouting at the top of her voice now, even though her manager would have told her to cut it out. Shouting could harm her voice. But to hell with Saul. And to hell with Holly too. If she wanted to shout, she would, goddammit.

“I wouldn’t need to judge you if you finally got your head out of your ass and got over whatever it is that irks you about this town or your parents!”

“My relationship with my parents is none of your damn business!”

“The hell it isn’t! Your parents are good people. They deserve better than having to find out what’s happening in your life through the tabloids because you never visit. You never call.”

“Why would it even matter to you?”

“Because...” Holly blinked as if she hadn’t seen that question coming. “Because I care, dammit!”

That shut Leo up, but only for a moment. Her manager and her ex-girlfriends had said the same thing, but most often, it turned out that all they cared about was her money and her fame. Why would Holly be any different? She was after something; Leo just hadn’t figured out what it was yet.

“I care enough about your family to have been at your grandfather’s funeral last year—unlike you,” Holly added.

“I was in the middle of a concert tour in Australia. What was I supposed to do? Cancel it?” This time, it was Leo who sprayed Holly with droplets of water when she wildly shook her head. “It wouldn’t have done my grandfather any good. I get that you think I’m an egotistical bitch, but people depend on me. My band, my manager, the crew, the label, my fans... I can’t just drop everything and cancel a tour willy-nilly.”

“Willy-nilly?” Holly blew a drop of water off the tip of her nose. “It can hardly be called willy-nilly if you’d wanted to be there when your grandfather died or when your father had his first stroke.”

Another lightning bolt flashed, and Leo felt as if it had hit her right in the chest. She gripped Holly's hand, which was resting on the middle console. "W-what did you just say?"

Holly stared down at the hand on hers. "I know it's not really my place to—"

"No." Leo cut her off with an impatient wave of her free hand. "Did you just say...this wasn't the first stroke my father had?"

Thunder crashed. Holly's forehead creased into a frown. Her lips moved, but Leo couldn't understand a word.

"What?" she shouted.

"No, it wasn't," Holly said so quietly that Leo could hardly hear her, even though the thunder had faded away. "Didn't you...didn't you know?"

"I didn't know a goddamn thing!" *Because I never visited. I never called.* Guilt penetrated the armor of her anger, but she shook it off. The phone worked both ways. Her mother could have called her at any time. "When...when did that happen?"

"Last year in the spring. It was a mild one, compared to the stroke he had in May. He had some physiotherapy, and I came in a few times a week to help him with his exercises, and he seemed to fully recover."

Leo sank against the back of the passenger seat and stared straight ahead, through the windshield. Outside, the rain became lighter and the thunder stopped. A ray of sunshine broke through the dense bank of clouds. Jesus. She'd had no idea.

"Leontyne," Holly said quietly. "Leo..."

Leo didn't turn her head to look at her. "Just drive." After a second, she added, "Please." She realized she was still clutching Holly's hand and quickly let go.

Holly turned the key in the ignition. The engine came to life, along with the radio. She switched it off, and they made their way home in silence.

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