

Prologue.

Kathy: 15 years old

Katherine Yolanda Larrington didn't know how it was possible to be so angry and yet not feel anything at all. She was numb from her fingertips to her toes. Her hands shook, and her head wouldn't stop pounding. It was an insistent rhythm that she heard in her ears and felt in her throat.

Outside, the rain dripped like sweat from the heavy clouds that hung low in the sky. Inside, people meandered from room to room to room, talking in hushed voices. Their words were as empty and lifeless as her brother's body in its shiny, black coffin.

He was so young.

Such a tragedy.

I'm so sorry for your loss.

Our deepest condolences.

Kathy wished they'd all gone home after the funeral and left her family in peace. These people were ridiculous, gray-faced and hollow-throated, as if *they'd* been the ones to get the call.

There's been an accident...

The black dress that had been laid out for her that morning had wrinkled in Kathy's sweaty fists. Every time someone said Zach's name, she had to stop herself from tearing the fabric. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Zach had been two months away from graduating from high school, ready to head to college and freedom from their mother's iron will. Her eye fell on a copy of the

funeral program that one of their guests had decided to use as a coaster.

Zachary leaves behind his loving mother and father, Gisele Larrington, AB, AM, PhD, and Geoffrey Larrington, PhD, and his doting younger sister, Katherine Yolanda Larrington.

The gentle hand on her back made her jump. “Hey, pumpkin.” Her father leaned against the wall next to her. She didn’t have to look up to see the worry lines on his forehead. They’d been there all week. “How are you holding up?”

Kathy’s throat was sore from crying. She managed to nod, wincing when dry fingers slipped over hers. Her father ran his thumb over her fist until it relaxed.

“Have you eaten anything?” He made a small sound of disapproval when she shook her head. “Honey, you need to eat. I know it’s hard, but you have to keep up your strength. Zach wouldn’t want you to waste away.”

Kathy turned to him at the mention of her brother’s name. “Then he shouldn’t have died.”

It was so wrong to say, especially to the man who had loved both of his children beyond reason. The pain in his eyes seemed to double. Triple. Bend toward infinity.

“Dad...”

She watched him swallow another cup of grief and wondered how he hadn’t overflowed with it.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.”

It wasn’t. “I’ll get some food if you will.”

The ghost of a smile curled the corners of her father’s mouth, and it was like someone had

pressed their thumb, hard, into the hollow of Kathy's throat. She couldn't get her lungs to work.

Eyes widening, her father squeezed her hand. "Come on."

They moved through the clumps of visitors and staff. Dressed in black, their faces blurred together. Their platitudes were as distant as the sound of a passing train. When they reached the hallway, Kathy was pressed against the wall. Her father's hands on her shoulders were the only things keeping her upright.

"Breathe, sweetheart."

She tried. As he massaged her arms, pressing soft kisses to her forehead, Kathy came back to herself in small increments. The smell of the food served for the repast mingled with a hundred colognes and perfumes worn by the mourners. Hushed voices punctuated by the occasional laugh brought her back to where she didn't want to be. Whatever had been choking her—grief, panic, rage, or all of the above—the only thing she managed to latch on to was the rage. She needed to *do* something. Hit something.

"Do you want to go lay down? People would understand."

Kathy didn't give a shit about *people*. "Yeah, okay. For a little while." She turned toward her room. When her father turned with her, she stopped. "I'm okay. You should go be with Mom."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I just need a break, that's all."

In his eyes, Kathy could see how much he needed one too. She also knew he wouldn't leave her mother alone to deal with their visitors.

“All right. I’ll come check on you later.”

He hugged her, but Kathy couldn’t feel it. She was cold, and walked down the hall toward her bedroom like her feet were encased in blocks of ice, each step heavy and slow.

They’d closed all the doors to the bedrooms. All except one. As Kathy reached her brother’s room, she stopped, half expecting him to yell at her for being nosy. The room was still and quiet when she stepped inside, everything as he’d left it.

A treasured poster of the Foo Fighters concert he’d gotten VIP tickets for still hung on his wall. A neat stack of books sat on the edge of his desk, stark against the chaos of the rest of the surface. And strewn everywhere, drumsticks.

Kathy closed the door and locked it, drawn to the corner of the room that held Zach’s practice kit. She picked up the pair of sticks lying at the foot of his bed and clutched them to her chest as she approached the set. Under the gray of the clouds outside Zach’s window, it stood like a broken, black skeleton.

Climbing behind the kit opened the floodgates to her memories. The first time he’d let her sit and watch him play, and the first time he’d let her tag along to a band rehearsal. Kathy hadn’t understood Zach’s fascination with drumming until that day.

Kathy: 11 years old

“Let’s try that Mutemath song the bride requested.” Pete, the leader of Zach’s trio, lifted his guitar strap over his shoulders. The bassist nodded and made adjustments before the group started up again.

Kathy didn’t know the song, but it had her head bobbing and her toes tapping.

The air in Pete’s garage had a metallic quality, as if she could smell the electricity flowing into the amps and between the players themselves—all powered by the same current.

“To the bridge!” Zach called out, turning to make eye contact with the other musicians.

They effortlessly floated through the song, sounding every bit as good as any band she'd heard on the radio. Kathy couldn't stop watching her brother play. He was a blur of movement behind the drum kit, all anchored by his blinding smile and the sheer joy written all over his face.

When the song ended, she clapped. "That was badass!"

"Thanks, lil' sis," Zach said, grinning.

"It would be even better if we could find someone to play keyboard," Kevin, the bassist, said.

"Maybe your sister should take it up," Pete said to Zach. "Make it a family thing, yeah?"

"Well, Kayla is a genius." Zach turned, his smile warm. She always loved his private nickname for her. "I bet you'd pick it up in no time."

"You ever thought about it?" Pete asked hopefully.

Kathy shook her head. "Not really."

"I'm surprised your mom didn't make you take music lessons," Kevin said.

"Oh, she did. Violin." Kathy cringed at the memory. "At school, I had a choice between that and piano, actually."

"And you chose the violin?" Pete asked, his brows lifting.

"I wanted to play guitar or bass or...something cool." Her gaze returned to Zach as he tightened one of the drums on the shiny chrome and wood kit, her fingers tapping against her crossed legs.

For a moment, she pictured herself in his place. Pictured her hands gripping the wooden sticks that were too long for her small hands, the very tips of her shoes pushing against the pedals, all in sync.

As they worked through the song, she felt the rhythm moving through her, down her arms to her fingers and down her legs to her feet. She tried to anticipate what Zach would do next—tap that drum, play that cymbal—and found that she could for the most part.

When he did a quick and complicated fill, she got up and moved closer to try and work out how he'd known where and how to place it.

Kathy was standing right over him when they finished.

"Ever consider the drums?" One brow arched, Zach grinned at her from over his

shoulder.

Kathy blinked and stepped back, watching as her brother climbed out from behind the kit. "Come here. Let's try something." He beckoned her.

She obeyed, wiping her hands on her jeans as moved beside him.

"Here." Zach held out a pair of drumsticks. "Take these."

She did and let him steer her to the stool, which he adjusted for her height. Sitting down, she took in all of the different drums and cymbals in front of her.

"Play something simple," Zach told the others.

The musicians began a song Kathy recognized, an old Beatles tune her dad loved. She began to tap the sticks against the rim of the snare drum, feeling uncoordinated but in love with it already. Looking up when the music changed key, Kathy snapped out of it, realizing where she was. Her fingers fumbled the sticks, and she dropped one.

The music stopped.

"I'm sorry, I don't really know what I'm doing," she said, ready to slink away.

"Doesn't matter." Zach smiled softly at her. "We all have to start somewhere. Give it another try, and this time don't be afraid of hitting the skins. It'll seem loud to you, but it's all right."

"Play whatever you feel," Pete added. "We'll follow you."

With everyone watching her, Kathy was caught in the eye of a hurricane of uncertainty. But, as she sat there, a pattern emerged from the chords. She gripped the sticks tight in her fists and let the rhythm take over her heartbeat.

"Can you tell where each verse begins?" Zach yelled over the sounds. Kathy nodded. "That's your one-count. Start there"—he pointed to the pedal at her right foot—"and just let go."

Kathy stomped her foot down on the kick drum pedal, sending a resounding boom throughout the room. She struck the snare drum with the stick in her left hand and the hi-hat cymbal with the one in her right, bouncing it the way Zach had done in the recording for his YouTube channel the week before.

"Almost," Zach instructed. "Kick on one, snare on three, hi-hat on one through four."

She followed his instructions and soon got the hang of it, hitting and kicking harder each time until the kit reverberated throughout her body. Kathy closed her eyes and just...played. She

barely noticed when the bassist began to play along, and then the guitarist, until her brain caught up to the fact that she was doing it. Playing. With a band.

The beat steadied her, and Kathy clung to it. Let it anchor her. Every stomp of her foot and crash of the cymbals drove away the thoughts swirling in her head.

It wasn't perfect, but it was...amazing.

Kathy tried to keep the tempo steady for as long as she could until her hands cramped, and she had to stop. She was sweaty, breathing heavily, and her thick curls were plastered to her head, but she had never felt so alive.

"Damn, girl!" Pete's smile was bright as he looked at her. "I think you might just be a drummer."

Beside her, Zach beamed. "I knew Kayla was a natural!"

"Uh, Zach?" The worried look on Kevin's face dampened the pride fizzing in Kathy's veins. "Didn't your parents have a thing tonight?"

"When don't they? Oh shit!" he exclaimed, ignoring their mother's rule about profanity. "We better get home before Mom grounds me for life."

Checking her phone, Kathy winced. They were super late. The dinner party started in half an hour, and it would take them almost that much time to bike back home. Their mother would definitely ground Zach for this, especially if she found out he'd brought her to band practice and not left her at the library like he'd promised.

"Tell her it was my fault," Kathy said to Zach as they mounted their bikes. "I lost track of time studying."

Smiling, Zach shook his head. "Nah, Kayla. Nah. Then she'd nail us both. I'll take the hit. At least that way she can still claim to have one perfect child."

Kathy: 15 years old

The door to Zach's room swung open. Kathy looked up to find her mother standing there, her hair neat and her dress tidy with none of the fatigue that seemed to plague Kathy's father and herself. The only thing that gave her mother away was the pinched corners of her mouth. She was livid.

“Katherine Yolanda? What do you think you are you doing?”

Kathy removed the headphones and set them on the snare pad. “I was just coming back.”

“Your father said you were lying down because you were tired,” her mother said. “Instead, I find you in here...disturbing Zachary’s things.”

“I wasn’t—” The denial faded from Kathy’s mouth, the fight snuffed out as quickly as it had arisen. Nothing she said would matter. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you miss him, but this isn’t the proper way to mourn your brother.”

But it was. Drumming meant everything to Zach. It was the one thing they’d shared that was just theirs.

“You’ve got rhythm in your heart, Kayla. Don’t let anyone drive it away.”

“What are you going to do with Zach’s stuff?”

For a moment, her mother’s features contorted with genuine emotion before her usual, implacable mask slipped back into place. “We...haven’t decided.”

Kathy almost sagged with relief. Given how much her mother hated Zach’s drumming, Kathy expected his kits would be immediately donated or, worse, tossed into a dump somewhere. She stood and smoothed her dress.

Her mother made a sound of disapproval. “You’re a mess. Clean yourself up before you come back downstairs. I’ll have another dress laid out for you.”

“Okay.” Kathy walked to the door, stopping when her mother blocked her way. She lifted her chin. “Mom?”

“I made mistakes with your brother, gave in to him too much,” her mother said, her gaze distant. “I never should have agreed to let him take a gap year. If I’d only stood my ground, he would have gone to school. Would have become a doctor.” She smoothed a hand over Kathy’s hair, pushing back a curl that had sprung loose from the tight bun. “Did you know he wanted to be a surgeon when he was a child?”

Kathy felt her head move from side to side. “He didn’t say.”

“No, I don’t suppose he did. Once he got it in his head that *music* was his calling, he—” She made a choked sound that swallowed whatever she was about to say, and searched Kathy’s eyes, frowning when she didn’t seem to find what she was looking for. Then she reached down and pulled the drumsticks out of Kathy’s hand.

She hadn’t realized she still held them. Her mother studied her face for a long moment, and Kathy tried to stand a little straighter.

“I won’t make the same mistakes with you.”

Chapter 1.

Kayla swiped her arm across her forehead in a feeble attempt to wipe away the rivers of sweat pouring down her face. Her butt was asleep, her thigh muscles were screaming, and her right hand had begun to cramp, but—goddamnit—Katherine Yolanda Larrington was exactly where and *who* she wanted to be. Zach would be proud, she hoped.

Perched behind a set of shiny black Neusonic drums, Kayla surveyed her domain like a queen on a throne. She had a commanding view of her surroundings. To her right, Toni Bennette wielded her guitar like a knife, slicing and dicing through the melodic verses. To Kayla's left, Tiffany Kim punched through her bass riffs like a woman on a mission to reverse the blood flow of every person in the audience.

Their slot in the Dragonfly Festival lineup was short, only twenty-five minutes, but they'd resolved to make every single one of those minutes count. To leave an indelible mark on the crowd.

Tiff swung her long twists over her shoulder and flashed Kayla an open-mouthed smile, entirely in her element.

Kayla grinned back as she gripped her sticks a bit tighter and slammed them down against the skins. Lifting her chin at Tiff, she snapped her wrist, hitting the snare drum with crisp precision that felt as natural to her as her own heartbeat.

At the front of the stage, Lilly Langeland used her otherworldly voice to whip the crowd into a frenzy. She sounded incredible tonight. Honestly, she had been getting better with every show, her confidence growing with every encore, but this crowd was their biggest yet. If Dragonfly was anything to go by, their upcoming tour was going to be epic.

"I can't hear you!" Lilly screamed into the microphone, setting alight the sea of forty thousand souls scattered across the field. "Get those hands up, Delaware!"

Lilly's newly anointed acolytes obeyed, raising their hands in the air and screaming at the top of their lungs. Earlier that morning, rain had poured in slanted sheets over the crowd, turning the once-green field into a veritable mud pit. They didn't seem to care, lost as they were in the music.

It didn't matter that the Lillys were so far down the list in the festival's lineup that you needed a magnifying glass to read their name on the posters. People danced, sang along with the

covers they knew, clapped for the songs they didn't know, and gave themselves over to them.

Lilly spun around to face her, signaling Kayla, Tiff, and Toni to play the song's outro.

Kayla settled into the groove, closing her eyes and listening to the others. They gelled so well. Like they were always meant to be—these four women playing this song in this place at this time.

As their penultimate song finished, Kayla let the roar of the crowd buzz through her sweat-dampened skin. She had just enough time to grab a towel and swipe it across her forehead before she had to jump right back into action, setting the pulse of the crowd with the ticking of her drumsticks against the hi-hat. Immediately, heads began to bob. Kayla watched the sea of hopeful faces as they waited to hear which song it would be.

She and the Lillys could keep them suspended like this forever. It was potent magic to wield.

"Thank you for being here," Lilly shouted. "For being present and at this moment with us, it's been incredible. *Tusen takk*, DragonFest!"

Kayla took the cue for what it was and dived into their final song of the night. She loved the pickup intro to "Juliet's Got a Gun" and zeroed in on the four-four downbeat, in no particular hurry. Happy to ride it out for as long as Lilly wanted.

Lilly didn't make them wait long, spreading her vocals over the layer Kayla, Tiff, and Toni had created for her. Icing on their cake.

They ripped through the song, fueled by adrenaline and the frenzy of the massive crowd. By the time they reached the end of the four minutes and change, Kayla was flying high. She finished with a clean double-stroke roll over her toms, smashed her crashed cymbals, and silenced them with her fingertips before standing to raise her drumsticks in the air as Lilly bade the crowd goodnight.

Kayla's leg muscles quaked as she climbed from behind the kit and made her way offstage, tossing her used sticks to a few outstretched arms at the front of the stage.

"Hot damn, this place is on fire," Tiff said, grinning as they made their way to the artist area. "Festivals are fucking fantastic." She looped an arm around Kayla's neck and pulled her close, causing them both to stumble as they walked.

"That was pretty cool," Toni said, understated as ever.

Kayla looked up and saw their number one fan-slash-manager, Seb, barreling toward

them with a big-ass grin on his face.

“That was fucking awesome,” he exclaimed before sweeping Toni up into a bear hug.

“Careful,” Toni warned, laughing into their inevitable kiss. “I’m all gross and sticky.”

Seb waggled his eyebrows. “Just the way I like you.”

There was a collective groan, albeit good-natured. By now, they were all used to Seb’s jokes.

The pair were sickeningly in love. Kayla was happy for Seb—for both of them—even if jealousy did rear its ugly head from time to time. Not that Kayla wanted either of them. She envied the kind of unwavering love they seemed to have for each other. The way they appeared to be true partners offered a stark contrast to power dynamics she’d grown up around.

Her parents loved one another, of that she was certain. But her mother was a force of nature whose will could blow through the people around her like a gale-force wind. She was well-meaning, but Kayla had found it increasingly difficult to live up to her expectations, especially after they had lost Zach.

The way Seb and Toni worked and loved in tandem gave Kayla hope.

As Tiff pulled Kayla to her side and praised her skills, Kayla thought, for now, what she had with these people—people who loved and supported her unconditionally—was more than enough.

* * *

Of course, her phone would ring just when she had wrestled her sweat-soaked leather pants down to her hips. She made a mental note to silence the thing for at least an hour after showtime from now on. Just about everyone she needed to hear from was within shouting distance anyway.

Also, whose bright idea was it to play in leather pants in the middle of a freaking heat wave? She cursed past Kayla for her lack of foresight.

Thankfully, the caller gave up, and Kayla’s phone fell silent. She struggled her way out of the leather and had just pulled up the zipper on her comfy jeans when the damned phone started up again.

“For fuck’s sake,” she grumbled as she reached around the privacy screen and plucked it from the makeup and hair products that littered the countertop. Kayla’s heartbeat quickened when she saw the name on the caller ID.

“Mom?” she asked as soon as the call connected. “What’s wrong?”

“Katherine. Why would you assume something is wrong?” Her mother’s tone caused an automatic straightening of Kayla’s back. She could almost picture the stern expression in her sharp features.

We don’t call each other, Kayla wanted to say. Instead, she asked, “How are you?”

“I am well. Busy, but that isn’t cause for complaint. And you?”

Relieved it wasn’t an actual emergency, Kayla parked herself in a chair and turned to the mirror to fix her hair and makeup. A group of reporters usually awaited the bands after their sets, and the Lillys had agreed to attend those pressers as a unit. With their former bandmate Candi stirring up trouble, they didn’t want to give the press any fuel for the fire.

“I’m busy too.”

“I see.” Her tone was cool, which was the best Kayla could hope for. “I have news.”

“You wrote another book?” Kayla could almost see the illustrated cover, having been the inspiration for her mother’s Little Miss Yolanda series. The books had cast a long shadow over her world. Wildly successful, they were in school libraries all over the country.

In interviews, her mother had never hidden the inspiration she’d found at home in her daughter. Her perfect, straight-A student, reading-at-a-college-level-at-the-age-of-nine prodigy. But Little Miss Yolanda was the pride and joy Kayla had never been for her. She had been too willful, too stubborn, *too much like your brother*.

“I…yes, as a matter of fact,” her mother replied. “I have a book tour coming up. The usual.”

Kayla shivered. There would be Little Miss Yolanda ads everywhere.

“But that isn’t why I called. Your father is retiring.” There was an awkward pause while Kayla processed the information. “They’re honoring him with a banquet.”

She couldn’t quite wrap her head around her mother’s words. Her dad *loved* teaching. It was his whole existence. “Is Dad all right?”

“He’s perfectly fine. I… *We* expect you to be there, Katherine.” Her mother spoke as if they were already arguing.

“Of course, I’ll be there,” Kayla replied, bristling. She took a breath to calm herself. She would not let a simple phone call with her mom devolve into its usual exchange of snide remarks. “When is it?”

“I’ll send you the details once they are finalized.” She sounded…relieved? Surprised?

Did she really think Kayla wouldn't attend?

"Okay, thanks."

There was another long silence as Kayla waited for her mother to ask how she was, what she'd been up to, if she needed anything. She knew she wouldn't.

"Where are you?" her mother finally asked, her voice on the edge of reproach as if she were prepared to disapprove. "It sounds like a train station."

"I'm...at a park." It was a partial truth. An unexpected wave of guilt swept over Kayla. She hadn't been up front with her parents about her life for years. Once her grandfather's trust was released to her at twenty-one, she stopped pretending to toe the Larrington family line. Whenever her father asked, she simply said she was taking time to find her way. As long as she was safe, that was all it took to satisfy him, and she adored him for that. As far as her parents knew, Kayla was still in LA. She hadn't confided in her dad, not wanting to put him in the position of dealing with the fallout from her mother.

"Katherine Yolanda?" Her mother's impatience cut through Kayla's thoughts.

"Sorry." Kayla refocused. She closed the flap to the tent that served as a makeshift dressing room and moved to the quietest corner. "Sorry about the noise. I'm at...a thing."

"Is it a *music* thing?" It was a particular talent to pack so much disdain into such an innocent word.

If her parents were to learn about the Lillys, Kayla knew her mother's reaction would be disastrous. The kind of cold disappointment only noted author, celebrated lecturer, and legendary university president Dr. Gisele Larrington could deliver. It's what had driven Kayla to leave home as soon as she'd turned eighteen. And it was why they rarely spoke anymore.

"Mom, I have to run." Kayla wasn't willing to lie outright. Better to cut the conversation short before it went south.

"You know, phone calls work both ways," her mother said. "You could try calling your own family sometime."

"Mom."

"Your father misses you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You apologize, but nothing ever changes." She sighed, and Kayla could almost picture the purse of her lips. "You're just as selfish as ever."

And there it was.

“Mom, I really do need to go.” Kayla sighed at the state of her hair. Between the sweat and the humidity, there was no use trying to suppress her curls. She pulled them up into a high ponytail, fussing with the tendrils around her face before giving up. Like her mother always reminded her, they would do whatever they wanted to do.

“At some point, you need to take responsibility and get your life in order,” her mother continued to vent. “Not ignoring everything to go watch some concert.”

Kayla reapplied her lip gloss and stuck it back in the pouch, zipping it up before tossing it into her bag. The counter was littered with jars of foundation, tubes of lipstick, and various compacts left behind by some of the other performers. She didn’t want her stuff getting mixed in.

“Your father should have gotten rid of them,” her mom said.

The drums. She was talking about Zach’s drums.

Kayla knew her own triggers, and she wasn’t about to let this one derail her.

“Mom, I can go...*watch* whatever concert I want. I’m twenty-six years old. When will my life become my life?”

It hadn’t been easy to leave home, and it wasn’t easy to stay away. Kayla loved her parents, but she knew she’d never be enough. She’d never be Zach.

“It *is* your life,” her mother said. “Do what you will. You always have.”

There was a knock on the tent’s flap before a head poked through. “Hi, are you with the Lillys?” a guy asked, his earpiece dangling from a clip on the collar of his bright green Dragonfly Festival crew shirt.

Kayla pushed the button to mute the call, panic squeezing her chest. She nodded. “Yeah.”

“We need your group in the press tent, stage left, in five.”

She nodded again and had to take a breath before she raised the phone to her ear. Kayla waited for a beat to unmute it, wondering if her mother had caught anything.

“Hello?”

“Sorry, I’m here.”

A pause. “I’ll let you go.”

“Okay. Thanks for calling. It’s...good to hear from you.” Kayla cringed. God, they were like strangers.

“It would be nice to hear from you too, Katherine,” her mother replied. “Take care.”

She hung up before Kayla could respond.

“You too.” Kayla pocketed her phone before grabbing her bag and heading out.

A few minutes later, she was sitting in the press tent with her bandmates, adrenaline still pumping through her veins. Her phone pinged. Cursing herself for forgetting to mute it, Kayla pulled it out.

MOM: Here are the details for the event next month.

Kayla was looking them over when another text came through.

MOM: Whatever you’re doing with your life, keep in mind that it reflects back on your family. Never forget what Little Miss Yolanda always says: Be Your Best Self.

Silencing her phone, she stuck it in her back pocket. Be your best self.

Christ, how she hated that damned mantra.

Little Miss Yolanda was a figment of her mother’s imagination. Her perfect child, hand-drawn to her satisfaction, had only a passing resemblance to Kayla. Her very real daughter. Having to deal with her mother’s far-reaching shadow and unrealistic expectations was a later issue. This was Kayla’s time.