

Tunes And Tails

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Dedication

For Emily Slatin—To my brilliant, adventurous wife, who cheered on this whimsical endeavor from its very first "What if..." To the one who saw magic in a band of cats and urged me to bring their purr-sonalities to life on the page. Thank you for championing every quirky idea and loving me in ways only you could. Here's to you: my biggest inspiration, my truest friend, and my loudest muse.

ACT ONE

From the Diary of Trudy Fantalica

CHAPTER ONE

We call our world Felonia, but we are merely uninvited guests dwelling in the margins of the Great Mother's over-saturated palette. Our buildings are just temporary geometric interruptions in a literal jungle currently trying to digest our sidewalks. You can't walk two paces without a bird with kaleidoscopic feathers shrieking a critique of your posture or a fast-growing vine attempting to colonize your footwear. Honestly, we wouldn't have it any other way; there's a certain dignity in living within a predator that hasn't yet finished its meal.

Catbridge isn't so much a city as it's a slow-motion surrender to inevitable entropy. On its very fringes, our neighborhood of Fellington Heights is a lowkey, sleepy suburb where the gardens are too well-kept, maintained by neighborhood watch-cats with more time than sense. It might seem an unlikely womb for a pop-punk band like the Lunatics in Love, but even this seemingly sterile environment produces its own kind of rhythmic friction.

Tiffany Larsen leads our five-piece collective as if the sun-dappled pavement were a runway. Her silver fur possesses a metallic sheen that suggests a high-end grooming regimen, her platinum curls bouncing with a calculated, dramatic cadence that defies the humidity of the canopy.

"Every time we walk home, it feels like we're in the opening credits of a broadcast no one asked for," she meows, her brilliant blue eyes scanning the scene.

Attempting to match her predatory stride is Tiffany's best friend Gloria Quazar, our drummer and beatbox extraordinaire. A snow-white queen of sharp angles and even sharper wit, she exists in a state of perpetual cynicism.

“Yeah, and the plot is figuring out who borrowed the neighbors’ botanical trimmers without asking and bringing it back busted!” she snorts, flicking an asymmetrical pixie bang out of her hazel gaze.

Perri Winters, our bass-line architect and resident optimist, skips ahead. Her honey-blonde hair frames a face that is constantly vibrating with high-frequency enthusiasm.

“I love that we’re finally using that old garage at my house!” Perri exclaims with a grin, her amber eyes possessing a high-frequency jitter, as if she was the source of our entire group’s kinetic energy. “It really is the perfect rehearsal space, isn’t it?” Her enthusiasm gets even the cynical Gloria to smile.

Trailing behind is our keyboardist, the orange tabby Danika Doby. Her hazel eyes are full of daydreams, wavy violet hair tumbling down over her right shoulder. She twirls it slowly as she stares up at the sky.

“This place is full of unwritten stories,” she purrs, largely to herself.

“Every enclave has its secrets,” I mew in agreement, adjusting my horn-rimmed glasses. Without them, my heterochromatic blue and green eyes wouldn’t see much at all. I tug at my navy-blue pigtail braids as I add with a grin, “We should definitely write some songs about the unwritten tales of our enclave.”

Tiffany shoots me a wink, her eyes flashing with mischief. “Oh, Trudy, I knew we kept you around for something other than being a calico cutie!”

If Felona could blush, I would. Tiffany’s teasing doesn’t faze me; I know where I, Trudy Fantalica, stand with her... at least, most days. I’m the youngest and slightly awkward fifth member of this crew. It’s taken some time, but I’ve grown into my role as the

band's saxophonist and chief lyricist. Sure, my sax is offbeat for a punk-rock band. But it's not unheard of in our musically obsessed culture to seek out a unique blend of sounds.

Our destination today is the "Scratching Post," Perri's creaky garage-turned-jam-space. It's a wreck at the moment, but it's ours. Last week, we finally got booted from practicing at Tiffany's high-class suburban mansion, where the house staff got sick of telling us to keep our racket down. So now, this former home of oil and steel is now our sanctuary. It's also where our pop-punk dreams now live. We've only practiced here twice at this point. While it's got a great vibe, we're still breaking it in.

Perri groans as she wrestles with the ancient garage door. It groans right back. "One of these days, I'll fix this thing," she mutters, muscles straining.

"You know, we should sample it for our debut album," Gloria quips. "The Cranky Beast is a vibe, for real."

With a final creaky sigh, the Beast surrenders, revealing our new space. It looks a lot better now than our first couple visits here. Strings of fairy lights twinkle overhead, casting a soft glow on posters that have seen better days. Guitars and keyboards are strewn about, plus a drum set gleaming in the back. Somehow, this makeshift jam space just works.

"What do you all think?" Perri asks proudly.

"Whoa, you really added a lot of new stuff since last week!" Gloria meows excitedly. "Where did you get all this?"

Perri groaned at that question. "It took Dani and I all our allowance to get all this from the local thrift," she explains.

"And a lot of begging, I'm sure," I quip.

“Among other places you don’t want to ask about,” Danika adds.

Tiffany wastes no time jumping right into rehearsal, though. She flicks on the amps and immediately tests the mic.

“Alright, Lunatics,” she calls out, strapping on her guitar and quickly tuning it. “Let’s rehearse this new theme song of ours one more time! Ready, queens?”

As the other southpaw besides me in our band, Tiffany plays left-pawed, like Zippy Dustwalker did back in the seventies.

Gloria takes her place behind the drum set and raises her drumsticks. “Let’s lay down some beats,” she mews.

Danika taps a few keys to find her center. She starts humming the melody she’s about to play.

Perri bounces on her heels, her bass guitar with a finish worn matte by years of aggressive claw-work slung over her shoulder. As she plucks away getting it in tune, you can hear how it almost groans with each tweak Perri makes.

I adjust my glasses and grin, doing my breathing exercises before I let loose on my sax. “We’ll make these licks literary,” I deadpan.

Chuckles ripple through the garage. My dry humor rarely seems to land on its feet. Most of the time it’s more like a dead cat bounce. But today, my quip seems to have struck a chord, pun intended.

Tiffany grins, feeding off our collective energy. “Alright, queens, let’s do this.”

Then Gloria counts us in, “One, two, three, four!”

The garage erupts with bright energetic sound as we launch into Tunes & Tails, our latest pop-punk anthem. This song's suffered more rewrites than we'd care to admit. But now, we got it to where it's vibrant, raw, and just a bit messy—exactly what we need it to be.

*We're the Lunatics in Love,
ripping up the classics,
we take your dusty pages
and make 'em scream, make 'em sing.*

Tiffany's voice rings out, bold and unapologetic. Gloria's drums set a thunderous pace. Perri's bass guitar growls steady and true. Danika's keystrokes float through the racket like an angel's harp. Finally, my sax screams out loud and rebellious to fill in the spaces between the verses and the chorus. Our sound is untamed and unapologetically us.

*We're the lunatics,
ripping tunes from the tales,
turning all your heroes
into rebels off the rails.*

After another run through the chorus, and trying some different lyrics for the second verse, we hit the bridge to the final chorus.

*We're the ones who shake the past,
give your dead poets a shot at last.
We're breaking the mold,
rewriting the gold.*

Tiffany closes with an explosive guitar riff—hitting a dissonant chord as the garage lights go out for a second. We almost overloaded the whole garage electrical circuit. Gloria finishes with a final slam on the drums, I wail a piercing sax note, and Perri smirks as she tosses her pick like she's throwing it into the crowd. Danika flourishes with a haunting keyboard outro. Finally, the song's done.

We share a triumphant glance at each other. Even Tiffany, perfectionist she is, seems satisfied. She takes a dramatic bow to an imaginary audience. “If I keep this up, there won’t be any Tiffany left for the real show,” she jokes, fanning herself theatrically.

“Yeah, save some drama for the real audience, Tiff,” Gloria quips, tapping out a playful rhythm on her snare. “We don’t want you spontaneously combusting before our big break.”

“Lead singer spontaneously combusts mid-song,” Perri chimes in with a laugh. “That’s one way to make rock band history.”

We dissolve into giggles, overcome by unfiltered joy. These moments where a song comes together make all we do for our art worth it. When we’re in our groove, nothing else matters but the music we’re making.

The laughter finally dies down and Tiffany straightens up. She looks at each of us with a gleam in her eye. “We’re going to rock this town. Catbridge won’t know what hit it.”

Perri beams. “First stop, the autumn fair festival. Next stop, the spring Battle of the Bands!”

Gloria nods in agreement, a playful smirk forming on her lips. “We’ve got a lot of work to do if we want to win that festival. It’ll be a big test to see if we’ve got what it takes to have a real shot at the Battle.”

“Kind of you to be the voice of reason for us mere mortals,” I joke. I get blank stares from everyone but Danika. She gives me that ‘gotcha’ kind of glance.

Perri immediately fills the awkward silence, “Anyway, Tiff, I’ve got some new bass lines I’m working on, if you wanna hear them.”

Danika softly adds, “Yeah, I’ve been playing with some new melodies, too. Might be something there for our next big hit.”

Tiffany smiles. “OK, let’s hear them.”

Perri starts plucking a few lines on her bass with her foreclaw, while Danika lays down some uplifting keyboard riffs. Tiffany closes her eyes and sways with the vibe.

Meanwhile, I pull out my notebook, already overflowing with ideas. “I’ve got a few literary inspirations that could turn into songs,” I offer. “Taking old classics, flipping them with our style. I think that’s what’ll set us apart.”

“Like *Romeow and Julietta*,” Perri giggles, still plucking away, “or *Paws and Prejudgment*.”

“Sounds rad,” Gloria remarks with a shrug. We all laugh. An oversized squirrel peeks through the back window and squeaks happily before scurrying off.

“This place really is working out, for sure,” I meow. “Even the local wildlife loves us!”

One thing is certain; we’re more than just your average high school band. I feel like the Lunatics in Love are on the brink of something great. With a little luck, our stories and our songs will go far beyond the friendly confines Fellington Heights. Just how far, though, remains to be seen!

CHAPTER TWO

I love the way that the morning sun plays hide-and-seek through the old oaks of Catbridge High's sprawling courtyard. This place is more like a botanical garden that allows a few thousand teenagers to run through it than a proper educational institution. It's huge, big enough to host its own small seasonal festival, and filled with so much greenery that you often see gardeners watering the plants between classes.

This courtyard is magical, combining the look of a futuristic city with an eco-resort. It's as much a hangout as a thoroughfare. Trees seem to wave at you as you pass by, their branches swooping down, inviting you to chill in the shade for a bit. There's one particular giant oak near the center that looks like it's about two centuries old. Every year they wrap it up in lights for the autumn festival, so brightly that it's like some giant arboreal disco ball.

Between the towering trees, there are paths winding everywhere, leading to little tucked-away spots. One section has carved wood benches so polished that they're actually too slippery to sit in comfortably. You even have wildflowers scattered about as bursts of color in just the right places, as if nature herself decided to show up and show off. The lawns roll like green waves, broken up by these strange sculptures of Felona historical figures, accompanied by abstract art made by students over the years. Not sure who thought that was a good idea, but hey, it's something to look at.

Every morning, this courtyard is alive with the bustling energy of young scholars gathering before and between classes. Laughter, chatter, and rhythmic clicking of open-sole buskins on the walkways ring out like a chorus that can't quite come together. This courtyard at the gateway for our school campus is a student hub with boundless energy. We're here every morning, feeding off

said energy, brainstorming lyrics while poking fun at the latest drama. Oftentimes the two are directly related.

Because Catbridge High is so huge, this courtyard becomes a second home, where we students get to vibe with our found families. For us Lunatics in Love, it's where the real plotting—scratch that, *planning*—gets done.

As an under-aged freshman this year, it's great that I have bandmates who double as four upper classmates looking over me. Just a month into the school year, we Lunatics claimed our own semi-secluded spot under a cherry tree. It's sufficiently away from the rabble to hear ourselves mew. It's also a good place for scribbling lyrics or pretending to be deep in thought when, really, you're just furrykin-watching. The cherry blossoms flutter down like pink confetti, as pollinating insects buzz above, providing for a lovely ambiance.

“So,” Tiffany leans in dramatically, her blue eyes twinkling with intrigue, “have you guys heard about the new tom?”

“Yeah, I hear his name is Darcy,” Gloria admitted. “He’s transferring from that elite Pawston academy.”

Danika raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t that the school where they teach you how to raise one eyebrow and look down your nose at the same time?”

Perri giggles, tilting her head. “Yeah, and they have advanced courses in disdain and snooty scoffing.”

Gloria snorts, pushing her bangs out of her eyes as she tries not to laugh. “Oh, let’s not forget ‘Contemptuous Tail Flicks 101.’”

Tiffany brushes a cherry blossom petal from her hair, trying to get us back on track. “Okay, okay, but seriously! Word is he has

such symmetry that makes the rest of the toms look like a collection of blurred sketches.”

I tap out a rhythm on my notebook absentmindedly. “Ah, so he’s the ‘brooding and mysterious’ type. Classic.”

“Exactly!” Tiffany mews, then biting her lip as she continues. “But some say he’s... unapproachable. Like, I’ve heard he’s a Valerian?”

I glance up from my notebook at the mention of that surname.

“That can’t be right,” I meow. “The Valerian family are the cornerstone architects of Felona high society. Our modern world wouldn’t exist without them.”

“Well, a Queen can dream, right?” Tiffany asks, batting her full eyelashes.

Perri wiggles her eyebrows and grins. “So, yet another tom for you all to fuss over.”

Danika rolls her eyes with a smirk. “Sounds like a cat-astrophe waiting to happen.”

“Well, if he’s anything like the Darcy we love from *Paws and Prejudgment*,” Gloria posits, “He might have layers underneath all that aloofness.”

“Books and furrykin shouldn’t be judged by their covers or their fur,” I meow.

Tiffany sighs dramatically. “You might be right, freshie. But it’s so tempting to judge when the fur in question is supposedly so divinely groomed.”

Danika chuckles, her violet hair catching in the breeze. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. Beneath all that pride, he might just be a feline looking for a place to belong.”

Perri grins. “Or he could be purrfectly prideful.”

Tiffany’s eyes sparkle. “Well, you know I have to find out!”

The rest of my friends laugh, but I remain quiet. As my friends chatter away, my attention drifts. Something caught my eye near the old stone fountain at the courtyard’s center. There’s a tall figure standing there, dark fur gleaming in the sunlight, impeccably groomed. His sharp business attire clothes look out of place in our casual high school scene.

Darcy Valerian, I presume. He stands perfectly still among the rabble making their way indoors. I consider going over to say hello. But he seems so detached, watching everything but engaging with nothing. I get the vibe that he’d rather be anywhere but here.

Before I can point him out to my friends, the first school bell rings. The courtyard starts to empty, and I follow my friends. I glance back one last time at Darcy by the fountain. But now, he’s gone. Was that just a momentary glitch in my vision, or was he even really there?

As I try to process what just happened, a familiar voice snaps me back to reality.

“Well, if it isn’t Tiffany and her merry band of misfits,” Lily Featherstone’s voice rings out, dripping with forced sweetness. “Aren’t you all adorable?”

Lily saunters up with her usual entourage, a couple sycophantic underclassmen trailing behind her. Her auburn fur sparkles and her dark red high ponytail bounces with every step. It adds an extra layer of swagger to her already confident stride. Her

long curtain bangs frame her bright green eyes and features arranged with a mathematical precision that feel less like beauty and more like a tactical advantage.

Tiffany turns slowly as if Lily's voice is more of an annoyance than a challenge. "Well, if it isn't the queen of bake sales," she fires back with a dramatic eye roll. "Run out of people to boss around yet?"

Lily laughs heartily. "Like that will ever happen! Anyway, Tiff, still rehearsing with your cute little friends in that cozy little mansion of yours?"

Gloria tries to confront Lily, but Tiffany holds her back. "How's junior class presidency treating you?" Tiff asks.

"Funny you should ask," Lily purrs, flicking her tail. "You didn't even bother to run against me, so of course I won easily!"

"Well, I have better things to do," Tiffany growls.

Lily shakes her head, clearly hurt by that barb. "Actually, Tiffany, I've been incredibly busy myself. You know, leading our class to greatness. Unlike some furrykin who are counting on a mediocre band to be somebody."

Gloria finally slips past Tiffany and gets in Lily's face.

"If I remember correctly, Lily," Gloria roars, "You tried out for a band once and didn't make it. Guess mediocrity has higher standards than you thought."

Lily's sharp eyes flash, but she recovers quickly. "That was a long time ago, Gloria," she purrs sweetly, flicking at her bangs. "Besides, I've found my true calling now. Leading, organizing, being adored... nothing *you* would understand."

“Right,” Gloria mutters, rolling her eyes. “Because we all know how much this high school needs a darling dictator.”

Tiffany steps closer to Lily, her blue eyes locking with Lily’s green ones. “What do you want, Lily? I know you didn’t come over here just to bask in your own self-importance.”

“Oh, I’m just making conversation,” Lily mews, her smile widening. “But since you asked... I was wondering if you’ve heard about the new transfer student. Darcy Valerian?”

Tiffany tenses up at the mention of Darcy’s name, but she keeps her cool. “Heard of him,” she meows nonchalantly. “What about him?”

Lily’s tail flicks playfully behind her. “Oh, nothing. I just thought it was interesting how someone from his background ends up here, of all places. I mean, this isn’t exactly his usual crowd, is it?”

Tiffany’s eyes narrow. “What’s your point?” she challenges.

Lily’s voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper as she leans into Tiffany, though loud enough for all of us to hear. “I think he’d appreciate a little... guidance,” Lily purrs. “You know, someone who understands his world. His... expectations.”

Tiffany smirks, but her gaze grows sharper. “And you think that someone is you?” she asks with breathy irritation.

Lily shrugs, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Well, I’ve always had a way with high society types. And let’s be honest, Tiffany, a guy like Darcy wouldn’t be interested in... whatever it is you do.”

Gloria scoffs. “Right, because all guys are just dying to hang out with the student government president.”

Lily's smile doesn't falter. "Oh, I don't need to chase him," she meows. "He'll come to me. They always do."

Tiffany takes a step forward. "Don't flatter yourself, Lily," Tiffany growls. "Darcy isn't some trophy to be won in one of your little games. A Valerian has better things to do."

Lily's eyes gleam with amusement. "Well, he's still a tom," she puts. "So, I'm sure he's open to... persuasion."

For a moment, there's a charged silence between the two of them. It's a battle of wills playing out through narrowed eyes and flicking tails.

"Classic Tiffany vs. Lily," Gloria mutters. I nod. I don't get diva warfare, but I feel like Tiff is winning this round.

"Well, Lily," Tiffany meows, her voice mimicking Lily's, "you're welcome to try. But don't be too disappointed when you realize that some furrykin aren't interested in taking part in your shallow power plays."

For the briefest moment, Lily's facade cracks. "We'll see about that, won't we?" she asks, but her tone is halting.

Lily turns on her heel, her entourage following obediently as she glides away. Her tail flicks one last time in mock dismissal.

As soon as Lily's out of earshot, Gloria lets out an exaggerated groan. "Ugh! Seriously, Tiff, this thing's been going on since, what, third grade?"

Tiffany rolls her eyes but a small, satisfied smile still tugs at her lips. "And it'll go on until she finally realizes she can't win," she purrs.

Perri hums emphatically in agreement, "She's insufferable," she adds. "But I'll say, she's persistent."

“She’s up to something,” I meow, finally finding my voice after watching this all play out. “She’s already got her eyes on Darcy.”

Tiffany shrugs. “Let her think she has a chance,” she laughs. “Besides, I don’t need some fancy transfer student to validate me.”

Gloria snickers. “No, you’ve got *us* for that.”

Tiffany flashes a grin. “Exactly!” she purrs excitedly.

“This isn’t the last time you and Lily will butt heads over him, huh, Tiff?” Perri asks.

“No, but, that was fun,” Tiffany purrs, shaking off the encounter like a stray drop of water. She clears her throat before continuing, “Let’s head to homeroom before we’re late.”

As we head towards homeroom, I notice that Danika slipped off during that drama. Where did she go?

CHAPTER THREE

Catbridge High has three thousand students, plus staff, yet it still feels cozy somehow. Its architecture is a study in organic ergonomics. The earthy walls lean into the topography, finished in a timber-scent resin that suggests the school was grown from a seed rather than built from a blueprint. It's like they're part of the jungle rather than slapped on top of it.

The rhythmic clack of my resin-capped paw-wraps echoed off the polished stone, a sound that always makes me feel like I'm walking through a cathedral rather than a hallway. The walls are lined with sleek wooden panels that always give off a freshly cut timber scent. Really, this school just feels like we're walking through an upscale resort. From what my dad's told me, schools used to be built like cages, so this is definitely an improvement over his day.

Many of the hallways are open, with the kind of natural airflow that makes you wonder why we bother with walls at all. The whole school has this airy, open vibe, with sunlight pouring in from huge windows. It's like the school itself is constantly reminding us, you might be indoors, but you're still in nature, so behave.

Of course, I'm still looking for Danika, who'd quietly slipped away during Tiffany and Lily's verbal sparring. Dani's never been one for high-stakes dramas. She prefers to observe from the sidelines, as her thoughts drift somewhere else, probably dreaming up another melody.

Fortunately, I don't have to dodge too many stray backpacks or tangled fireballs of gossiping students to find my missing friends. Danika's leaning against her locker, earbuds in, swaying to the beat of whatever indie track is playing.

"Danika?" I meow, nudging her lightly.

She pulls out an earbud, flashing a hesitant smile. “Hey, Trudy.”

“So, that was something back there, wasn’t it?” I ask her, as we start walking towards homeroom period.

“Did I miss anything interesting?” Dani purrs. Her tone suggests she already knows the answer.

“Nothing new,” I reply with a grin. “Tiffany and Lily were at it again. They’re both after Darcy, already trying to outdo each other.”

Danika chuckles softly, her expression distant, as if she’s mentally transposing our conversation into a minor key. “Typical.”

“But you missed the best part,” I meow, leaning against the locker next to hers. “Lily thinks she’s going to win Darcy over with her whole ‘high society’ act.”

Dani is visibly amused. “Tiffany wasn’t having any of it, huh?”

I shake my head, laughing. “Not a bit.”

Danika hums thoughtfully, tilting her head as she taps her claws against her shoulder-slung bookbag. “What do you think about Darcy, Trudy?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, back in the courtyard,” Dani observes. “You were watching him.”

I felt my ears twitch toward the back of my skull; it’s the involuntary tell of a calico caught off guard. But I shrug it off. Obviously, Danika saw Darcy, too.

“I don’t know yet,” I reply. “There’s something about him, though. He’s so... I dunno, it’s like he knows he doesn’t belong here, but he’s trying not to show it. Almost like he’s waiting for someone to notice him and say something. Then he just vanished. He’s... strange.”

“Hmm, interesting,” Danika mews thoughtfully.

I tap my notebook against my knee, considering her words. “Yeah, there’s a story there. I just know it.”

Danika nods, her gaze distant. “Some of us are just broadcasting on a frequency that the local towers aren’t equipped to receive. Darcy may be like me, still searching for some furrykin with a compatible antenna.”

I smile at her insight, “I know how that is,” I reply. Danika always sees things in a different light, and the other Lunatics don’t seem to often pay attention the way I do. “So, what do you think Darcy is all about?” I ask.

Danika’s smile widens. “The outsider looking in, trying to figure out where he fits in. There’s at least one or two songs in that, right?”

I scribble down a few quick notes in my notebook. “Yeah, I’m sure there is.”

Danika grins, leaning her head back against the locker. “Whatever is going on with this Valerian fellow,” she muses. “It’s going to be good.”

“Come on,” I purr, tapping my bag as if to remind Danika we’re at school now. “Let’s get to homeroom.”

Danika laughs, tucking her headphones into her own bag as we go to join our bandmates.

Along the way, Dani and I overhear our peers gossiping about Darcy. We stop in at Perri, Tiffany, and Gloria's homeroom, where they're huddled around a table. Their heads are close together, voices low but animated. Seems they're in the middle of a heated debate.

"Ah, there you two are!" Perri exclaims as we approach. "We were just talking about—"

"Let me guess," I interrupt, sliding into a seat next to Danika. "Darcy?"

Perri rolls her eyes, smirking. "Bingo. But honestly, I'm ready to change the subject. Can we talk about our next song instead?"

Before the conversation can shift, Tiffany leans forward and blurts out. "No, wait! I really think we need to give Darcy a Loony invitation!"

"Oh, dear," Danika sighs, rolling her eyes.

Gloria, never one to be outdone, chimes in. "I agree with Tiff. But, for real, I think I should be the one to approach him. After all, I have a knack for getting furrykin to open up."

"No way, Glo! This boy's mine!" Tiffany growls playfully.

Tiffany and Gloria love to compete, sure. But unlike Tiff and Lily, those two only do it out of poking fun at each other. They've always had a special bond, more like sisters than pals.

"I can see it now," Tiffany purrs. "A chance encounter in the library, having a deep conversation, then walking home under the autumn leaves..."

Gloria arches an eyebrow, her competitive streak in full flare. “Sounds like one of those paperback love stories, Tiff. But don’t forget, I need to be the one to break the ice.”

“Yeah, remember what happened last time we had a transfer?” Perri asks. Danika shrugs and I stare blankly. Apparently, Dani and I are both lost on this one.

“Hey, you gave me bad intel, Glo!” Tiff insists.

“This is why I leave the boys to you sillies,” Perri laughs. “I already have a soulmate.” She pretends to strum her bass guitar and we all just giggle.

“Why not make meeting Darcy a group effort?” Danika offers with a smile. “We could all introduce ourselves, make him feel welcome.”

I nod in agreement. “Danika’s right,” I meow. “If Darcy’s going to be part of this school, we should extend our paws in friendship.”

Perri quickly steers the conversation toward more familiar territory. “Let’s talk about our next song,” she meows, leaning forward with a grin. “We’ve got enough going on with our own stuff without getting gaga over this Darcy!”

Well, Tiffany might be wrapped up in her romantic daydreams, but I’m more interested in expressing what Darcy represents. He’s the classic outsider, a mysterious figure standing alone in the middle of a crowd. Stories about strangers always make for great songs.

Gloria is already tapping out a rhythm with her fingers on the table. “Yeah, I’m thinking on our next track we can play around with the tempo—keep it unpredictable. Kinda like Darcy.”

Tiffany smirks. “And, of course, there’s got to be some drama in the lyrics. You know, all about finding where you belong, breaking down walls...”

Perri chuckles, her foreclaws mimicking a bassline in the air. “You’re so predictable, Tiff. But I like it.”

Danika leans in with a soft smile, her eyes alight with excitement. “And don’t forget Trudy’s sax solo.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Thanks, Dani. I’ll whip up something.”

The second morning bell rings just as we’re getting into a groove, pulling us out of our creative haze. I glance at the clock and realize with a sinking feeling that I’ve lingered too long again.

“Miss Fantalica,” spoke a voice like dry leaves skittering over pavement, interrupting my rhythm. “Please get to your homeroom.”

I turn to see Assistant Principal Clawrence Felworth towering over me, his tail flicking in irritation. “Ah, yes, right, Mr. Felworth. I was just on my way,” I mew sheepishly.

I chuckle at myself as I gather my things. Felworth always lets it slide when I’m late. I’ve never quite figured out why. It’s almost as if he lets me bend the rules on purpose.

“And you too, Miss Doby,” Felworth groans, although less sternly than with me. I suppose that’s a benefit of being an upper classmate. But her homeroom is one door over, which she shares with Lily. You can’t blame her for preferring this homeroom.

With a final wave to my bandmates, I head toward my own homeroom. When I get there, I realize that even among the freshmen that I never associate with, Darcy is the main topic of discussion. So, Darcy might not know it yet, but he’s becoming the

center of something bigger than just gossip. His arrival has shifted things more than I'd expect from something as commonplace as a student transfer. If he really is a Valerian, though, things are going to get quite interesting.

CHAPTER FOUR

This is third period history—the one class I share with all four of my bandmates. It's the only time during the day when I get to be educated alongside my bandmates, despite being a freshman and them being juniors. Thanks, accelerated placement!

But today, the usual pre-class conversation is more muted, as if everyone is waiting for someone to walk in.

Soon enough, Darcy Valerian steps through the doorway, his black fur perfectly groomed and his clothes sharp and stylish. All conversation comes to an abrupt halt, as everyone stops and stares. It's as though he just walked out of a catalog. His posture is immaculate, every movement precise and calculated.

Ms. Calico claps her paws together, her stern face unusually bright. "Class, settle down! Let's welcome Mr. Darcy Valerian, who's just transferred from East Pawston Academy. I'm sure he'll make a fine addition to our class."

The room collectively holds its breath as Darcy nods, his emerald gaze scanning everyone's faces with the cold efficiency of a botanist identifying a new strain of invasive moss..

Danika leans toward Tiffany, her voice barely above a whisper. "Wow, he really knows how to make an entrance."

I can't disagree. "It's like he was born for entrances like this," I mew.

Tiffany responds in her typical, dramatic fashion. "More like how to make an 'I'm-too-good-for-the-hood' entrance."

Perri snickers. "Maybe he's just mastered the art of stage presence."

Darcy clears his throat, quietly but purposefully. "Thank you, Ms. Calico. I look forward to contributing to the academic environment here."

Gloria raises an eyebrow, leaning closer to me. "Is it just me, or does that sound like something straight out of a decorum textbook?"

I shrug, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Maybe that's his thing. Proper talk."

Tiffany scoffs, "Oh, sure, I know all about that."

Ms. Calico directs Darcy with an enthusiastic wave. "Alright, Mr. Valerian, please take a seat. You can sit next to... ah, Tiffany! Yes, right there."

Tiffany visibly tenses as Darcy approaches, her usual bravado slipping just for a moment. "Of all the seats..." she mutters under her breath.

But Darcy hears her. His eyebrow arches as he looks at her, his voice smooth. "Is there a problem with this seating arrangement?"

Tiffany is caught off guard. "Oh, no. Um, not at all," she stammers. "Just noting the... proximity. Welcome to... your desk."

To everyone's surprise, Darcy's lips twitch into something resembling a hasty smile. "Thank you for the warm welcome to... this desk."

Perri leans closer to Danika, barely stifling a laugh. "Well, this isn't awkward at all," she chuckles.

Danika smirks, whispering back, "No kidding."

Ms. Calico clears her throat, pulling the class back to the lesson at paw. But it's clear the dynamics in the room have shifted. Darcy's presence is a welcome change to the usual monotony of third-period history.

The lesson itself, something about Meowltaire and *The Age of Awakening*, is a blur to most of us at the moment. Ms. Calico explains how Meowltaire's satires such as *Claws of Power* sparked an intellectual revolution, pushing Felona society to question the rigid Pride hierarchy that defined our civilization for centuries.

Tiffany, meanwhile, keeps sneaking glances at Darcy, her curiosity clearly piqued. Finally, realizing no one's paying attention to her lesson, Ms. Calico tries to steal back the room from our new arrival.

"Mr. Valerian," Ms. Calico booms, "Given your prestigious background, what's your take on Meowltaire's critique of the Pride system?"

Darcy blinks, momentarily caught off guard by the direct question. He pauses, considering his response. "Merit is a convenient fiction used to justify the legacy of the Prides," Darcy meows, his voice possessing an eerie monotone. "Meowltaire's *Claws of Power* argues that satire is the only lens through which the unearned privilege of the elite becomes visible to the masses."

Tiffany jumps in with a wry smile. “Fascinating. And I thought we were just going to meow about how hilarious it is, but like, somehow also make it incredibly boring.”

Ms. Calico, thrilled to have engagement come out of nowhere, steps in to encourage the back-and-forth. “Wonderful points! Let’s dive deeper, then. How does Meowltaire’s use of allegory reflect our current understanding of Felona society?”

Before Darcy could even speak, Tiffany cut in, her tail giving a sharp, rhythmic flick. “Well, it seems Mr. Valerian’s view is that we’re all just participating in a collective delusion? Fascinating. I didn’t realize the Academy was teaching the aristocracy how to deconstruct themselves.”

Darcy stared blankly at Tiffany, growled to himself, and went blank for a moment as Ms. Calico continued the lecture.

Perri leans toward Danika, smirking. “Since when did Tiffany become an expert on Meowltaire?”

Danika giggles. “Since about five minutes ago, apparently.”

By the time the bell rings, signaling the end of class, Tiffany looks both satisfied and slightly flustered.

Perri, never one to miss a teasing opportunity, flashes her a grin. “So, how’s it feel being the one to shut down Catbridge High’s newest enigma?” she asks.

Tiffany shrugs, playing it cool. “Oh, it’s all in a day’s work. But if he thinks he’s going to outwit me with 28th-century philosophy, he’s in for a surprise.”

Gloria laughs as she gathers her books. “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful rivalry here in the 31st century.”

I can't help but think that Gloria might be right. Before I walk out, I notice Darcy lingers at his desk, gathering his books very slowly. Around him, soft snickers rise.

"Guess the new kid's not as smart as he thought," one girl whispers to herself.

"Trying to keep up with Tiffany? Bold move, dude," one boy snickers as he walks by Darcy.

Darcy's grip tightens around his notebook, but he keeps his face neutral. His claws didn't even extend. That was the most unnerving part. Most of us would have instinctively shredded the edge of the desk, but Darcy's restraint was clearly practiced. Tiffany really showed him up, and clearly, he wasn't used to that. I went to approach him, but once he noticed me approaching, he leapt from his seat and disappeared down the hall. It seems to me his first day wasn't going too well at all. I know that feeling all too well.

So, now it's lunch time, and we all share the first lunch period this semester. We have three at our school, because of how many students we have. The scent of fried food and whatever mystery dish they're serving today fills the air. Around us, the gossip grows ever louder as more students come in. Everywhere you turn, they're all on about the same topic: Darcy.

Perri steers us toward our usual spot by the window. It's perfect for watching both the courtyard and the action inside the lunchroom. As we settle in, Tiffany is still distracted. Her tray sits untouched as she swirls her drink absentmindedly. She's probably thinking about that little philosophical duel she and Darcy had in history class.

"You're still thinking about that debate, aren't you?" Gloria teases, popping a sweet potato fry into her mouth.

Tiffany rolls her eyes. "Please, I wasn't thinking about Darcy!" she growls.

"Come on, Tiff, you know that wasn't even a *real* debate," Perri suggests, trying to downplay what just happened minutes ago. "You both just quoted Meowltaire like you were sparring at a tournament."

"No, like, I was thinking about how ridiculous it is that Lily acts like she's got the world wrapped around her paw," Tiffany explains.

Danika smiles knowingly. "So, why do you keep glancing toward the door?"

Before Tiffany can defend herself, the double doors of the cafeteria swing open. As if summoned by Tiffany's very mention of her name, Lily Featherstone glides in. She doesn't even have the first lunch period, but with the way she's proudly displaying a clipboard, it means she's on "official business."

Lily's high ponytail sways as she scans the room. Her Class Council entourage follows dutifully behind her, looking as prim and proper as ever. Her eyes lock onto our table. For a moment, it's like everything is in slo-mo.

"Oh, great," Gloria mutters under her breath. "Here we go."

Lily struts over, her tail flicking in that way it does when she's about to meow something snide.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the Lunatics," Lily mews, "I'm just here to gather signatures for the Autumn Canopy cleanup. You five looking for some extra-curriculars, hmm?" Lily purred, her eyes never leaving Tiffany's.

Tiffany straightens up, her blue eyes narrowing. “Lily, don’t you think these delicate claws have better things to do than yard cleanup?”

Lily smirks. “Oh, darling, you’re so adorable. You know, it’s my presidential duty to ensure the Class is living up to their civic expectations.”

Gloria snorts. “Right. Clearly, because your daddy is a senator, it’s your job to tell us about our civic duties.”

Lily’s green eyes flash at Gloria’s remark, but she keeps her cool and pretends to ignore her. “I couldn’t help but overhear you talking about Darcy earlier,” she purrs. “Just so you know, we’re meeting up after school to discuss a project. He and I have quite a bit in common, you know. Darcy’s used to a more sophisticated crowd, of course.” Her tone drips with the kind of superiority that makes your fur stand on end.

Tiffany leans back in her chair, giving Lily a tight-lipped smile. “Oh, is that so? Well, enjoy your little *meeting*. I’m sure it’ll be... fun.”

Perri guffaws, unable to hold back her amusement. Lily shoots her a pointed look before turning her attention back to Tiffany.

“Don’t worry, Tiff,” Lily mocks. “You’ll get used to the idea of Darcy spending time with someone who actually understands him. It’ll be refreshing to speak with someone else who understands the nuances of administrative burden.”

With that, Lily purrs condescendingly and turns on her heel, her entourage trailing behind her like well-trained kittens. She saunters out of the cafeteria, tail flicking high with satisfaction.

Danika sighs. “Well, that was... brief,” she mews.

Tiffany exhales, slumping back into her seat. “I can’t believe her. She’s acting like she’s already won him over.”

Gloria tosses another fry into her mouth. “She hasn’t won anything. Darcy’s not some trophy to be won. Besides, you held your own against him in class. Let Lily have her moment of delusion.”

Perri grins, leaning forward. “Honestly, Lily’s gotta be afraid of you, Tiff. She knows you can outshine her any day.”

Tiffany smiles at that, finally picking up her fork. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely,” I meow, chiming in. “Lily might be good at playing her games, but you’ve got something she doesn’t. You know, authenticity. Darcy’s going to see through her act eventually.”

Danika nods in agreement, her eyes thoughtful. “Don’t worry, Tiff. I don’t think Darcy’s the type to be swayed by Lily’s pretense.”

Tiffany straightens up again, a flicker of determination back in her eyes. “You’re right. If she thinks she can intimidate me, she’s in for a rude awakening.”

But there’s an unspoken understanding between all of us. Darcy’s not just any other new student. He’s become the catalyst for this renewed rivalry between Tiff and Lily. Whether he knows it or not, he’s stirred something in all of us.

As we finish our lunch, the conversation drifts back to this afternoon’s jam session. Still, I can’t stop thinking about how long it will be before this game between Tiffany and Lily escalates to new heights.

CHAPTER FIVE

When the final bell rings, we relieved scholars all spill out into the warm afternoon air. As usual, the five of us Lunatics in Love converge almost like we're in a perfectly choreographed musical and fall into step. We're ready to make the fifteen-minute walk from Catbridge High back to our cozy corner of Fellington Heights.

Our walk home is like stepping from one world into another, then yet another. About halfway home, we cut through Catbridge City Park. Really, it's more of a wild area that happens to have walking paths carved through it.

Catbridge City Council calls it a "natural preserve," but it's just the jungle doing its thing with a few benches thrown in for good measure. The trees here are taller and denser than around the school or the surrounding neighborhoods. In some places, you can't even see the sky through the canopy. There's always something skittering through the underbrush or darting across the path, and you're just as likely to run into a giant squirrel or a flock of colorful, loud-mouthed birds as you are a fellow furrykin.

Emerging from the park, our neighborhood of Fellington Heights feels cozy and connected. With its winding roads and homes tucked between trees, the Heights is a display of practical suburban order on the very edge of the wilderness. You still can't walk a block without seeing birds of every possible color darting through the branches overhead. You might not quite be in the jungle, but you still will find yourself dodging the occasional oversized beetle or being serenaded by tree frogs every night when you settle down for bed.

Perri skips ahead like she always does, her energy seemingly boundless. Meanwhile Danika lingers at the back, like a satellite in a decaying orbit.

Tiffany's place comes into view first. It's a sprawling mansion that looks like it grew right out of the trees themselves. The house is ridiculously big with its ivy-covered walls and wide, glass windows that reflect the surrounding greenery. Tiffany acts like it's no big deal. Still, there's no denying the way her house looms over the neighborhood like some kind of feline castle.

Tiffany leads, her chin tilted at an angle that suggests she's navigating by the stars rather than the pavement. It makes sense when you learn that she pretty much grew up on stage. We pass the Larsen mansion first, a titanic residence made of glass and ivy where the vines are currently winning a war against a literal army of gardeners. It's Tiffany's gilded cage that comes with ladylike expectations and high-protein hors d'oeuvres, one she treats with a mix of reverence and resentment.

"You know, Glo," Tiffany muses, glancing up at her house, "I think the vines have officially won the war. There's no stopping them now."

Gloria smirks. "Maybe you should just let the house go full Zartanya," she jokes, invoking the name of the infamous jungle dwelling leopard goddess. "At least then you wouldn't have to hear your grandmother complain about the help."

Tiffany laughs half-heartedly. I'm sure she still wishes we could practice there, but her grandmother kept looming and picking at everything she did. I do miss being waited on by her personal staff, and those amazing *hors d'oeuvres*, though.

Anyway, Tiffany quickly changes the subject.

"Do you think Darcy is humoring Lily?" Tiffany asked, her voice dropping into a register of forced nonchalance. "With the 'project' meeting?"

Gloria didn't even look up from the rhythm she was tapping on her thighs. "Lily is the queen of unnecessary meetings. Darcy's just the latest sucker of a prince, I guess."

Tiffany smirks, but her eyes show concern. Meanwhile, Gloria confidently strides like she's daring the world to challenge her. She always looks ready for something or someone to jump out at her. Her long bangs keep falling into her eyes and she brushes them away with an impatient flick.

"Lily's playing the long game, but she's not as smart as she thinks," Gloria offers. "She doesn't understand Darcy. He's too guarded. It's gonna take more than her tricks to get him to open up."

Tiffany raises an eyebrow, particularly fascinated by this insight. "And you know how to break through that?"

Gloria shrugs. "I'll figure it out. I always do."

On that note, Gloria's house is next on our way. It's a modest, mid-sized home with perfectly trimmed hedges and a lawn that's suspiciously well-kept for a family with a busy political dad. Its white stone walls and wooden beams make it feel both sturdy and warm, like the kind of place you'd expect to see a catnap happening in the sun-drenched front room.

But what really stands out is the garden out back, where Gloria's dad grows all kinds of exotic plants. He's obsessed with showing off Felonian native species to his political guests, like it's some kind of ambassadorial duty.

"I swear, if my dad plants one more 'rare species' to impress his campaign donors, I'm going to start charging admission," Gloria mutters, though there's a hint of pride in her voice. Her house might not be as flashy as Tiffany's, but it's got its own charm.

“You’re not the type to care about appearances,” I say. “But I know your dad certainly does.”

Gloria nods and chuckles, “What matters to me is control over my own destiny. I can’t wait for our band to take off so I can have just that.”

Ahead of us, Perri is already halfway down the block, bouncing along like a ball of sunshine. She’s vibrating with enthusiasm, as if the day hasn’t drained her at all. The jam session ahead is clearly already playing in her head.

She turns back to us, waving her arms like a conductor. “Come on, slowpokes! I want to get in some practice before dinner.”

Danika chuckles softly from behind me. “She never stops, does she?” she asks herself aloud.

We turned the corner past the Doby house. It’s the only Alopix-influenced structure in the neighborhood, in that it’s angular, metallic, and looks like a piece of Miranda Prime that fell out of the sky and got stuck in the mud. The jungle is trying to digest it, but the sleek lines make it still feel like a visitor among the trees.

Dani’s adopted parents are vulpine humanoids called Alopix from Miranda Prime, our sister planet in the sky. She’s the only one of us with non-Felona parents, adoptive or otherwise. It’s something she almost never brings up. But I know it weighs on her sometimes, like she’s still figuring out where she belongs in the world.

“I wonder what Darcy would think of my house that doesn't know if it belongs,” she murmured, her eyes drifting toward the horizon.

I didn't answer. I was too busy watching the way she'd pinned her typically loose long violet hair into a high ponytail, framed by curtain bangs that looked... strangely familiar.

So, then there's me. I walk in the middle of the group, always observing and processing what I see. My house is still a few blocks away, a smaller place at the end of the street, a cozy three-bedroom cottage tucked away in a clearing behind a line of trees. It's nothing fancy, but it's home, and it has some amenities you might not expect. But more on that later.

While Perri, Tiffany, and Gloria chat away, with Danika adding an off-paw comment here and there, I'm silent for the rest of our walk to the Scratching Post. I'm still trying to process everything that happened today.

Perri's house is the furthest from our school, a cozy two-story bungalow with that garage-turned-Scratching-Post. Perri's place is the one that feels the most like home these days. Even before the garage turned into our jam space, it's still where we've spent the most time as a band. It's cozy and welcoming, with its wooden walls and big windows that let the sunlight pour in.

The yard is always alive with wildlife, with birds swooping down to snack on the fruit trees, squirrels and rats darting through the branches, and the occasional jungle brute prowling through the underbrush. It's the kind of house that looks lived in, which it most certainly is.

Perri leads the way into the yard, grinning from ear-to-ear as she gestures toward the garage. "Let's get jamming, queens," she roars, her energy infectious as always.

Even though the day's been long, the sight of the Scratching Post fills me with great anticipation. This is where we belong, surrounded by the wild, natural energy of the jungle and the noisy, energetic sound of our music.

Music is what binds us together. It's what makes everything else—school, boys, drama—fade into the background. For the next few hours, music is all that matters.

Tiffany tosses her bookbag onto the old couch, her eyes still betraying irritation from the day's events. Perri is already plucking out a few warm-up notes on her bass, giving off good vibrations.

"Alright, you Lunatics," she declares with a grin, "let's see what kind of magic we can make today."

Gloria's behind the drum set, twirling her sticks like the pro she is. "I got a new beat for that song we talked about earlier. I think it'll give us just the right amount of edge."

Tiffany is about to respond when she catches sight of Danika, who's busy setting up her keyboard in the corner. Tiff finally notices Danika's new hairstyle, and our usually unflappable leader's chipper expression melts away in an instant.

"Danika," Tiffany mews, her tone a mixture of curiosity and suspicion, "are you wearing your hair... differently?"

Danika looks up, a soft smile on her face. "Oh, yeah. I decided to try something new." She gestures to her high ponytail, then fiddles with the soft curtain bangs framing her face. It's definitely not her usual slightly messy, carefree style.

Tiffany crosses her arms, eyes narrowing. "And where, exactly, did you get the idea for this... new look?"

Danika shrugs casually, clearly unaware of the storm brewing. "Lily. I saw her wearing her hair like this, and I thought it looked good. Figured I'd try it out."

Tiffany's reaction is immediate and sharp. "Lily? You're taking style tips from *Lily Featherstone* now?"

The tension in the garage is palpable. Danika blinks, surprised by the edge in Tiffany's voice. "Yeah. I mean, it works for her, doesn't it?" she points out innocently. "I thought it might work for me, too. Besides, it's functional for practice."

Tiffany scoffs, her voice rising. "Just because it's functional for *Lily* doesn't mean you need to copy her! We're the Lunatics, not Lily's fan club!" Tiff even uses air-quotes for the word *works*!

Gloria raises an eyebrow, glancing between them. "Whoa, Tiff. It's just a hairstyle. It's cute. Let it go, girl."

But Tiffany's mad. She paces in front of the amps, her tail flicking in irritation. "No, it's not just a hairstyle. It's a surrender to Lily's influence. By adopting the uniform of Lily, you let her win, giving her even more control than she already thinks she has!"

Danika's smile fades, and she looks genuinely hurt. "I'm not playing her game, Tiffany. I'm just studying her playbook. And it's the one thing about Lily that I feel like works. Why are you so upset about this?"

Sensing the growing tension, Perri steps in with her usual optimism. "Hey, hey, queens, let's not turn this into a catfight. It's hair. Not worth going to war over!"

But Tiffany's frustration only builds. "I just don't get why you'd want to take after her, Dani. She's the enemy."

Danika frowns, her paws on her hips. "Tiff, I'm not playing sides. I just thought it'd be fun to switch things up."

Gloria lets out a dramatic sigh. "You know," she muses. "If we're going to start throwing fits over hairdos, I might as well buzz my mane off in the name of trying something new."

“Don’t even suggest that!” Tiffany exclaims, followed by a groan.

Perri chuckles, always quick with a joke. “Or maybe we should all wear matching wigs. We could call ourselves the ‘Lily Lookalikes’ and see how long it takes for her to realize we’re trolling her.”

Tiffany finally stops pacing, her arms still crossed but her anger starting to deflate. “I’m sorry, it’s just... Lily drives me *insane*. And seeing her influence right in front of me... I don’t know, it just rubs me the wrong way.”

Danika sighs, stepping closer to Tiffany. “I get it, Tiff. But it’s not about her. I just wanted to try something new. You know how I am... always experimenting.”

Tiffany sighs, some of the fight leaving her. “Fine. But if you start talking like her, I’m pulling an intervention.”

Gloria leans back in her chair, grinning. “Ah, yes. Our first-ever intervention as a band. Can’t wait to see that.”

Tiffany finally cracks a smile, albeit a small one. “Don’t tempt me.”

With the tension broken, we all get back to our instruments, the garage filling with the familiar sound of tuning, tapping, and strumming. As we start to play, the earlier frustration fades away, replaced by the music that binds us together. Even Tiffany relaxes, her usual confidence returning as she belts out the first notes of our newest song.

As we settle in for rehearsal, the sounds of the jungle blend with our own, the birds and insects providing a backdrop to the pounding drums and wailing guitars. It’s like the whole neighborhood’s wildlife contingent is in on the act, cheering us on as we get lost in the music.

Danika, now completely at ease, lets her claws glide over the keys. Her high ponytail sways as she bobs her head to the rhythm.

As Gloria's drumbeat drives us forward into another chorus, I feel like this weird day is finally over.

But as we finish our jam session, our usual high energy isn't there. Perri and Gloria are packing up their instruments, quietly chatting about things they want to work on at our next session. For some reason, they leave Tiffany and Danika out of it.

Danika lingers near her keyboard, adjusting the settings for tomorrow's practice with one paw, with her other softly clawing through her ponytail. She doesn't seem too fazed by Tiffany's earlier outburst.

Yet, Tiffany is again pacing back-and-forth near the amps, her tail flicking with frustration. Finally, Tiff walks over to Danika and just stares at her for a moment, clearly collecting herself.

I'm sitting on the old couch, fiddling with my notebook. While pretending to be focused on jotting down lyrics, I'm really listening in on what's about to be said.

"Dani, can we talk for a sec?" Tiffany asks tensely.

"Sure. What's up?" Danika asks with a shrug, shooting Tiff a cursory glance, but otherwise barely looking up from her keyboard.

Tiffany crosses her arms tightly against her chest, "Look, I didn't mean to blow up earlier..." she mews, her voice strained. "But you're really going with the Lily look?"

Danika tilts her head, her usual dreamy expression slipping into mild confusion. She still barely looks up from her keyboard, that dreamy look in her eyes as always. "Uh huh?" she mews.

Tiffany growls, as she leans against the wall, putting some distance between her and Danika.

Dani starts humming a melody, clearly not sure what to say next.

“Do you... do you even get why this is bugging me?” Tiffany asks, softly but firmly.

Finally, Danika turns to Tiffany, her hazel eyes bright but calm. She smiles gently. “I get it, Tiff,” Danika replies. “But I’m just... trying things.”

Tiffany drops her arms, clearly growing even more frustrated. “It’s more than that, Dani,” she argues. “You know how Lily is. Always trying to get under my fur. And now you’re... I don’t know, taking after her somehow?”

I tap my pen rhythmically against the page, pretending I’m stuck on a lyric or something. But it’s my way of processing the conversation.

“I’m still me, Tiff,” Dani insists, her expression darkening.

Tiffany’s frustration brings her voice up to a dull roar. “But why do you want to copy anything about her? She’s... manipulative. And now everyone at school is going to think you’re trying to be like her.”

Danika sighs. She says nothing.

Tiffany bites her lip, then exhales sharply again. “You don’t get it, Dani. Lily is all about control. If people start seeing you take after her, it’s like she’s winning, you know?”

Danika gives her a soft, bemused smile. “I’m not playing her game, Tiff.”

Tiffany stares at her for a moment, hesitating as she tries not to say something rash. Clearly, Tiffany's taking this personally. I'm not sure why.

"Just... promise me you're not getting sucked into whatever Lily's got going on," Tiffany begs, seemingly on the verge of tears. "I can't stand the thought of her getting her claws into you."

Danika grins, her eyes brightening again, and her usual playful expression reemerges. "Pinky promise!" Dani giggles, wiggling her free foreclaw as if to seal the deal.

Tiffany exhales, her shoulders relaxing, relenting to the silly pinky gesture. She then tugs at her with a look of desperation in her eyes. This is something I've never seen her do.

Danika says nothing else, clearly done with this conversation. She returns to her keyboard, humming softly as she fiddles with the melody from earlier. Tiffany glances at me, and I pretend to be engrossed in my notebook again.

"Good night, Trudy," Tiffany whimpers. Clearly, she knows I've heard every word. She waves goodbye to Perri and Gloria but doesn't say anything. They hardly notice her leaving. Apparently, they think it's best to give Tiff space.

As Tiffany walks out through the house, she's clearly preoccupied. She even waves off Perri's mom who offers her an organic catnip cookie. That's not like Tiff at all. The silence she leaves behind is louder than any rehearsal we've ever had.

CHAPTER SIX

Making my short walk home, tonight's events keep replaying in my head. Even as I approach home, I'm still troubled. Considering it's a cozy, ivy-covered cottage that looks plucked straight from the pages of a Felonian folktale, that gives you some idea how worried I am.

On the outside, it seems to be an idyllic little home nestled into a jungle clearing, where nothing crazy would ever happen. Of course, this is far from the truth.

When I step through the front door, the comforting smell of Mum's cooking fills my senses. For a brief moment, it's almost enough to drown out the noise in my mind. Considering there are some new scents to whatever she's whipping up tonight, I'll likely be roped into a taste-test later, unwilling or not.

My mum, master chef Tilly Fantalica, is already busy in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up. She rules over our home's commercial-grade kitchen. Her shrine to high-end culinary excellence is complete with towering shelves of ingredients from across Felonia, Miranda Prime, and beyond. The stark contrast between the quaint cottage exterior and this industrial-grade kitchen always amuses me.

Most furrykin walking through the front door expect our place to be as quiet and serene as the garden. They're often shocked to find themselves surrounded by the gleaming steel and polished stone countertops of Mum's domain. Guests often gawk when they first see the high-tech ovens capable of feeding a royal banquet.

"Hey, Mum," I call out.

"Hi, darling!" Mum's voice floats back, cheerful as always. She never really seems stressed, even though she runs a

restaurant empire spanning multiple cities. I don't know how she stays so calm when everything else in her life moves at a hundred clicks an hour.

I wander into the kitchen, taking in the familiar sight of Mum working at the prep counter. She's expertly slicing some kind of purple root vegetable that I can't quite identify.

"How was your day?" Mum asks without looking up from her cutting board.

"Same old, same old," I reply, hopping up onto the counter as normal. "Lunatics rehearsal went well, though. We're thinking of debuting a new song at the next gig."

"That's wonderful, sweetie," Mum says, pausing to wipe her paws. "You'll have to play some of it for me later."

Just then, I notice a pile of junk at the edge of the counter. It's a half-collapsed mechanical something-or-other, sprawled across the counter like the remains of a botched experiment.

"What's Edy up to now?" I groan.

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Edy moseys over with an embarrassed look on his face. My little brother, Edyson, thinks he's a genius inventor. He's always tinkering with something, coming up with gadgets meant to improve daily life. So far, they end up causing more trouble than they're worth.

I love him, of course, and about half the things he makes seem to almost work at their intended purpose. Still, I can't ignore that a spare few happen to explode at random, like the one today.

"I was just, uh, testing a new auto-folding laundry basket," Edyson explains sheepishly. "It's supposed to help with, you know, laundry."

I can't help but laugh a little. "I don't think laundry is supposed to involve an exploding apparatus, Edy."

"Okay, maybe it needs a little fine-tuning," Edy admits with a grin.

"Right," I growl, giving him my best big-sister glare.

"Trudy, honey, could you help me clean this up before dinner?" Mum asks me sweetly, but wearily. I stare for a moment or two at the pile of gears, springs, and who-knows-what. Then I look at the mess in the living area, and I can't help but groan.

"You know, I'm not that hungry, Mom," I lie, slipping away upstairs without a second glance.

I throw myself onto my little twin bed, flip open the worn cover of my diary, and scribble down the first thing that comes to mind.

Lily Featherstone is ruining everything.

I nervously chew on the end of my favorite pen for a moment before I continue writing.

She worms her way into everything. Into Tiffany's head. Into our band identity. I'm just waiting for the Lily diss track to drop!

I stop again, tapping my pen out of frustration like one of Gloria's relentless beats. Then my messy thoughts keep spilling onto the page, swirling with worry and anger.

What if Tiffany really is losing it? What if Lunatics in Love crashes and burns before we even get off the ground?

The door creaks open, and Mum enters with a hot plate in her paws.

"I know you said you're not hungry, but..." Mum trails off, setting the plate down on my desk. The scent of sizzling avian meat and herbed vegetables curls into the air. She doesn't need to say anything more. My stomach betrays me, growling audibly. So, I pick up the fork, glancing at Mum, watching me with that patient smile that she always has.

"I had a bad day," I manage to meow between bites as I shovel down one of Mum's signature recipes.

"You know," Mum mews, taking a seat at the edge of my bed next to me. "I wish I could be here more. I know it's hard with Dad gone all the time, and me being... well, busy. But you know, that's just how things are when you grow up."

I swallow a mouthful of food. A knot I didn't even realize was in my throat loosens a bit.

"I don't want that," I mumble. "I don't want to be gone all the time, doing some dumb job. Especially not anything like intergalactic corporate accounting like Dad."

Mum chuckles, her paw resting lightly on my knee. I look into her eyes, the same heterochromatic blue and green like mine, but reversed. I hope someday I grow up to be just like her—sweet, gorgeous, and exceptional at cooking.

"Making music is a job, too, sweetie," Mum tells me. "A song is just a recipe that you perform in real-time. If you don't respect the ingredients, especially the people in the band, the whole thing curdles, no matter how much artistry you throw at it. Sometimes, it'll feel like it's all falling apart. But it's worth it to just do what you love, and you have to stick to the process, even if the recipe isn't quite right. There's always the next meal."

"I just..." I mew, eyes fixed on my plate. "I want the band to work out, so we won't need anything else. So, we can just... do

this." I point to my pile of notebooks with our band's lyrics and sheet music.

Mum smiles. "If anyone can make that happen, it's you and your friends. Just remember, even the best bands have bad days." She kisses me on the forehead, minty catnip on her breath, as she rises to her feet. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

As soon as Mum leaves, I let the fork clatter back onto the plate. Even though Mum's world revolves around food, she always makes time to support our music. We don't always see eye to eye on things. Mum often compares music to cooking, which annoys me to no end. But our conversations are always full of mutual respect and occasional playful jabs.

Soon as she leaves, I make quick work of the braised purple-root and seasoned avian-fillet. Just as it seemed the savory complexity of Mum's spices is finally quieting my internal static, there's a loud crash from the living room. I then hear Edyson's footsteps pound down the upstairs hallway. No doubt he's on another harebrained mission to improve the world with yet another invention.

"Edy! Stop wrecking the house!" I yell, but it's half-hearted. I'm too tired to care. Honestly, Edyson might drive me crazy sometimes, but his wild inventions and boundless curiosity remind me of my own limitless creative energy. But mine is channeled into music instead of laundry-folding robots or whatever contraption he's failed at building now.

Most days, I'm grateful for the constant activity at home. I love that our house is alive with experiments that rarely go as planned. But tonight, I need to wind down. I don't need anything else to think about at the moment.

I bury my face in my pillow, eyes shut tight, thoughts still swirling. *What if Lily really does ruin everything for us?* I keep

thinking. The worry clings to me, pulling me towards a restless, fitful sleep.

...

The next day, the hallways of Catbridge High echo with the usual morning commotion as we Lunatics head toward our lockers. Tiffany leads our pack, her tail flicking with each step, still fuming from the events of last night. I decide to hang back with Danika, who seems even deeper into her daydreams than usual. I tug at my braids, which I redid this morning, much tighter than usual. I think I might have wound them a bit too much, after all. But it's all I could do to keep my skull from exploding.

As we round the corner near the lockers, Lily Featherstone glides by, entourage in tow. But she stops and spins back. With a quick motion, Lily brushes Danika's arm, and her voice rings out.

"Your hair looks amazing, Danika." Lily comments. "Really suits you."

Danika's eyes widen with surprise, her paw instinctively reaching up to touch her hair. Then she flips both sides of her curtain bangs with a pride I've never seen from Dani before.

"Oh, uh, thanks," she stammers, clearly shocked at the comment, but loving the attention.

Lily slyly smiles before continuing down the hallway, her tail swishing confidently behind her. The moment she's out of earshot, Tiffany turns on Danika, her blue eyes narrowing.

"So... you're sticking with *that* look now?" Tiffany's tone is jagged, the kind of cadence that precedes a territorial dispute.

Danika straightens her posture. "Yeah, Tiff," she meows. "I *like* it. It's going to be my look from now on, whether Lily wore it first or not."

Tiffany rolls her eyes, clearly exasperated. “Fine, whatever,” Tiff growls. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you when everyone starts thinking you’re trying to copy her.”

Danika shrugs, brushing off the comment. “Let them think what they want. I’m doing this for me.”

Before the tension can escalate further, Gloria jumps in with a laugh. “Alright, queens, let’s save any more drama for after school.”

Our group starts moving again, and Tiffany doesn’t meow another word.

By the time we filed in for our third period class, the tension was mostly dissipated. Thank the Great Mother that Lily doesn’t have history class with us.

When Tiffany walks in, her usual confident stride makes Darcy shift uncomfortably in his seat. His gaze flicks between his notes and the front of the room, avoiding eye contact. Obviously, his mind is elsewhere as class begins.

Like usual, Tiffany seems to have an answer for everything that the teacher asks about. But when Miss Calico finally calls on Darcy, he just shrugs. Fortunately, she doesn’t force the issue, but it doesn’t stop the inevitable whispering. At least, it’s lunchtime soon.

...

At lunch, our squad occupies our favorite spot by the school cafeteria windows, bathed in a warm pool of sunshine. The light catches our whiskers, and I feel some much needed warmth to calm my nerves.

At the next table to our right, sits Darcy with impeccable posture. He's deeply engrossed in conversation with some members of whom I'm guessing is his advanced literature class. I recognize some of them from my last year of middle school.

Gloria squints at them, trying to decipher their distant expressions. "What do you think they're talking about? It looks so... intellectual."

Perri jests, "Oh, come on, Glo. It's lunchtime. They're probably debating the merits of tuna versus salmon."

Danika adds with a wink, "Or discussing whether the price of organic catnip is worth paying over the GMO brands."

"I'm going to grab some juice," Tiffany mews, pushing her chair back. "I'll be right back."

As Tiffany passes the table with Mr. Valerian, a snippet of conversation catches her attention: "...Honestly, I'd rather not attend these superficial gatherings," Darcy meows.

Tiffany looks shocked, muttering something under her breath. She rushes back to our table, fur slightly ruffled, and bursts out, "I overheard Mr. Pompous-Pants talking about 'avoiding superficial gatherings.' What could he be talking about?"

Suddenly I find myself needing to be the voice of reason. "Well, now. Let's not jump to conclusions," I caution.

"Well, to be fair," Gloria meows. "I did tell him about our weekend karaoke plans in the hall between classes this morning. Maybe he's just not into belting out standards?"

Perri waves her paw dismissively. "His loss!"

Tiffany glares at Gloria. "You did what? That's supposed to be girls only night!"

Trying to defuse the situation, Danika suggests, “Tiff, I’m sure he’s talking about something else? Some other event?”

But Tiffany entirely ignores Dani. “Ugh! Maybe he’s just too refined for our fun-loving, karaoke-singing, utterly fabulous selves.”

Still trying to play the mediator, I offer, “Or maybe he was referring to some fancy high-brow shindigs at his old academy.”

“I don’t know,” Tiffany sighs. “It just sounded... judgy.”

Danika leans back, flipping her tail with casual grace. “Well, until he offers a written explanation with footnotes and citations, I say we enjoy our lunch and our own fabulous company.”

Always one for dramatic gestures, Perri raises her juice box high. “To being purrfectly ourselves, whether others think it’s superficial or not!”

Gloria echoes her sentiments. “Cheers to that!”

We laugh and clink our juice boxes together in a mock toast, letting the tension fade as we return to our meal. At the next table, Darcy and his peers are still deep in conversation, oblivious to us or anyone else around them.

Just as we’re finishing up our meals, the PA system crackles to life.

“Attention, students!” the voice of Assistant Principal Felworth roars, “Please make your way to the auditorium after this period. Fourth period classes are suspended for a special assembly! Be quick about it!”

“Oh, sweet!” Perri roars, bouncing in her seat. “No class!”

Danika sighs. "I wonder what we're going to be scolded about as a school collective this time."

I shrug. "Hey, I wasn't in the mood for my next class anyway."

"But it's Mid-30th Century Literature, Trudy!" Gloria interjects. "That's your favorite!"

"I could use a change of pace," I meow, truthfully. That literature class is boring these days anyway. No one in that class, teacher included, has any real love for the works we're studying.

"Hey, maybe this is the superficial gathering Darcy meant," Tiffany mews, her curiosity piqued. "Ever think about that?"

"That's all you're thinking about right now?" Perri teases.

"Well, you'll have your chance to confront him about it soon enough," I propose. "We better get going."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Catbridge High auditorium hums with a chaotic frequency, the kind of white noise that precedes a storm in the jungle canopy, as students file in for the special assembly. Whispers and giggles bounce around like pinballs. Meanwhile, teachers attempt to herd the mess of all the clowders and cliques from across campus.

This place is a monstrosity, five thousand seats worth of pure architectural overkill, wrapped in gleaming stone and glass. It's like a grand temple dedicated to some Felona obsession with oversized public spaces. Seriously, this is a venue big enough to host a rock festival. That may work in our favor at some point, of course, but it's still ridiculous!

The seating arrangement is typical Felona efficiency, so steep that even the most agile among us would think twice before sprinting up to the nosebleeds. It's spaced so tightly that by the end of an assembly, you're basically best friends with the people on either side of you. Fortunately, we Lunatics always try to huddle together, so I don't mind that so much.

Perhaps the most ridiculous thing about this place, though, is the sound system. The speakers are so powerful they could rattle the windows in Fellington Heights if someone cranked the volume high enough. The first time here, I joked with Danika that they probably went overboard in case of an alien invasion—so they could blast out public announcements to the whole city. Honestly, that might even be true, as Danika suggested.

In any case, it's hard to believe this space was meant for regular school functions. It feels like we should be featuring some world-renowned power trio like Astrakane or something. I just hope we don't get swallowed whole by this absurdly large auditorium whenever it's our turn to be the ones up on stage.

Anyway, on stage, Assistant Principal Felworth stands and scolds students for being unruly, his fur slightly ruffled from the morning's preparations. Eventually, he clears his throat quite dramatically, which manages to pierce through the chatter like claws through curtains. The rabble settles down, the collective attention reluctantly shifting from each other to Felworth on stage.

We five Lunatics take seats in the second row from the front. I sit between Perri and Danika, while Tiffany and Gloria are off to the left. This is unusual, as Tiffany is always in the middle.

"Good morning, young felines and esteemed guests of other species," Felworth begins, his voice carrying the weight of many a catnap interrupted by school affairs. "I apologize for taking you away from your studies. But Principal Latchkey couldn't wait to announce a major event that's sure to be the highlight of our academic year!"

The students start muttering, a mixture of curiosity and dread. When Felworth throws up his paws, the murmurs die down. "Principal Latchkey, you have the floor."

The school principal, Mrs. Mona Latchkey, steps up to the podium, her signature purple spectacles gleaming under the stage lights. She's always full of enthusiasm, and perhaps a little too full of catnip, too. Whatever the case, an emergency gathering like this means we're getting something more than her usual pep-rally antics.

"Good afternoon, my lovely pupils," she meows warmly. "As you're probably aware, the annual 'Battle of the Bands' is upon us!"

The auditorium erupts into cheers. But I freeze. Wait, I'm thinking, the Battle isn't supposed to happen until the spring? Yet, here we are, barely into autumn, and she's bringing it up now? As the cheers die down, it seems my confusion is contagious as

murmuring ensues. The other Lunatics seem just as taken aback as myself.

“Yes, yes, I know it seems early!” Latchkey chuckles, clearly reveling in the surprise. “That’s because this year, we’re doing something a little different. Instead of the usual autumn pep rally, we’re combining our autumn fall festival with the spring Battle of the Bands!”

Tiffany squeals quietly. “This is the best news ever!”

That wasn’t the reaction I expected. Gloria looks at her like she’s gone mad.

“Don’t get all excited just yet,” Latchkey warns, raising a paw. “The fun won’t come at the cost of your academics. This year’s *Battle of the Bands* will have a theme tied to your coursework.”

Gloria’s tail flicks with agitation. “Wait, what?” she growls.

I exchange quick glances with Perri and Danika. *Where is Latchkey going with this?* we’re all thinking.

“For this competition,” Latchkey continues, “your songs must be crafted around a specific theme. The theme for this year is...” She pauses for a moment for another of Felworth’s cheesy drumrolls. “Love and Tragedy!”

The students around us erupt in a mix of laughter and cheers. But the five of us sit in stunned silence. How could this be happening? The idea of writing songs inspired by literature—especially by classic tragic love stories—was ours! So, who leaked it to the entire school?

“The battle won’t just be about music,” Latchkey adds. “It’ll be about integrating your studies into your art. Think of it as your

chance to bring history, literature, and even science and math to life—through song!”

So, now we must include other subjects, too? I immediately think that Felworth is somehow behind this. Sure enough, Felworth is standing off to the side, paws crossed, looking especially pleased with himself.

Finally, the noise level in the auditorium reaches a crescendo, so Felworth raises his paws for silence.

“Each band must perform three songs,” Felworth cuts in. “Each must reflect a different aspect of ‘Love and Tragedy.’ Think of it as writing the soundtrack for your academic soul, weaving in all of what you’re learning into your own personal symphonies!”

The principal goes on about the prestigious alumni who’ve participated in recent years’ Battle of the Bands and details the rules. But I’m not paying attention at this point. This is ripped straight from my own notebook. It was my idea that was at the heart of our entire band concept. Now some miserly assistant principal just gives every one of our peers the key to our band’s identity before we can even get started.

“The grand prize,” Felworth roars, his voice swelling with importance, “is a chance to perform at Moonlight Melodies!”

The room gasps. The Moonlight Melodies Extravaganza gig is a huge deal, a massive charity event that can make or break acts. But instead of excitement, I feel a growing sense of dread.

Tiffany leans over, whispering excitedly, “This is our first real chance to get noticed, right?”

“Tiff, someone stole our whole concept!” Gloria growls, her claws tapping against her bag in irritation. At least someone besides me figured that out already!

Danika's usually dreamy demeanor fades. "This isn't fair, at all," she groans.

"We've been working on this whole love and tragedy thing for months," I meow. "Now everyone's going to be doing the same thing."

Perri bounces slightly in her seat, still trying to find the silver lining. "Yeah, but we're the *Lunatics in Love*! We've already got a head start! We're way ahead of the curve."

Latchkey finally closes out the meeting with something all five of us needed to hear.

"Also, just so you're not wondering, the Spring Battle of the Bands is still on," Latchkey explains. "We'll have a new theme for that, too. So, this year, it's double the music, double the learning fun! Best of luck to all of you!"

As we all file out, my mind is still reeling. Yeah we have a few songs we could adapt, and I have ideas for three more. But they're not even close to ready for a competition like this. Three chapters of the rock opera we planned for the spring could fit the theme. But now it seems we only have a month to purrfect them to our liking.

Tiffany tries to play this all off as great fortune, "Well, hey, if this one goes bad, at least we have the spring, right?" she laughs.

Gloria just stares at her. She has nothing to say. Perri and Danika are chattering amongst themselves, and I'm just dumbfounded.

After the assembly, we part ways to go to our fifth period classes. But I certainly didn't care about fifth period math. In my own class, everyone was already teaming up to create their own band. The teacher didn't even bother with the lesson because of how preoccupied everyone was.

When we Lunatics gather in the courtyard for an emergency band meeting after school, it's understandable that we're freaking out about our timeline being moved up by months.

"You do have those three songs you were working on, right, Trudy?" Perri asks.

"Yes, but they're part of a twelve-part opera!" I exclaim, exasperated. "And they're nowhere near ready for this kind of competition."

"We'll figure it out," Tiffany promises with newfound determination. "This is still our moment. No one can do it like we can. The Moonlight Melodies Extravaganza is going to be *our* big break."

Gloria mutters under her breath, "If Lily doesn't get a band and steal our thunder first..."

"But Lily doesn't have a band yet!" Tiffany growls. Then a look of realization washes over her face. "Oh, wait, like every single clique in the school is going to have a band now, huh?"

"Yeah, see, girls?" I meow. "This isn't good at all."

As we leave the school grounds, my mind races. Did Felworth spy on us and leak our ideas to Latchkey? Whether it was intentional sabotage or just bad luck, one thing's clear—we're now on the back-foot.

Now, we'll have to fight harder than ever to win our fair share of the spotlight. As for Felworth, something tells me he knows exactly what he's doing.

...

It's late afternoon now. After grabbing some much-needed greasy fast food, we're all back in the "Scratching Post," picking up

our instruments for another jam session. Tiffany is busy adjusting her guitar strings, her expression focused and intense. Danika's claws hover over her keyboard, tapping out a few tentative notes, waiting for inspiration to strike. Perri's tweaking her bass guitar, already bobbing her head to some rhythm only she can hear.

Gloria is behind her drum kit, tapping the cymbals with precision to make sure they're just right, and testing the microphone for her backup vocals. Meanwhile, I'm lounging on the old, worn-out couch in the corner, flipping through the pages of *Paws and Prejudgment*—the classic by Clawdia Whiskerbane that's the inspiration for my latest song I'm working on, *Purrfectly Prejudiced*. That tale was to be the backdrop for our rock opera, plans now hacked to bits because of the sudden change in schedule.

Danika finally breaks the silence. "Okay, so we're settled. We go with 'Purrfectly Prejudiced' for our next song. Who's actually read *Paws and Prejudgment*?"

Without looking up from the book, I flutter the pages with pride. "Cover to cover," I humbly brag. "Several times."

"Besides you, Tru," Danika said with a smile, twirling one of her bangs.

Gloria grins, her eyes gleaming. "I have. Lisabell Softpaw is such an icon."

Perri smirks, tapping her bass. "And Mr. Darcy Darkwhisker is... well, a bit of a broody bro."

Tiffany, her eyes glinting with mischief, chimes in, "A bit like someone else we know, right?"

Danika can't help but laugh. "Oh, you mean Mr. Darcy... Valerian?"

We giggle about that, and even Tiffany cracks up a bit. Even after the craziness of today's assembly, we can still joke around. I can see Tiffany's still not quite herself, though.

I close my book and sit up. "The book's more than just the romance, you know. It's a commentary on Felona society, manners, and misunderstandings. That's where the real depth is, you know."

Gloria nods. "Exactly," she meows. "And the biggest takeaway? Never judge a tom based on first impressions."

"You mean," Perri adds, "like assuming someone's proud and arrogant without really knowing them?"

Gloria shoots her a knowing look. "Bingo. Like Lisabell did with Darkwhisker. And maybe... what we're doing with another Darcy."

"Alright, point taken," Tiffany concedes. "But our Darcy could still smile more."

Danika, who's more eager than ever to get back on track, claps her paws. "Back to the song! We need to capture that tension between Lisabell and Darkwhisker."

I sit up, the creative gears in my head already spinning. "How about something like..." I pick up my sax and do a little impromptu solo. I'm surprised even with myself that I had that in me today.

Perri grins wide, her enthusiasm contagious. "Hey, I love that! It's catchy."

Tiffany's foreclaws softly strum something that seems to be meant as a counterpoint to my jam. "That's a bit much," she mews. "But I think I'm onto something..."

Gloria taps out a light rhythm on the cymbals, and adds, “Yeah, I feel that.”

Tiffany starts playing that new melody with more fervor now. One by one, we all join in—Danika on her keys, Perri’s bass locking in the groove, and Gloria sets the beat. I wait for the right moment, then let my sax add a burst of energy to the mix.

As the music builds, I feel a song finally coming together. It’s not just about channeling *Paws and Prejudgment* anymore. This is all about us.

This music we’re creating is turning into a perfect backdrop for my lyrics to weave in the timeless lessons of Whiskerbane’s story with our own lives. It’s like the music is carrying us, guiding us toward something bigger than just a track for the competition.

So, as Tiffany belts out the first notes of her improvised chorus, I can’t help but smile. No matter what challenges we face, this is our music. For us, that’s really all that matters, whether we win or lose some stupid school competition that’s dropped in our laps.

...

The next day after fifth period, Tiffany takes off like she’s on a mission. Ever since the Battle of the Bands announcement, I can feel the frustration rolling off her in waves.

“I’m going right to Felworth,” she announces, and storms off without another word.

Of course, I’m not about to let her storm into Felworth’s office alone. But Gloria, Danika, and Perri insist that I let her go blow off some steam. But I know she’s just going to get herself in trouble if one of us doesn’t go.

So, I rush after her, just in time for us to reach the assistant principal's door together. Tiffany doesn't bother knocking and just pushes it open. Felworth is there, flipping through some papers at his desk, looking quite disinterested. He's clearly biding his time for something.

Tiffany wastes no time in unloading her frustration on him. "Mr. Felworth, we need to talk about the Battle of the Bands."

He glances up, raising an eyebrow. But he doesn't even give us the courtesy of putting down the papers.

"I'm very busy," Felworth groans, giving us a dismissive wave of a foreclaw. "I have a student government meeting to oversee in a few minutes."

"Well, it seems you have a moment!" Tiffany growls.

Felworth rolls his eyes and stares Tiffany down. He doesn't even seem to notice me standing there. "Then, make it quick, Larsen," Felworth growls.

Tiffany puts her paws on her hips. "You moved the competition to the same week as the fall festival, and it just so happens to be right before Pawston's Youth Leadership Summit?"

Felworth picks up a folder off his desk and pretends to read through it as he replies. "These things happen," he meows flatly. "Timing is everything, Miss Larsen." He then gives her a dismissive smile. "But the decision is final. You have a month to prepare."

Tiffany's frustration builds, her tail flicking in irritation. Felworth gets up and heads out past us, brushing her off like nothing.

But Tiffany doesn't let it go. She follows him to wherever he's off to. I hang back just close enough to hear what's being meowed.

“Of course, it’s all about timing,” Tiffany replies, “If Lily wins the Battle of the Bands, she’ll have a fresh victory under her belt, just in time for the Summit. It’s too perfect for her, isn’t it?”

Felworth pauses, just for a second, but he recovers quickly. He adjusts his tie, not even turning to face us. “I really don’t have time for baseless accusations, Miss Larsen. I’m looking out for the benefit of the entire school. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have important matters to attend to.”

He picks up his pace, leaving us standing there. Tiffany looks ready to explode into a fit of rage.

“Tiff, it’s not worth it,” I suggest, trying to keep calm. “We’ll figure this out.”

But Tiffany’s already moving again, her jaw clenched. “I *know* he’s up to something,” she growls. “I bet he’s going to that meeting to set Lily up to look like some kind of renaissance queen.”

I follow her down the hall. Whatever she’s trying to do, it’s not going to end well if she barges in there without a plan.

We reach the student government meeting room, and Tiffany stops short, pressing herself against the closed door. I know what she’s thinking before she even says it. “Let’s listen,” she whispers.

I follow her lead, pressing an ear to the door. Felworth’s voice is clear as day on the other side.

“Lily’s leadership skills are exactly what our school needs,” Felworth proposes. “She’s a role model for her peers. Just imagine the impression she’ll make at the Youth Leadership Summit. This will be a major boost, not just for her, but for all of us.”

I glance at Tiffany. Her ears flatten slightly, and her eyes fill with sorrow. She was right. It's not just about the Battle of the Bands—Felworth's setting Lily up for something bigger.

Then Lily's voice cuts in, as sharp as ever. "No wannabe diva can take my spotlight just because she thinks she can sing!" she roars. "This is more than just a competition. I'm going to show the world who's a real leader around here."

Tiffany stiffens beside me. Her fists clench, and I can see she's about to blow. Without thinking, her paw reaches for the handle.

"Tiff, don't!" I whisper, grabbing her arm.

She turns to me, her eyes blazing with rage. "Did you hear what she just said?" she growls. "She's talking about *me*. Felworth said something to do. I'm not letting her or that crooked dude get away with this."

"Tiff, we can't just charge in there," I warn her, tightening my grip on her arm, trying to keep her grounded. "That's what she wants. She wants you to lose it. But we need to regroup. We must think this through."

Tiffany tries to pull away, but when she does, it seems my words sink in. Slowly, she exhales, the tension draining from her shoulders. But her eyes stay hard and enraged.

"Fine," she growls through gritted teeth. "But I'm not letting her get away with this."

We slip away from the door, walking down the hall in silence. Tiffany's still fuming, clearly unsure of her next move.

"This isn't just about winning the Battle of the Bands anymore," Tiffany growls as we head to the courtyard. "I have to prove that I'm better than her!"

“If Lily takes that win,” I meow, “She’ll have fresh fans, and she’ll use that momentum to own the Summit. Apparently, that’s exactly what Felworth wants.”

“But, why would Felworth want to do all this for Lily?” Tiffany groans. “Unless...”

“Senator Featherstone probably is in his pocket,” I suggest. “That makes a lot of sense.”

Tiffany looks stunned that I’ve come to that conclusion, but really, I know she’s on the same page. “Yeah, it makes too much sense.”

“We got to go to your grandparents about this, Tiff,” I suggest.

“No, I’m not getting them involved. My family may be billionaires, but I’m not stooping to Lily’s level.” Tiffany growls.

“But you got to tell them that our school has a corrupt assistant principal,” I insist. “They’ll do something. After all, they got lots of pull with the school board.”

“No, no,” Tiffany said. “I’m not telling Papa and Nana anything. You know Nana would be thrilled if Lily made a mockery of the Lunatics in Love. Then I’d have to go and be her perfect little heiress again.”

I put a paw on her shoulder. “Whatever you decide, we’re all with you. Danika, too.”

Tiffany looks at me with somber understanding. I don’t think she’s mad at Danika, not really. She’s mad at herself for not realizing just how much Lily is taking advantage of these sudden opportunities being spoon-fed to her.

When we reach the school courtyard, Tiffany stops when she realizes the other three Lunatics are nowhere to be found. She looks ready to burst into tears, but she keeps herself steady.

“She’s not a real leader, Tiffany,” I mew, stepping up beside her. “You are. You’ve got this.”

Tiffany looks at me with a half-smile, but I can see the wheels still turning in her head.

“I know,” she groans, her voice low but fierce. “But I’m not letting her win. Tomorrow, we’ll start figuring this out. No more playing around. We’re going to show everyone what the Lunatics are really made from!”

I nod, watching as her focus sharpens into something bigger than just irritation. Tiffany’s ready to lead. If spoiled brats like Lily Featherstone are vying to be our future leaders, then we really need Tiff to step up and take charge.

Yeah, I know we’re in for a fight. But with Tiffany as our lead, I’ve got a feeling we might just have a chance.

“Let’s get to the Scratching Post,” I suggest, looking at my vibrating phone, “Perri won’t stop texting me about us being slowpokes.”

“No, Trudy,” Tiffany mews with a snuffle. “I have something else to do. See ya tomorrow.”

With that, Tiffany rushes off. I call after her, but she’s long gone within a moment. Guess I’m off to work with the band without her. What is so important that she’s skipping band practice?

~ *Trudy Fantalica* ~

ACT TWO

From the Diary of Tiffany Larsen

CHAPTER EIGHT

Something about the school library just speaks to me. I could use the quiet after the past couple days. I just need a moment away from the band. Right now, this is the only place I can gather my thoughts. It's one of the few places Lily won't bother me, too. She's too busy with her extracurriculars to do something as academic as reading. After all, I need to be productive with something. I've got a research project due next week, too. But I haven't even started it. You know, I'm busy with the band and all.

But today, I'm not just here to wander as I sometimes do, scanning the titles for potential song lyrics. I'm searching for something specific.

I casually browse through the towering shelves, my paws skimming the spines of the books. I'm in a bit of a fog right now with everything on my mind and a lot of the titles I see are titles that I don't expect to find alongside the others. But mostly, I just keep moving. After what seems like an eternity, I find something that will actually help me with my project.

Clawmark's Operas and Legacy. This will help. Of course, it's tucked away on the top shelf of the classical music section. Luckily I just happened to look up there. The old leather-bound book is a little dusty, but otherwise it's a pristine copy. Reading about the work of such a classical master should be a good distraction. It helps that we're studying Clawmark in music class, too. It's not an original topic for me to do a paper about, but he'll have to do.

I stretch out my paw to reach for it. But before I can grab it, a dark, immaculately groomed paw brushes against mine. Startled, I pull back. It's a familiar paw, too. There's Darcy Valerian. His emerald eyes meet mine, intense but calm. Still, for a moment, neither of us speaks.

"Oh! You!" I blurt out, trying to cover my surprise with a laugh. "You startled me."

Darcy's expression softens. "My apologies," he mews, smooth as usual. "I didn't expect to bump into anyone here, especially not someone reaching for something written about Clawmark's operas." Now there's a faint warmth behind his words.

I'm genuinely surprised. "You know Clawmark?" I ask.

He nods, pride written on his face. "I have... let's call it a penchant for classical music. It's a guilty pleasure of mine."

I shake my head. "Guilty? You should be proud of having taste like that! You're way ahead of most cats around here."

A small, amused smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. It's subtle, but it's the first real expression I've seen from him that doesn't feel so guarded.

"Not many of our peers share that sentiment," Darcy meows, leaning against the shelf. "They're more interested in whatever's trending... pop beats, electronic rhythms."

"Don't get me wrong, I love a good pop tune," I counter. "But there's something timeless about classical music. It tells stories, real stories, in a way that sticks with you." I chuckle and add, "And my grandmother won't stop making me listen to it! You know, like, I need to be more cultured! Like fermented nectar or something!"

Darcy's eyes light up. "Exactly," he mews. Suddenly, the aloof, brooding tom from third period history class acts quite differently. There's genuine excitement in his voice now. "It's like the music carries pieces of history, of emotions that still can carry us even today."

"So, what's your favorite piece, Mr. Valerian?" I ask.

He hesitates for a moment. "It's Darcy, by the way. Just Darcy." His eyes blink softly as he adds, "If I had to choose, I'd say Clawdovsky's *Tale of the Shadowtail*. It has a sort of... melancholic beauty to it."

"Uh huh," I mew, my impression of him shifting with every word he meows. "You're full of surprises, Darcy."

He tilts his head slightly. "Aren't we all?" Darcy poses with a mischievous grin.

For a moment, the library fades into the background. The space between the towering stacks feel suddenly pressurized. It's like the air itself holds its breath to see who will blink first.

Darcy breaks the silence first, almost tentative. "Maybe I could introduce you to some lesser-known gems," he suggests. "If you're interested, that is."

The offer surprises me, but I smile. "I'd like that." I reply. "Who knows? Maybe I can show you some contemporary beats with their own kind of charm."

He flushes slightly, his ears flicking back for a second. "It's a date. I mean, a plan."

I can't help but tease. "A musical exchange, let's call it," I quip.

"Perfect," he agrees, his smile lingering just a little longer.

The library lights start to dim as the afterschool period of our school day comes to an end. We both look up at the wall clock. So much time has passed for what seemed like a brief exchange. For the first time since he got here, Darcy is finally more than just the quiet, brooding stranger at the edge of the crowd.

We walk toward the exit together.

“So, I noticed you’ve been really quiet in class the past couple days,” I offer. “Everything OK?”

Darcy tenses for a moment, quite curious that I showed concern for him. He shrugs, trying to keep it casual.

“Just catching up,” he meows matter of factly. “I haven’t gone over these subjects since my tutor made me read Meowltaire’s collected works cover to cover.”

I feel my eyes almost pop out of my head. “That sounds like torture!” I observe.

“It’s not that bad,” Darcy meows with a shrug, clearly lying. “I actually wanted to thank you for catching me off guard. Ever since I haven’t quite been sure what to say. I wasn’t expecting to meet someone as well versed in Meowltaire as someone from the Academy... ahem, here.”

“I know enough to be dangerous,” I reply slyly.

“Indeed, you do,” Darcy replies with clearly feigned amusement. “Anyway, I have somewhere to be this evening.”

“OK, catch you later,” I mew as he darts off. So, I check out that Clawmark, make my way back to my locker to gather my things and head home.

My walk home is quiet. Without me at practice, the other girls decided to just do their own things tonight. Alone with my thoughts, I can’t shake that conversation with Darcy. It keeps replaying in my head.

So, the brooding tom from history class is a classical music geek? Clawmark and Clawdovsky? Seriously, who even knows

about them these days? If it weren't for my grandparents still living in the last century, I'd be clueless about them.

My grandparents' place is quiet, as usual. The big old mansion seems too large for just the three of us, but it's home. I kick off my shoes at the door, grab a quick snack from the pantry, and head up to my room. Now, I can finally unwind.

Lounging on my oversized bed, I pull out my phone and scroll through my messages. Nothing urgent, it seems. Danika is lost in some art project. Perri is no doubt in her garage fiddling with her bass. Trudy is likely buried in another book. That leaves Gloria, who I'm sure is just babysitting her little brother.

So, I dial her number. After a couple of rings, she picks up.

"Hey, Tiff!" Gloria meows. "How's your big Clawmark research project coming along?"

I smirk, lying back on my bed. "Hey, bestie! Oh, it's going fine," I reply. "I mean, I did go to the library and touched a book. That counts as research, right?"

Gloria laughs. "Sure, if that's what you were really doing. You don't sound like you've been slogging through dusty old music scores and biographies all afternoon."

I hesitate for a second, twirling a few curls of my hair between my claws. "Well... I did run into someone."

There's a pause on the other end. "Wait, hold up. Do you mean..."

I take a deep breath before filling the dead air. "Darcy Valerian," I mew.

"Um, what!?" Gloria shouts. There's a thud as if she took a tumble or something.

“Yeah, I know, right?” I meow, sitting up. “Turns out Mr. Valerian is a huge music nerd.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence at the other end. “Darcy? Now, are we talking like classical?”

I laugh. “Yeah, like legit classical. We’re talking Clawmark and Clawdovsky. Tale of the Shadowtail! He even offered to get together so he can tell me about stuff probably even my grandparents don’t know.”

Gloria lets out a low whistle. “Huh! Here I thought he was just a snob with a fancy name. So, what’s his deal?”

I lean back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. “I’m still working that out,” I admit. “But with me today, he was... different. In class, he’s too cool for school and just lets everything happen around him while he sits there like a marble statue. But like, when we started talking about music today, he lit up. He smiled, Glo. For real.”

Gloria sounds genuinely surprised. “You sure it wasn’t one of those ‘I’m better than you’ smirks?”

I shake my head. “Nope. It was...” I didn’t want to say it was real. “Well, there’s something there.”

Gloria giggles. “So, you’re telling me you’ve gone from class rivals to musical soulmates or something?”

“Come on, it’s not like that,” I groan. “We just—like, he’s different when you get him talking about something he cares about.”

“Well, color me intrigued,” Gloria mews sarcastically. “So, are you going to dig deeper?”

“I mean... yeah, I guess,” I admit, twirling my hair again. “He’s interesting. I want to know what makes him tick. If nothing else, we could get killer song inspiration out of this.”

“True, true,” Gloria purrs. “Just don’t let him distract you too much. Remember, we’ve got a Battle of the Bands to win.”

“Don’t worry, Glo.” I purr. “As Trudy might meow, Darcy is just a side quest. The band’s still my main game.”

Gloria chuckles. “Good. Because if you end up writing a love ballad about a brooding tom in the back of the classroom, I’m never letting you live it down.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Yeah, well, we’ll see about that.”

We chat for a few more minutes about the band’s plans and the assembly before Gloria has to go do some family thing again. I hang up, still smiling to myself. Gloria’s right—this Darcy thing is weird. But, like, it’s also kind of exciting. He’s not who I thought he was.

I stare out the window. Tonight’s sunset is turning the sky a deep shade of lovely pink. There’s a strange feeling in my chest—like something big is coming. For the first time in a long time, I’m not sure if I’m ready for it or not.

One thing’s for sure. Darcy Valerian is becoming more than just a classmate. Now I might find out who he really is behind that family name. I look in my mirror and consider my reflection thoughtfully. If I’m able to win over Darcy Valerian, then I’m going places.

CHAPTER NINE

By the time I stroll into third-period history the next day, things feel different. I feel like a chair that's balanced on three legs instead of four.

Darcy's already sitting in his usual spot at the back, except today, he acknowledges me. It's a quick nod, but it's something. I don't see that brooding look he usually wears at all.

I take my seat a few rows over, still processing the fact that typically standoffish Darcy Valerian gave me that look. So, maybe that chance encounter at the library did matter to him?

Ms. Calico is starting her next lecture on the Felona Enlightenment. This one's about Furrtier's social philosophies and the rise of independent thought. How exciting, right?

"Furrtier argued that the social harmony of the queendom was only possible through the precise alignment of individual desires..." Miss Calico drones on.

I was only half-listening, scribbling in my notebook. Today, I can't help sneaking glances over at Darcy.

Then, out of nowhere, he turns in his seat, catching my eye again. This time, he motions subtly with his head, like he wants me to lean over. I blink with surprise, but curiosity wins out. So, I gather my things and shuffle over to the empty desk next to his.

As soon as I sit down, Darcy leans in slightly, mewing softly. "Tiffany, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Let me guess," I ask. "You find this lecture just as boring as I do?"

He chuckles softly and shakes his head. "No, not quite. It's about the school band project."

My heart skips. "Oh? What about it?"

He hesitates, then admits, "I was asked to help out with it."

A hint of desperation in his tone makes me pause. "Who is it?"

He looks down at his desk, as if he's embarrassed. "Lily."

I suppress my urge to groan. "So, what, she wants you to help her with the project?" I ask. "Is she forming her own band?"

Darcy nods, his expression uneasy. "Right on both counts," he admits. "She came to me this morning. Said she could use someone with a *classical background* to elevate her band's sound or whatever. But... I'd rather work with you."

My stomach does a flip turn. I don't know what to say.

"You'd rather work with me?" I purr, trying to keep any hint of surprise out of my voice.

"Yeah," Darcy mews even quieter now, like he's confessing a dangerous secret. "But to be honest, your band, your friends. Well, they make me a little nervous."

I blink, then laugh out loud, earning a look from Ms. Calico. I lower my voice and smirk at Darcy. "Wait, seriously? You're intimidated by the Lunatics?" I ask.

He shrugs, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. "You've got to admit, you're all pretty intense." Darcy admits. "Gloria gives me death stares for no reason. I don't think Perri's ever smiled at me once. Trudy always looks like she's analyzing my every move, and

Danika... well, she's off in her own world half the time, so I have no idea what she's up to."

I laugh again, shaking my head. "Okay, I'll give you that. Gloria can be a bit much at first. Perri can be a bit... excitable. Trudy, well, she's just not interested in anyone, let alone you. But Danika's harmless."

He leans back in his chair, relieved that I'm not offended. "I know they mean a lot to you, but I didn't want to come off as, I don't know, arrogant?"

"Well, you did," I mew with a cough.

"That's kind of why I kept my distance," Darcy mews. "Gloria really took my declining karaoke night personally, I guess. But I have a lot going on and I must be very picky about my activities."

"Superficial gatherings, right?" I ask.

Darcy's eyes flash with shock. "Oh, you overheard that. I was talking about being asked to join the student government. I declined. That apparently didn't go over well with some furrykin. Especially my mom."

I nod slowly, understanding now why he seemed so standoffish before. "So that's why you were all broody and mysterious? You're under a lot of pressure."

"Yes, that's correct," he mews, clearing his throat.

"But why were you were scared of us?" I ask.

He laughs under his breath. "Well, I don't really know. But now, I think I made it worse by trying to stay away."

"Yeah, it didn't exactly help your rep," I tease.

His smile fades slightly. "Look, I'm not..." he begins, then takes a short pause. "I'm not comfortable working with Lily. I feel like there's more to her asking me for help than just music. But I didn't really have an excuse to say no."

I roll my eyes, leaning closer to him. "Of course there is," I mew. "You're a Valerian. Lily's not interested in your musical genius. She's interested in *you* and what you represent as a high-society type. If you're not careful, she'll make *you* her next conquest."

Darcy looks genuinely worried for a second, like he hadn't considered that. "You really think so?"

I shrug, but my expression is serious. "Trust me, I know her. Lily's competitive about everything, especially guys. She's probably only asking you to work with her to get under my fur. I mean, we've had a rivalry since, like, forever. You're just... her latest shot at a trophy."

Darcy frowns, "I don't want to be anyone's trophy. Neither do you."

"I'm glad you feel that way. So, you better tread carefully," I warn him. "Lily doesn't let go easily once she's decided what—or who—she wants."

He opens his mouth to meow something, but Ms. Calico's voice cuts through the room. "Ms. Larsen, Mr. Valerian, I hope whatever you're whispering about is more important than Furrtier. Otherwise, you can take your conversation outside."

I freeze and Darcy chuckles. He turns his attention to the lecture. But I can't pay attention. Darcy might not take Lily seriously. That worries me. Lily's not going to let him go without fur flying. Whatever, I can't get caught up in a love triangle right now.

We Lunatics in Love have a Battle to win in a few weeks. I can't be distracted!

Fortunately, before I know it, the bell rings, signaling the end of the third period. I grab my things in a hurry. Darcy makes no attempt to follow me as I streak off for lunch period. I don't even wait for the other girls to join me. I just take off, my thoughts spinning in a dozen directions.

So, halfway to the cafeteria something stops me in my tracks—a familiar laugh echoing down the hall. I glance over my shoulder and freeze. There's Lily Featherstone. Right by her side, laughing like they're old friends, is *our* Danika!

My fur bristles in fury. Before I can stop myself, I march over to them. My tail lashes behind me as I approach. Dani spots me first. Her eyes widen, and she immediately raises her paws.

"I know how this looks!" Danika blurts out before I can say anything.

I fold my arms, glaring between her and Lily, who's still smirking like a stalker who'd just discovered a hole in a perimeter fence.

"Really?" I roar. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're getting all cozy with the Class President."

Danika shakes her head vigorously, stepping closer to me. "Tiff, no, this isn't what you think. I swear."

Lily rolls her eyes and saunters off down the hall, throwing a parting wave in Danika's direction.

"See you later, Dani," she purrs.

"Okay, what is going on?" I ask Danika once Lily's out of earshot. "Are you, like, switching sides now?"

Danika sighs, quickly glancing around to make sure no one's listening. "No, Tiff. I'm not switching sides," she whispers, "I'm... gathering intel."

I blink, taken aback. "What?"

"Okay, so here's the deal," she mews. "I've been... kind of working my way into Lily's good graces. You know, chatting her up, getting her to trust me. Well, I've found out some stuff."

I frown, crossing my arms tighter. "And what exactly have you found out?"

Danika's voice drops to a near-whisper. "First off, Felworth? Totally in on Lily's little schemes. He's feeding her ideas to make her look good. Apparently, they're tight because Felworth's best friends with Lily's dad, Senator Featherstone—you know, the big-shot in Pawston?"

I blink, my anger momentarily replaced with surprise. "Wait, what? Felworth's giving her ideas?"

Danika nods. "Yeah, and it's all to make her look good. He's doing whatever he can to boost her rep and make her the golden girl of Catbridge High."

My tail flicks as I process this new information. "That... makes a lot of sense. No wonder she's always one step ahead."

Danika shrugs, a sly smile creeping across her face. "Well, now she's not, thanks to me. She's so confident in herself that she didn't mind blabbing about everything."

I narrow my eyes at her, suspicion creeping back in. "Okay, but what about Darcy?" I ask. "Apparently, now he's helping her with putting a band together."

“Yeah, well, that’s the other thing,” Danika mews with a sigh. “Lily seems to feel like Darcy’s only helping her because he doesn’t feel comfortable messing with our band’s vibes. I don’t know.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Yeah, he told me something kinda like that in class. But so, what? He thinks we’re too intimidating, but Queen of the Jungle Lily’s just fine?”

Danika laughs. “Apparently. But here’s the thing, Tiff. Gloria said not to tell anyone, but she’s really jealous that Darcy’s so into you. Don’t let her know I told you that.”

I stare at her, my mouth hanging open. “Gloria? Our Gloria?”

Danika nods, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Yup. Please don’t bring it up, though. She’d kill me.”

I stand there for a moment, my mind reeling from everything Danika’s just unloaded on me. The Felworth-Lily connection, Darcy’s reluctance to hang out with us, and Gloria’s frustration with Darcy... This is too much to process!

I shake my head. “I’ve got to say, Dani, I’m impressed. I didn’t know you had it in you to be so... under-pawed.”

Danika grins, shrugging innocently. “Hey, I’ve got my shadow side, too.”

I drop my shoulders, letting my anger melt away. “I didn’t think your skillset included deep-cover espionage, Dani,” I admit. “I’m both impressed and concerned by the lack of transparency. But it seems I seriously owe you one.”

Danika laughs, pulling me into a tight hug that I wasn’t ready for under the circumstances. “Just doing my part. But seriously, Tiff—keep an eye on Lily. She’s up to no good.”

I pull back and nod, my expression serious again. “Oh, believe me, I’m watching her. Especially now that I know what she’s up to, she’s not going to get away with anything.”

Danika smiles, the two of us now united in our little conspiracy. For the first time in a while, I feel like we’re ahead of Lily’s game.

Now heading off to lunch together to meet the other three Lunatics, I feel so much better. Lily may have Felworth in her pocket. But if I can win Darcy over, I think I may finally have the upper paw over her.

CHAPTER TEN

The next day, the ruckus in the school hallways is louder than usual, charged with excitement about the upcoming Autumn Festival. Posters line the walls, flashing images of glittering lights, musical notes, and dancing silhouettes. All anyone's talking about is this Autumn Music Festival, married with a Battle of the Bands.

Today, everyone is speculating about who's performing with who, who's going solo, but most importantly, the unexpected pairings. Who's singing with whom, who's dancing with whom—it's like the whole school's auditioning for a reality show.

As we Lunatics in Love gather by our lockers, we can't help but gossip, either.

"So," I meow, leaning against my locker and crossing my arms with a grin, "who's getting paired up with who now? I heard Tommy Silverstring is trying to lock down Sasha Softpaw for a duet. Bet she's loving that attention."

Trudy chuckles. "I never thought about that. Sasha's last name is Softpaw. Like Lisabell Softpaw from Paws and Prejudgment!"

Gloria laughs. "Of course, you'd catch on that! Oh, yeah, Tiff, what do you think of the Tabbytones? Do you think they have a shot at giving us a run for it?"

I pause. I think about Jinx, that sleek pantherette with the golden eyes and the slicked back hair. She and her bandmates, Louie the upright bass player and Dan the rhythm junkie, are jazz musicians. They're a band that's so far removed from our own sound. I don't even really consider them competition.

“Hey, I like Jinx,” I meow. “But they’re not even in our stratosphere.”

“Hey, Trudy didn’t she ask you to join their band once?” Perri asks.

“Yeah,” Trudy reveals. “But great musicians as those three Tabbytones, I don’t think I fit their mold. I have that wildcard energy that fits better in the lunatics, I think.”

“And we’re thrilled to have you, Trudy!” I meow excitedly.

Meanwhile, Danika lets out an exaggerated sigh as she watches tomcats and young queens alike trying to convince one another to pair up. She shakes her head as yet another tomcat wails after his failure to connect with a pretty girl.

“This festival is more like a matchmaking event at this point,” Dani observes. “I swear, so many of our furrykin are acting like this festival is their one shot at true love or something.”

Perri giggles. “Yeah, nothing says romance like a poorly rehearsed duet for a school event.”

Gloria interjects, trying to be serious, “Jake Purrrman’s going solo this year. That’s a statement if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised anyone’s brave enough to go it alone in front of the whole school,” I offer.

Trudy’s been quiet to this point, but she finally speaks up. “The quarterback Jake Purrrman? The one you were chasing all last year, Gloria?”

Gloria gives Trudy a playful shove, “Hey, I just like his moves on the field. I’m a sucker for athletic prowess, you know.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Or maybe he just doesn’t want to deal with band drama. Smart move, if you ask me.”

Perri clears her throat as if to meow something profound, but I know it’s going to be one of her cheeky observations. “No, queens, you know it’s because Gloria is with us and she wouldn’t dream of doing a duet with *him*.”

“Hey!” Gloria gives Perri a hard shove. Perri playfully shoves right back.

Suddenly, the energy in the hallway shifts. The usual noise of chatter lowers as Darcy Valerian cuts through the crowd. He struts on through like some feline prince with his perfect posture and quiet, brooding vibe. I expect him to walk right past us. But then, just as he’s about to pass, he turns right to me.

Perri nudges me, her eyes wide with amusement. “Look sharp, Tiff. Mr. Brood and Groom’s here to see you.”

Danika, clearly entertained, whispers, “Bet he’s got something important to say.”

I feel my heart pick up as Darcy approaches. He stops just in front of me, shifting his weight ever so slightly. I don’t think Gloria’s glaring at him helps. I cross my arms, eagerly awaiting what he has to say.

“Tiffany,” he mews, his voice lower than usual, “do you have a moment?”

I raise an eyebrow, pretending like I’m not totally thrown off by this. “Uh, sure. What’s up?”

There’s another beat of awkward silence. Darcy’s eyes betray his nerves. He clears his throat, glancing at the ground for a second before meeting my eyes again. “I was wondering if... maybe you’d want to go on that date we talked about.”

For a second, I just stare at him. The other girls share oohs and ahhs.

“Wait, really?” I ask.

Darcy nods, but I see the uncertainty in his eyes. “Yeah. I think it could be... cool. If you’re still interested.”

From behind me, I hear Danika whisper to Perri, “Did Darcy just seriously ask Tiff on a date?”

Perri snickers. “This is gold. Better than any gossip I’ve heard all week.”

Gloria, trying to be level-headed, leans in slightly between them. “I mean, it was bound to happen, right?”

Ignoring them, I focus on Darcy. “You know what? Yeah. I’d love to.” I finally answer.

Darcy visibly relaxes, his tense shoulders easing and he calmly exhales. “Great. I... I’ll see you later, then.”

He nods, then he walks off. Other furrykin notice what’s happening and start muttering to themselves about what they just saw. Meanwhile, as I watch him go, I’m still a bit dazed by how fast that all happened.

As usual, it’s Perri who’s first to break the silence. “Plot twist!” she roars dramatically, like we’re in the middle of some soap opera.

Danika grins. “Right? Didn’t see that coming. Not like that, right here in front of everybody.”

Gloria is just as amused as the others. “You sure you’re ready for this, Tiff? He’s not exactly... your type.”

I shrug, a grin still on my face. “Hey, what even is my type? Besides, I’m curious. I mean, he’s got more layers than he wants furrykin to think.”

“Just be careful,” Gloria warns. “You know Lily’s not gonna like this.”

I roll my eyes. “Lily’s always unhappy when things don’t go her way. Let her deal with it.”

The bell rings and we split up to head to our next classes. I still can’t believe this turn of events. Like, Darcy just asked me out! Yeah, the girls are teasing me about it. But I can’t help but feel excited. Still, I can’t shake the feeling that this is going to complicate things with the upcoming festival. Though, when it comes to Darcy, maybe a little complication is exactly what I need.

Still, Darcy showing up like this feels too convenient. It’s a bit suspicious, especially with the festival looming. Is this some sort of game?

Yeah, it doesn’t take much imagination to think that Lily might be pulling the strings behind Darcy’s sudden interest in me. She’s always been manipulative, and she makes no effort to hide that she doesn’t like me. The rivalry between us has been brewing since elementary school. But lately, it’s felt more like a cold war. I’m just worried Darcy is about to become just another pawn in her game.

But this doesn’t feel like a Lily setup. She’s nowhere to be seen. So, the ball of yarn is clearly in Darcy’s court now. Still, I think it’s liable to unravel quickly.

By the time I make my way to the music room for class, my suspicions are screaming in my head. Sure enough, when I push open the door, there she is—Lily Featherstone, the queen of passive-aggressiveness. She’s perched on the piano bench, legs

crossed like she owns the place. A few students linger near the back, clearly auditioning for something. None of them seem particularly thrilled to be there.

“Lily,” I meow, walking in like I’m unbothered. But I know she can sense my mood. She always could. “Didn’t know you were auditioning for the festival.”

Lily doesn’t even look up from the sheet music in front of her. “Well, Tiffany,” she drawls. “I figured it was time to put together a real band. You know, one with actual talent.”

Her words sting, but I refuse to let her see it. Instead, I lean against the piano, arms crossed. “Right. So, what’s your band going to be called? ‘Lily and the Lemmings’?”

Finally, she looks up, her eyes narrowing into that cold, calculating stare she’s perfected. “Jealous much?” she asks. “I’m sure you and your merry little band will do just fine... in second place.”

I’m so ticked off at this point that I just throw down the gauntlet. “You put Darcy up to this, didn’t you?” I ask.

Her laugh is sharp, like glass breaking. “Oh, Tiffany, darling, you give me far too much credit. Put him up to what? As if I’d have to tell Darcy what to do! He has a mind of his own, you know. And let’s face it—who wouldn’t feel a little sorry for poor Tiffany?”

“What did you tell him?” I growl.

“Oh, nothing that’s not true,” she purrs, “Just that you have no family but your aging grandparents left, clinging to your little rock band like it’s your only way out of being forced into the family business when you turn eighteen.”

The words hit like a truck. My heart sinks into my stomach. She knows exactly what buttons to press. I should’ve been ready

for this, but it still cuts deeper than I expect. Of course, I don't let her see that. I straighten up, smirking like her comment was nothing more than a weak jab.

"You're right, Lily." I meow coolly. "Darcy does have a mind of his own. Which is why it's weird that he'd suddenly want to date me—right before the biggest event of the year."

Lily's smirk fades, just a little. "Maybe he's realized you're not as bad as you seem. Or maybe he's just trying to make you feel better, get you out of your little funk. It probably doesn't hurt that you stand to inherit billions, either."

"You know it's far from that simple, Lily." I argue. "He's a Valerian. My family business is peanuts compared to what he comes from."

"Either way, does it really matter?" Lily mews. "It's not like you've got anyone else lining up for your paw, right now, do you?"

I shrug, playing it cool. But inside, the hurt is building, threatening to spill over. "You know, for someone who claims not to care, you seem pretty invested in what I do." I spit out.

Lily's eyes narrow, but she doesn't say anything. I take that as my cue to leave. Clearly, music class is going to be all about Lily today. No one is going to miss me.

As I turn to walk out, she calls after me, her voice dripping with mock concern. "Good luck, Tiffany. I'm sure your date with Darcy will be just what you need."

I don't respond. Apparently, Darcy told her that he planned to ask me out. Why am I not surprised? Of course, if he did, that means he turned her down. I have to see that as a win for me.

So, I just keep walking, letting the door swing shut behind me. The hallways are quieter now, most students already in their

fourth period class. I have study period for fifth period anyway and my study monitor never takes attendance. That means I'll use this opportunity to have an extra long free period.

I take my time heading to the library to think. But I can't get Lily's words out of my head. They echo louder with every step I take. Even suggesting that Darcy's interest in me is just some pity move makes me want to scream!

So, I pull out my phone and text Gloria. *Meet me at the café after school. Pronto.*

...

By the time Gloria slides into the booth across from me at the Purrfect Brew right by the park, I've already ordered us both iced lattes—with extra cream, of course! She knows something's up.

"Okay, spill," she meows, leaning forward with that no-nonsense look she gets when she knows I'm upset.

I sigh, swirling my straw around in my drink before finally speaking. "I think Lily's behind the whole Darcy thing."

Gloria raises an eyebrow. "Behind what, exactly? Him asking you out?"

"Yeah." I nod, my voice drifting to a lower register. "She basically implied that the only reason he asked me is because he feels sorry for me. Like... like he's doing me some kind of favor."

Gloria's expression hardens. "That's ridiculous. Darcy wouldn't..." She stops suddenly, as if swallowing her words, and she takes a long drink. "I dunno. He is a Valerian."

"But what if she's right?" I wonder, filling the sudden awkward silence, my voice cracking slightly. "What if he does feel

sorry for me? What if this whole thing is just some stupid pity date? I don't want that, Glo. I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me."

Gloria reaches across the table, placing her paw over mine. "Tiff, listen to me. Darcy asked you because he wants to. Not because of Lily, and definitely not out of pity. She's just trying to get under your fur, and guess what? It's working."

I bite my lip, staring down at my paws. They're in bad need of a manicure. "It just... it hurt. A lot. I just hate that it got to me."

"Wait, what are you talking about? What did Lily say to you today?" Gloria asks.

"She... she brought Papa and Nana and the family business into this." I mew.

Gloria squeezes my paw gently. "Look, Lily is just a spoiled brat. But you can't let this get to you."

"But it hurts, Glo. I don't want to have the responsibility of a home goods empire on my shoulders. All those people depending on me knowing what I'm doing. Hell, I don't even know what I'm doing with myself!" I feel like I'm about to have waterfalls burst out of my eyeballs.

"Look, Tiff. I know Lily says things to make you hurt." Gloria mews. "But it's okay to hurt. It's what you do with that hurt which matters. Don't let Lily win by making you doubt yourself. You're Tiffany freaking Larsen. You're strong. And if Darcy's too dumb to see that, then screw him."

I let out a weak laugh, some of the tension easing. "Thanks, Glo."

"Anytime," she mews. "Now, about that festival... let's make sure we blow Lily's little band out of the water, yeah? If Darcy is

dumb enough to join that, well, no one can save him from that, can they?”

I nod, feeling determination rekindle in my chest. “Oh, we will. Trust me.”

No matter what Lily or anyone else does, I’m not going to let them drag me down—not ever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'm sprawled across my king-size bed, staring up at the string lights casting soft shadows on the ceiling. My room is usually my sanctuary—full of blankets, cushions, and band posters—but tonight, nothing feels right. I can't stop thinking about the past few days, especially about Darcy.

I flip open my copy of *Paws and Prejudgments*, hoping reading that will distract me. I've never read it all the way through. Well, as I start reading more carefully, the tale hits me right in the gut. There's a part where Miss Lisabell Softpaw realizes she's been totally wrong about Mr. Darkwhisker, how she let her assumptions blind her. The words jump off the page and slap me in the face.

I read aloud. "'How despicably I've acted,' she cried; 'Me, who prides myself on how well I read my fellow furrykin...'"

I groan and toss the book aside. *Am I... Softpaw-ing myself?* I've been so quick to judge Darcy. Is he even someone worthy of my attention, never mind my affection?

I might be a complete fur-brain. What was I even thinking, saying yes to this random date? As yet, he hasn't even set a time yet.

Just then, my phone buzzes. Part of me hopes it's Darcy. But no. It's Trudy texting me, asking about the rehearsal tomorrow. I text back that everything's fine and it's on as usual. I lay back down, close my eyes, and suddenly, something very strange happens.

I'm hoping for a quick nap to clear my head. But instead of the usual comforting darkness, something entirely different unfolds. When I open my eyes again, everything feels off. The string lights seem dimmer. Shadows on my ceiling dance in strange, almost

hypnotic patterns. I blink a few times and sit up, rubbing my eyes. Something doesn't feel right—like I'm still actually asleep.

Groggy, I drag myself out of bed and stumble toward the mirror on my dresser. But when I look at it, I freeze. It isn't me staring back.

My heart stutters in my chest as I lean in closer. The face in the mirror is mine—but those eyes stare back at me with a coldness I don't recognize.

What really strikes me is the hair. My reflection has a mane that's long and electric blue, with neon pink and purple highlights streaking through it, falling past my shoulders in an unruly, wild style. I feel my hair, and oh Great Mother, I feel the long strands between my claws. I'm looking at my twelve-year-old self. Somehow, I'm her again. She's the girl I tried to become so many years ago.

Trixie Pawless.

I stare at her. At myself. I see the heavy eyeliner, the dark lipstick, and the chipped pink claw polish. This is exactly how I looked back in middle school, right before everything changed. I thought I could just reinvent myself. This version of me was free of suffocating expectations, free from having to be the perfect granddaughter. Trixie is everything I wasn't, and am still not, allowed to be.

"Is this who you really wanted to be?" the girl in the mirror asks. Her voice isn't quite mine. It's younger and snappier, sending shivers down my spine.

I don't answer. I can't. My mind is too tangled in memories of that night I did away with her. In fact, I find myself playing it all out again in my head.

I'd stayed out super late—well past bedtime curfew. My hair, freshly dyed electric blue, hung in messy waves around my face. I'd told Gloria earlier that day that I was going to change my name and everything else about me.

Trixie Pawless was going to be the new me. Gloria laughed it off, like it was just a phase or something. But I was dead serious.

Well, when I got home that night, my Nana's sharp voice cut my excitement to ribbons.

"That hair," she roared, her tone oozing with disapproval, "is unbecoming of a lady. We'll have it fixed tomorrow. You'll get a proper style and your natural color back. Enough of this nonsense."

So, I stormed upstairs, locking myself in their bathroom, away from the pristine vanity and the perfectly curated house they called home. I stared at my reflection, tears welling up in my eyes. This wasn't fair. None of it was fair. I didn't want to be the perfect granddaughter. I didn't want to be the version of myself they approved of. I wanted to be Trixie Pawless—bold, fearless, and untamed.

In a fit of rage, I grabbed a pair of scissors and chopped at my hair. I chopped it down into a short bob, leaving jagged edges and a mess of blue and neon tangles scattered across the counter. No one was going to tell me what to do with my hair. I took control instead.

If ruining the length of my hair wasn't enough, I bleached it, too. But I went too hard with the bleach, though. So, I helplessly watched as the color drained from it, leaving them pale and lifeless. It turned almost the same silver as my fur, not the golden tinge of blonde they were before.

The chemical smell was overwhelming, and the bathroom was a disaster, but I didn't care. I was rebelling in the only way I knew how—make a mess of everything.

When it was over, my hair was forever stained platinum blonde. It's a permanent reminder of that night. Every time I look in the mirror, I think of the girl I'd tried to be and the girl I could never fully become. Funny enough, I stand out even more now with the platinum blonde, for better or worse.

All the girls teased me for months at school. Lily, especially. My nana forced me to get a pixie cut perm and I hated it. But it only got worse. In supporting me, Gloria chopped off her beautiful long chocolate colored hair and dyed it bright red. She's kept it just about the same ever since. Yeah, my hair has grown out so much since then, and I've kept the curls ever since. But it's like Gloria found herself in my losing myself. I never have.

Yet now, this blue-haired version of me is back, staring me down, her eyes full of judgment just like Lily's.

"Trixie," I whisper, reaching out to touch the mirror, half-expecting my claws to pass through the glass. But they don't. Instead, the cool surface meets my paw. The girl in the mirror tilts her head, waiting for me to say something.

"You were never meant to be," I mew, more to myself than to her.

Trixie forces a sad, knowing smile. "Maybe. Or maybe you were just too scared to be me."

I step back, shaking my head. "No. That's not it."

But deep down, I'm not so sure. Maybe I still fear what becoming Trixie Pawless means. I'm still terrified of letting go of the safe, predictable life I've always known, even if it suffocates me.

Before I can think any more, a knock on my bedroom door pulls me from the trance.

“Tiffany, dinner’s ready,” my grandpa’s voice calls through the door, gentle but firm. “Come on, you need to eat something.”

The spell breaks as I squeeze my eyes tight. When I open them again and look back in the mirror, the girl with blue hair is gone. It was just me again—Tiffany Larsen, with my bobbing platinum-blond curls and the weight of the world on my shoulders.

“I’m not hungry,” I call back, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

Papa pauses for a moment, then meows, “You need the energy for your studies, you know.”

I sigh heavily, running my sharp claws through my curly hair. He isn’t wrong. But still, I don’t feel like eating. Not after... whatever that was.

Just as I’m about to crawl back into bed, he adds, “Come on down when you’re ready, kiddo. And hey, keep doing what you’re doing. Your friends need you now more than ever.”

I place my paw on the bedpost. Papa means well. He knows how important the band is to me. Even though he never comes out and meows his approval, there’s always that small, unspoken support. Whether it’s a wink, a nod, a pat on the shoulder, it’s always enough.

After a long pause, I stand up and head for the door. At dinner, Nana goes on about what’s happening with the business. It’s a slow quarter or something. I don’t get a chance to get a word in edgewise, so I pretend to care, then excuse myself rather quickly.

Later, after dinner, I sit at my desk, staring out the window. My thoughts are a tangled mess. That dream—or whatever it was—kept replaying in my head. Trixie Pawless had always been a

fantasy, a version of myself that was bold enough to break free. But now, it feels like she is actively haunting me.

So, for the first time in years, I'm not sure if I can keep her buried. I take one more look in the mirror and while it's my reflection, it's Trixie's eyes that stare back.

I'm falling apart. This date better happen, and it better go well!

CHAPTER TWELVE

I'm not nervous. Okay, maybe a little. But who wouldn't be? It's not every day you go on a date with Darcy Valerian—the King of Aloofness, the Prince of Posh, and the Heir to Countless Fortunes. Yet, here I am, standing outside *Purrl's Ice Cream Parlor*, waiting for that very tomcat.

Even with summer now long gone, but there's still a warm breeze. It's like a kind of lingering promise that the good weather isn't done with us yet. Hopefully Darcy doesn't stand me up! I had a bad enough night yesterday with Trixie rearing her pretty blue head.

I've never been so fidgety in my life. Darcy wants *ice cream*, of all things, for our first date. I almost didn't believe it when Darcy suggested it by text. But hey, here I am hoping this isn't a joke. I mean, even brooding types have a sweet tooth, right?

A few minutes later, I spot him. Darcy's walking toward me, paws in his pockets, looking a bit more casual than usual. He's still got that I'm-too-cool-to-care vibe. But I can tell this isn't his usual scene. It feels very forced. Whatever! I bury any doubts and try to live in the moment.

"Tiffany," the dashing tom meows with a small smile, as he approaches. "Sorry if I'm late."

I shrug, playing it cool. "You're good. It's not like I was counting the seconds or anything."

He chuckles, his shoulders easing a little. "Good. I wasn't sure if this was... you know, a normal kind of date."

"Hey, who says we have to be normal?" I grin, feeling a bit more at ease, too.

Inside the parlor, the smell of freshly baked waffle cones and sweet toppings immediately hits us. The place is alive with the usual evening crowd—students, families, and couples both young and old. It feels oddly perfect for a first date.

“So, what’s your go-to flavor?” Darcy asks as we step up to the counter.

“Chocolate and caramel swirl with extra fudge,” I order without hesitation. “Always.”

He raises an eyebrow, a small smile playing on his lips. “Solid choice.”

“And you?” I ask, curious what a Valerian orders for dessert.

He glances at the menu, then back at me. “Vanilla.”

I blink, waiting for him to say more. “That’s it? Just... vanilla?”

He shrugs, and for the first time, I see a hint of self-awareness in his grin. “What can I say? I like simplicity.”

“Simple, huh?” I tease. “I would’ve pegged you for something more complicated. Like, I don’t know, tiramisu gelato with gold flakes or something.”

Darcy laughs, and it’s warm and unguarded this time. “Nah, I save the gold flakes for special occasions.”

We grab our ice creams and find a spot by the window. The evening light filters through the glass, casting everything in this soft, golden glow. For a moment, we’re both quiet, just enjoying the moment.

I take a bite of my ice cream, and memories of summer flood in—of chasing down the ice cream truck in Fellington Heights, those long days that seemed to stretch forever.

I find myself mewling aloud, “You know, the ice cream truck is like the soundtrack of summer for me. It’s this... thing that just keeps going, long after the school bell stops ringing. I never want summer to end.”

I glance at Darcy, expecting him to give me one of his usual stoic nods. Instead, he seems genuinely interested in my idle musings. “That’s a cool way to think of it. Summer’s soundtrack,” Darcy admits.

Something clicks in my brain. I freeze for a second, thinking it’s the ice cream, but it’s real inspiration. Instantly, an entire song, almost fully formed, starts swirling around in my head. It’s not like the one Trudy’s been working on for the festival. This one’s all mine. I need to write this—something about summer, about endings that feel open ended. Like with Trixie.

“You okay?” Darcy asks, tilting his head as he notices me zone out.

I blink, snapping back to reality. “Yeah. Sorry, just... thinking.”

Darcy smirks. “Thinking about what? Or should I even ask?”

I laugh, suddenly feeling a rush of excitement. “Actually, I was thinking about writing a new song.”

He raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “A song? Right now?”

I nod, my mind already racing with lyrics and melodies. “Yeah, something about... the soundtrack of summer. Like, how it’s more than just a season. It’s a feeling, a state of mind. You know what I mean?”

Darcy leans back in his chair, studying me like he's never seen a girl inspired before. "I think I do," he replies. "Sounds like a good idea."

His approval surprises me, but in a nice way. Something about this date feels right somehow. Maybe I was wrong about Darcy. This isn't a pity date, after all.

We keep talking, both about music and about life. He never asks about my family or either of our family businesses, though. In fact, Darcy opens up more than I expect. He even tells me about the pressure he's under with his own family, how he's expected to always be perfect. But he's very guarded about how the Valerian fortune came to be. It's an open secret, though. They sort of just own a little bit of everything.

It's weird seeing him this vulnerable. But it turns out we have a lot more in common than I realized. After all, we're both rich kids with many expectations forced upon us. I just don't act like it. Apparently, he wishes he didn't have to, either. Right now, I feel a real connection. Even if it's all in my head, I need it to be right now.

As we finish our ice cream, the night creeps in around us. If anything, this date was worth it just for the *inspo*.

"Thanks for tonight," Darcy meows politely as we step outside into the cool night air. "It was... fun."

I smile up at him. "Yeah, it was."

He hesitates, then adds, "I'd like to do it again sometime."

I laugh softly. "You mean, get ice cream and talk about music? Sure. Hey, this could be our thing."

Darcy grins, and for once, it feels like there's no awkwardness between us. We're just two young Felona, figuring stuff out.

I watch Darcy stride off into the night, his silhouette fading into the soft glow of streetlights as I stand outside Purrl's. This date went far better than I expected. As the cool breeze brushes against my fur, I feel so much lighter. Maybe I really did misjudge him.

I pull out my phone, already jotting down notes for the song that's been brewing in my head.

The soundtrack of summer... never really fades away... it lingers in the air, even when the days turn gray...

This is going to be something special. I take few more quick notes on the potential lyrics and melody chord progressions. Now, I can't wait to share the news with Gloria. I quickly dial her number, picking up my pace towards home a little in the cool night air as I wait for her to pick up.

"Hey, Tiff," Gloria answers, her voice sounding slightly distracted. I can hear some clattering in the background.

"What's going on over there?" I ask, a smirk creeping onto my face.

"Crim's being a menace," Gloria meows with a huff. "He got into my makeup again, and now he's running around the house looking like a mini drag queen."

I can't help but laugh at the mental image.

"Hey, nothing wrong with that!" I chuckle. "He just wants to be as awesome as his sister."

"Well, that's debatable, Tiff. Anyway, what's up?" Gloria asks, clearly welcoming any distraction.

“Hey, I won’t keep you long. Just wanted to tell you the date with Darcy went... really well.”

There’s a pause. I can almost hear the smirk crack onto Gloria’s face. “Did it now? So, you’re telling me Mr. Darcy wasn’t just a plant by Lily?”

“Nope. In fact, I think we actually bonded,” I purr, surprising even myself with the words. “We talked about music, life, and stuff. I even got a new song idea out of it. It’s called *Soundtrack of Summer*.”

“Ooh, nice! Can’t wait to hear it,” Gloria meows. There’s a thud on the other end of the line. It’s followed by Crim’s giggles and Gloria’s exasperated sigh. “Crim! Give me back my eyeliner!”

I chuckle. “You sound busy. I’ll let you go in a sec, but there’s something else I wanted to talk about. I had this weird dream last night.”

“Yeah?” Gloria asks, her tone shifting to concern as she wrangles her little brother. “What kind of dream?”

I hesitate for a second, but then decide to just spit it out. “It was about Trixie.”

“Trixie?” Gloria’s voice goes sharp with alarm. “Whoa, now. You’re not thinking about going all Trixie on me again, are you?”

I try to laugh, but I almost choke on it. “No, no. It’s nothing like that. I’m not gonna bring back that electric blue hair or anything. I just... I saw myself like I was back in middle school, all Trixie-fied, and it got me thinking.”

Gloria pauses for a second, then responds with a more careful tone. “Thinking about what?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, staring down at the pavement. “About who I was back then. I wanted to be someone different. I thought Trixie was who I was supposed to be. But now, being... well, respectable Lil’ Miss Tiffany, I guess, sometimes it feels like I’m just doing what’s expected of me, you know?”

Gloria sighs softly. “I get it, Tiff. I really do. But you’re not stuck in some box just because you’re not Trixie anymore. I mean, sure, I loved your golden locks back before you went blue, but honestly? I prefer your platinum blonde now. The curls, too. It’s more... you.”

I smile a little, even though she can’t see it. “That’s the thing, though. Sometimes I look in the mirror, and all I see is the hair I bleached after chopping it off in a fit of rage. It’s like this permanent reminder of how I had to change to fit other people’s boxes. It doesn’t feel like me sometimes—it just feels like what I had to become.”

There’s a brief pause before Gloria lets out a short, understanding laugh. “Tiff, I get it. I really do. My dad’s a local politician, and trust me, he *hates* my style. Every time he sees me, he sighs like he’s the hapless ruler in some Shakespaw tragedy. But you know what? I do my thing anyway, because it’s who I am. It’s what makes me feel right.”

I hum in agreement. Gloria’s always been the braver one, at least when it comes to not caring what other people think. I’ve always admired that about her.

“So, what’s your point?” I ask.

“Just be you, Tiff,” Gloria mews. “Whatever that means. If you feel like Trixie sometimes, then just roll with it. If you feel like Tiffany the rest of the time, then go with that. There’s no one right way to be you, and I’ll back you up no matter what.”

Her words settle over me like a warm blanket. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Thanks, Glo."

"Anytime, Tiff," she purrs. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to rescue my eyeliner from this pint-sized drag queen before he gets glitter all over the house."

I laugh. "Good luck with that. I'll see you tomorrow for rehearsal."

"Later, girl!" Gloria hangs up, leaving me walking slowly towards home, staring up at the stars that are just beginning to poke through the night sky.

Maybe I don't have to choose between Trixie and Tiffany. I could be both—or neither. Whatever that means, I'll figure it out.

For now, though, I've got a song to write. So, at least I have something productive to do!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As I finish my study hall period for the day, I decide to walk by the music room. From inside, I hear a familiar voice straining to hit notes that even I wouldn't dream of trying to hit. I peek in and see Lily Featherstone trying to hit sharp notes that she isn't built to reach.

I almost want to go in there and help her. But I'm reveling in her struggles. After all, she's used to having such control over just about everything around her. Now she just sounds desperate. I almost feel bad—*almost* being the operative word.

I try not to linger too long. After all, I got to meet my Looneys in the courtyard. When I get there, Danika is the first one to speak up.

"So, I scoped out Lily's practice session," she meows with a quiet, but obvious pride.

"Yeah, I caught the end of it," I admit.

"Her band's a disaster," Danika explains. "I mean, her backup singers didn't even know the chorus."

Trudy, Perri, and Gloria are all laughing. But I roll my eyes. "Of course, they're a disaster," I meow freely.

Danika adds, "You know, Lily's been acting weird lately. She's way too nice to me. I mean, I almost feel bad for spying on her."

Gloria snorts as she's checking her phone. "Guess what I just heard? Lily's dad is freaking out because she's 'wasting time' on music." She makes air quotes with her fingers.

“Wait, what?” Perri blurts out. “But Lily’s been in chorus for years!”

“Yeah, she’s not half bad, actually,” Trudy adds.

“Well, according to my source,” Gloria explains. “Apparently, Senator Featherstone is trying to get Lily to focus on politics—put all her energies into her role as class president or something.”

I scoff. “Does the good Senator even know his daughter at all? We’ve been trying to both be divas since at least fourth grade.”

Danika, Perri, and Gloria all nod. Trudy just looks puzzled. “How about we just get to practice?” Trudy suggests.

“You know what?” I meow. “Yeah, Trudy, you’re right. Let’s go jam!”

...

I swear, band practice is the best part of my week. Even when things are nuts, it’s the one place where everything makes sense. It’s even better since Perri’s dad decided to fix the old side door on the outside, so we don’t have to fiddle with the cranky beast anymore!

For me, the rest of the world fades away in Perri’s garage, as I allow myself to soak in the rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. When Perri is bouncing all over the place with her never-ending optimism and Gloria’s testing beats that could wake up the entire neighborhood, it feels more like home than even my family mansion.

This Scratching Post has become our little piece of heaven—a sanctuary for our creative madness. Tonight’s no different. We’re all here running through our latest ideas, tossing

lyrics back and forth like they're the most important things in the world. In this moment, more than ever, they are.

As I strum a few chords on my guitar, the familiar notes blend with the background noise of the band's chatter. But my mind is all over the place. So, to get myself focused, I run through the lyrics to "Soundtrack of Summer" in my head. Still, my thoughts keep drifting to Darcy, wondering what he's really about.

I should be laser-focused on our set and on writing this song that's been swirling in my brain since yesterday. Yet, all I can think about is the way his smile felt different last night. Am I being too trusting? What if this is still part of some game? Even if Lily has nothing to do with his sudden interest in me, is Darcy after something else than just my affection?

I catch myself sighing, then quickly shake it off. Not now, Tiffany. Right now, the girls need me to stay present!

Perri's bouncing a rubber ball against the garage wall, and it gets louder as she hums an upbeat melody, clearly having too much energy as usual. Gloria's keeping rhythm by tapping her drumsticks against the couch, and I can see her mentally filing away beats she wants to test out later. Danika's in her zone, claws lazily moving across her keyboard as if she's crafting some ethereal tune drifting upon her from another dimension. Finally, there's Trudy, half-hidden in the corner, furiously scribbling lyrics in her notebook, a familiar frown of concentration on her face.

"Okay, so what about this line?" Trudy asks, holding up her notebook. "I thought I had the map, but then I threw it away...' Too much?"

Gloria snorts. "Depends. Are you throwing the map off a cliff or into a bonfire?"

Trudy rolls her eyes but grins. "Noted."

We've been working on a few new songs. One of Trudy's ideas is nearly done. Now, *Soundtrack of Summer* is baking inside me, just waiting for the right moment to make its debut.

But then, as I'm tuning my guitar, a sharp creak from the side door makes us all freeze. I stop mid-riff, my claws hovering over the strings as the door slowly swings open. For a second, I think it's Perri's mom with more snacks—she's always dropping off cookies or something halfway through practice. But no, it's Darcy.

He steps into the garage like he's on a mission, his usual cool, distant expression replaced with something serious. The paper in his paw flutters slightly in the breeze from outside as he noiselessly closes the door behind him. The entire room goes dead silent.

My heart's in my throat. He's not supposed to be here. What's he doing?

Gloria breaks the silence. "Uh, Tiff... did you invite him here?"

But before I can even respond, Darcy's already in front of me. He holds out the piece of paper like it's some kind of sacred offering. Everyone in the room goes dead silent. No one ever thought to lock the door before. Of course, it's not like Darcy's unwelcome.

Darcy gives me the paper along with the sincerest smile I've ever seen for him. Then, without mewing a single word, he just leaves. The door clicks shut behind him, leaving an unsettling silence in his wake.

All eyes turn to me, but I can't focus on them right now. My gaze drops to the paper in my paws, and I slowly unfold it. It suddenly feels much heavier than it should. It's like I'm sucked into some wild dream sequence that doesn't make sense.

“Uh, Tiff?” Gloria mews, her drumsticks frozen mid-air. “What in the Great Mother’s name just happened?”

My heart’s racing as I glance down at the paper, my paws trembling slightly. What did Darcy give me? A letter? A song idea? Maybe an apology for the sudden breaking and entering? Whatever it is, I need to read it *right now*.

I unfold the paper slowly. My eyes skim over the notes and lyrics scribbled in Darcy’s neat writing. My eyes widen when I realize it’s the blueprint for a song, a duet titled *Written for You*. It’s all here—the melody, the harmonies, everything is laid out on the sheet. When I realize the lyrics are labeled clearly with parts for Darcy and Tiffany, I’m floored.

Whatever Darcy may be up to, this was never meant for Lily. Tears sting at the corners of my eyes as I keep reading. The lyrics are beautiful, melancholy, and hopeful all at once. Then, at the bottom of the page, written in Darcy’s precise script, are words that unravel me completely.

P.S. You are the greatest thing to ever happen to me. Will you be mine, Tiffany?

I drop the paper and start crying—full-on, messy, dramatic sobbing. I can’t stop, even if I want to. I just let it pour out. My bandmates are all staring at me, confused and concerned. It’s like my heart just cracked wide open. So, all the feelings I’ve been bottling up are pouring out.

“Tiff, what did he give you?” Gloria asks, holding her drumsticks like dual-wielded swords. It’s as if she’s about to come to my rescue.

I try to answer, but the words catch in my throat. Trudy’s up from the couch in an instant, crossing the room in a few quick strides. Meanwhile, Perri’s bouncing energy is replaced with wide-eyed concern. She lets the bouncing ball roll into the corner.

“Tiff?” Trudy mews. “What is it?”

I manage to choke out, “He... he wrote a song. For me. A duet. And then he asked... he asked me to be his...”

Gloria’s mouth drops open. Danika gasps, and even Perri’s eyes widen with shock.

“No way,” Gloria mutters, picking up the paper I dropped. She scans it quickly, her expression shifting from disbelief to awe. “Wow, Tiff. This is... this is incredible.”

Danika nods, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “This is... the most romantic thing ever.”

Perri’s already beaming. “Tiff! He’s into you *big time!*”

I wipe my eyes as I start to laugh through the tears, feeling the love of my amazing friends pouring out for me. “I know. It’s... it’s a lot,” I stammer.

Trudy hugs me, whispering, “You deserve this, Tiff. You really do.”

The whole moment is surreal. It’s like something out of a cheesy romance flick. Darcy Valerian just wrote me a song, and then asked me to be his in the most perfect way possible.

I look around at my bandmates, *my chosen family*. They’ve been with me through so many ups and downs. Gloria’s been with me since, what, third grade? She’s been here for every awkward crush and every moment of self-doubt. Now, they’re all with me for maybe the biggest, most heart-stopping moment of my life.

“So, what’s your answer?” Gloria asks, a teasing smile on her face.

I take a deep breath, my heart racing.

“Yes. Absolutely, yes.” I mew wistfully.

“So, now what?” Trudy asks.

“Well, first,” I mew, still sniffing, “Glo, I need you over here for a minute. I need your eyes because I can’t read well right now.”

So, Gloria scans the lyrics on the page. The more she reads, the deeper her brow furrows. When she’s done, she shoots a curious glance at me.

“You want *me* to sing Darcy’s part, then?” she asks, her eyes full of some emotion I can’t describe.

I nod wordlessly, as my heart’s still pounding from the emotional whirlwind Darcy’s surprise has stirred up.

“Yeah. I mean, I can’t exactly sing a duet by myself, right?” I meow.

Gloria gives me a look that says she’s trying to figure out what parallel universe we’ve entered where she’s asking to help me with a love song written by *Darcy Valerian*. But after a moment, a grin creeps across her face.

“Well, this should be interesting,” Glo mutters. She grabs Perri’s bass guitar, still looking skeptical. Perri is about to meow something about just grabbing her bass. But instead, she just takes a seat behind Gloria’s drums and starts tapping out a little ditty.

Trudy, meanwhile, sits on the couch, clutching her saxophone a little tighter than usual. I can tell she’s disappointed. After all, today we were supposed to be working on her song. You know, the one she’s been pouring herself into for weeks. But instead of saying anything, she swallows her pride and picks up a

shaker. She gives it a little rattle while offering a small nod of approval.

Danika gives me an encouraging smile, already positioning herself at her keyboard.

“Ready to follow your lead, Tiff,” she offers with a smile.

Never one to let the mood dip too much, Perri starts tapping out a slow, steady beat on Gloria’s drums, her energy as contagious as ever.

“All right, Tiff. Let’s see what you got,” Gloria meows, leaning against her mic stand with a playful smirk.

I take a deep breath. The melody Darcy had written is soft but layered, full of subtle emotion. I strum the opening chords, the first few notes hanging in the air as I compose myself.

As I struggle to sing the lyrics, Gloria jumps in almost immediately. Her voice is warm and confident. Gloria has what some might call a raspy voice, but I think it’s beautiful. She’s really kicking ass belting out Darcy’s part. But then, halfway through the verse, she starts messing with the lyrics.

“No, no, no,” Gloria groans, stopping mid-line. “We can’t have *this* here. ‘Falling like the autumn leaves’? Come on, Darcy, we can do better than that.” She grabs a pencil and starts scribbling something on the sheet, muttering under her breath, “How about... ‘Drifting with the winds of change’? Much more poetic.”

“Are we rewriting the whole song now, Glo?” I ask, stifling a laugh as I watch her completely hijack Darcy’s lyrics. I’m both greatly amused and also immensely horrified at her chopping apart Darcy’s carefully crafted lines.

“Just the bits that sound like they came out of a greeting card,” Glo teases, though there’s genuine excitement in her voice. “You know I can’t resist making things better.”

I can’t help but grin. This is classic Gloria—always pushing for perfection, always tinkering.

Danika laughs softly, watching as Gloria scribbles more edits on the page. “Looks like we’re getting the Gloria remix,” she laughs as she plays along on the keys.

Trudy, still quiet, lifts her sax and nods to Perri’s drumbeat. She’s in, even if we’ve shifted from her song for the time being. This isn’t easy for her. But even when it’s not her moment, Trudy is here for me. She taps her way through a few practice scales, waiting for Gloria to finish open heart surgery on Darcy’s sacred text.

“Okay, okay, let’s try it again,” I suggest, adjusting my grip on the guitar neck to a higher octave. “But let’s at least keep some of Darcy’s original lines. I mean, it *is* his song.”

Gloria grins mischievously. “Fine, fine. But I make no promises about the chorus.”

We start again, this time with more intensity from our rhythm section and more confidence in the lyrical choices. Gloria sings Darcy’s part with extra flair this time, while I sing my part, my voice blending with hers.

As we keep going, the initial awkwardness of a song being dropped in our laps finally fades, replaced by pure creative energy. Just like any of our own songs, we’re building something together, note by note, and beat by beat. Gloria’s been my backup vocalist for many years now. But somehow, I feel some new connection opening between us.

Perri starts adding some snare hits, gradually picking up the pace. Danika layers in a few dreamy harmonies, bringing that ethereal quality only she can. Trudy eventually gets into it, adding a smooth, jazzy sax riff to improve the overall vibe.

Yeah, this isn't exactly what Darcy wrote. But somehow, it's becoming true Lunatics in Love material.

When we finish the song, we're all breathing hard, smiling like the bunch of looneys we are. Gloria throws down the bass.

"Okay, I admit it," she tells me. "Darcy wrote a decent song. With my help, of course."

I laugh, shaking my head. "You changed half of it!" I exclaim.

"Yeah, and it needed it," Glo retorts, playfully sticking her tongue out. "Trust me, he'll thank me later."

Perri's bouncing again, her face lit up with excitement. "That was awesome! We gotta play that at the festival!"

Danika nods, her eyes sparkling. "Definitely. This song's a hit, Tiff. It's got something special."

Trudy, who's been quiet for most of this, finally speaks up. "Yeah, it's good. Really good," Trudy meows.

I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude. This is why I love these queens. Even when things get complicated—when emotions are high and expectations seem impossible to meet—they've got my back, no matter what.

As we pack up for the night, Gloria sidles up next to me, giving me a knowing look.

“So... you gonna tell Darcy about the minor edits we made?” she asks me.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, sure. I’ll tell him you rewrote half his song,” I reply with an honest laugh.

She laughs, too, slinging her arm around my shoulders. “Hey, he should be flattered. Not everyone’s magnum opus gets the Gloria Quazar treatment.”

I smile, glancing down at the paper in my paw—the song that started it all. Maybe Darcy didn’t write a masterpiece. Yeah, Gloria changed half the lyrics. But at the moment, it feels like something big.

So, whatever happens next, I know we’re going to hit just the right notes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two weeks is all we've got to pull everything together for the Autumn Battle of the Bands. It's like the Great Mother herself is challenging us to see if we crack. But hey, us Looneys thrive under pressure.

I can tell I'm taking the pressure better than some. Lily, especially, has been running ragged lately, her hair looking awful flat. Some days she's been opting for a bun instead of her usual flowing ponytail. Maybe Darcy told her that he wrote a duet for me and not her. That's got to be killing her.

While the other girls are off doing some family-related stuff, I attend today's Student Leadership meeting. They're always open, yet I still sneak around in the back of the room. This afternoon, Lily is trying to look chipper while discussing student council elections or whatever.

But today Lily's usual sickly-sweet smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. While it's not my problem that the pressures are wearing her down, I start feeling bad for her. I slip out after a few minutes of her droning on and rush off to our rehearsal.

Even when we have various obligations after school, we Looneys still try to meet every day, late afternoon or evening. Right now, our collective energy is higher than ever. All our eyes are on the prize: winning the Battle of the Fall Festival and proving to everyone, including ourselves, that we're more than just any high school band.

But as I go to meet up with the crew, Darcy stops dead in my tracks.

"How are things coming for the festival, Tiff?" Darcy asks. He sounds so serious.

“Well, dear, I don’t know how much I can tell you,” I purr. “You know, competition and all that.”

“Oh, so you don’t trust me?” Darcy asks flatly.

“I do, it’s just...” I trail off. “You know, Lily and our thing... and your thing with her.” I cough as the words just get tangled in my mouth.

Darcy laughs. “You don’t have to worry about Lily. Trust me, Tiffany. She’s got way too much on her plate right now to care what you’re doing.”

“Well, uh, that’s good to hear,” I stammer.

“So, for real this time, how are things coming together?” Darcy insists.

Against my better judgement, I give in. “The songs are starting to come together,” I meow.

“Alright, then. What’s the plan?” Darcy asks, looking more interested now.

“So, we’re going with three tracks,” I explain, “First, we got Trudy’s *Purrfectly Prejudiced*, which has evolved into this incredible, emotionally charged anthem that feels like a perfect mashup of literary brilliance and pop-punk vibes.”

“Trudy certainly has a way with words,” Darcy observes.

“Second, we have *Soundtrack of Summer*, you know about already,” I offer. “It’s all about those moments that linger long after the season’s over. Like it’s nostalgic but full of hope, with a beat that stays with you long after the song is done. Thank Glo for that!”

Darcy chuckles. “Thanks, indeed.”

“Finally, there’s the duet you wrote,” I reveal. “It’s turned our whole set upside down. Sure, we’re giving it the Lunatics treatment, making it more fit our style.”

“You don’t say?” Darcy asks quizzically.

“I’m not sure you’re going to like all the changes Gloria made to the lyrics, though,” I admit.

If he’s mad I can’t tell. “I’m just glad that you used it at all,” he meows kindly.

“Anyway, it already ties perfectly into our theme of love and misunderstanding,” I add. “So, adding our signature sound can only take it to the next level, right?”

“I can’t see why not,” Darcy replies.

“Danika’s working her magic on the harmonies,” I continue. “Perri’s tweaking the bass line to give it more of that soulful punch. Beyond the ‘minor’ edits to the lyrics, Gloria’s making sure the drums carry just the right amount of drama to match the emotional tension.”

“Okay, cool,” he meows, now becoming impatient.

“Here’s the thing, Darcy,” I purr. “Gloria seems totally chill with the idea of just singing your part.”

Rather than get more impatient or mad, Darcy just laughs. “Is that so?” he asks.

“Well, you asked me in that note if I’d be yours,” I meow. “And I said yes. But rather than get jealous, she just got more excited about doing the song.”

Darcy’s reaction is unexpected. He just laughs. “Gloria’s a riot, isn’t she? You know, she was just feeling me out, right?”

“Well, I thought she was jealous of you and not. But since we rehearsed her alternative lyrics, it seems like her interest in you completely evaporated. She’s all about winning this festival now!”

“That’s for the best, I’m sure,” Darcy meows. “And thank you for being honest with me.”

“Seriously, though, to pull off the duet, I think we need you,” I admit.

“Really? You don’t think it’s a conflict of interest?” Darcy asks.

“I absolutely think it is,” I meow, “but the rules don’t say anything about cross collaboration with other groups. You know, we live in a results-based society, after all.”

“Don’t I know it?” Darcy chuckles. “But really, I care about you, not the competition. Any help I can give you, I will.”

“I just don’t want Lily to ruin things out of spite,” I warn.

“You worry about making the song work,” Darcy promises. “I can handle Lily and her nonsense.”

“But the song was written for you and me, after all,” I insist. “It’s your voice, your ideas, if not the actual words.”

“Well, if you feel you need to borrow me from Lily, you’ll have to ask her,” Darcy meows.

I find that an odd response. “But if you and I are a thing, why should that matter?”

“It’s just the proper thing to do,” he meows, looking at his watch. “Oh, dear mother, I’ll be late for afternoon tea.”

“I won’t keep you, Darcy,” I mew. “Boyfriend.”

Darcy nods. “Later, girlfriend,” he meows, before scurrying off.

...

So, the next day at school lunch, we’re all feeling good. Gloria, Perri, Trudy, and I are totally vibing at lunch when Danika taps me on the shoulder.

“Hey, I got to tell you something, Tiff,” Dani whispers.

“Yeah, Dani?” I ask.

“So, I’ve been keeping tabs on Lily, right,” Danika meows. “But honestly, it feels kind of cruel. I mean, she’s totally cracking under pressure. Her band’s a mess, her dad’s breathing down her neck, and, well, she’s not as bad as I thought.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re not going soft on me, are you?” I ask. Of course, I’m starting to feel bad, too. I’m not a monster, after all! But as frontwoman, I gotta keep up some prideful façade, right?

Danika shakes her head. “No, but... I don’t know. She’s not evil or anything, just... a girl.”

“Does she know about Darcy and the duet?” I ask.

Danika shakes her head. “No, but I’m not sure. She’s too flustered with her class president stuff, schoolwork, the usual. Far as she knows, Darcy is just playing his part.”

“You know, Tiff,” Trudy meows, shaking her milk carton, frustrated that it’s running out. “We really need to let Lily know that we need Darcy for that part.”

“I was hoping to avoid that,” I admit.

“Yeah, well, what’s she going to do about it?” Perri asks.

“It could be seen as a major conflict of interest,” Trudy points out.

“You know what, Tru? You’re absolutely right.” I meow resolutely. “After lunch, let’s go find Lily.”

“I’ll come with you,” Danika offers.

“That’s not really needed, Dani, I think...” I get cut off by Gloria and the others staring me down.

“Take Danika,” Gloria argues, as if it were an order from a five-star general.

“Ok, Glo. I will,” I concede.

It isn’t hard to find Lily. Her locker is on my way to my next class anyway. Sure enough, there she is. Danika is with me, despite going in the opposite direction from her next period.

Well, all the positive vibes I’ve been building all day come crashing down when I run into Lily. The second I mention using Darcy for the duet, her whole demeanor changes.

“What?” Lily hisses, her green eyes narrowing. “You’re asking *my* bandmate to sing with *you*?”

“It’s just for one song, Lily,” Dani explains, hoping their rapport will smooth this over. “Darcy wrote it for Tiffany. It wouldn’t make sense for anyone else to perform it with him.”

Lily’s tail flicks in agitation. I can almost see smoke coming out of her ears.

“So, Darcy’s just going to abandon me—abandon our band?” Lily roars. “I see how it is. After everything I’ve done for him, he goes crawling to you!”

“Lily,” I mew, trying to keep my voice calm, “it’s not like that. We’re just *asking* to borrow him for one song. He’s still your bandmate otherwise.”

But she’s not having it. Just then, Darcy walks up, hearing the commotion.

“I can’t believe you’d stab me in the back like this, Darcy,” Lily snaps, turning on him. He puts his paws in his pockets, genuinely taken aback.

“Lily, it’s not betrayal,” Darcy meows evenly. “That song... it’s personal. I need to perform it with Tiffany.”

Her eyes flash with anger. “You think you can just do this?” Lily growls. “You’re making a huge mistake. If you go through with this, I’ll make sure you regret it!”

My fur bristles at the threat in her voice. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

Lily crosses her arms, a sneer curling her lips. “I mean, I have friends in high places,” Lily threatens. “You don’t want to mess with me. Darcy knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

That’s when the real bomb drops. “Darcy, what’s she talking about?” I ask him.

Darcy wants to reply, but a lump apparently gets caught in his throat. So, he briskly walks away.

“For your information,” Lily growls, wagging her foreclaw in a threatening stance, “Darcy’s been flaking on our rehearsals. He’s

unreliable, anyway. Clearly, he's just in my band to try and impress my Daddy!"

"You know that's not true, Lily," Danika contests. "You told me otherwise!"

"Oh, and you didn't think I knew you were playing spy, Danika?" Lily asked. "Ha! You're so naïve! I told you all that because it doesn't matter anyway. We're going to win. Daddy will make sure of it! Ha!"

Lily struts off, shaking her stuff emphatically. I growl, but Dani puts her paw on my shoulder. "Come on, Tiff, let's go."

"You four go on without me," I growl. "I'm finding Darcy."

I go dashing down the hall, my heart pounding. As I round the corner, Felworth—playing hall monitor this period—steps out in front of me.

"Tiffany!" Felworth roars. "Where are you off to in such a rush? You know the rules—no running in the hallways!"

But I barely slow down. "Sorry, Felworth, no time!" I call over my shoulder, dodging around him before he can protest further. I bolt toward the library, instincts guiding me to where I know Darcy will be. The library has become his hideaway, the one place where he can escape the ridiculous school drama. If he isn't there, then I'm truly out of ideas.

I skid to a stop outside the library doors, collecting myself before quietly slipping inside. Sure enough, there's Darcy, sitting by the window. He's staring out at the courtyard, his gaze distant. His posture is tense, his normally cool demeanor fractured.

I approached cautiously, calling out, "Darcy?"

He doesn't turn, but his ears flick, acknowledging my presence. After a long pause, he sighs.

"What is it, Tiffany?" he asks, clearly deflated from that run-in with Lily.

I sit down next to him, leaning forward slightly. "What's going on? Why did you walk away like that? I mean, I know Lily's being... well, Lily, but there's something else, isn't there?"

Darcy doesn't meet my gaze right away, but after a moment he turns to face me. His expression betrays a mix of frustration and defeat.

"You know how she is, right?" Darcy groans. "Ever since I told her about *Written for You*, she's been whispering to anyone who'll listen that I'm unreliable, that I've been flaking on rehearsals. She's telling people I'm just using you for my own personal gain."

My ears flattened against my head, anger bubbling up inside my chest.

"That's not true, is it?" I ask.

"None of it is," Darcy mutters, running a paw through his hair. "But Lily doesn't care about truth. You're right. She cares about control. So now, she's threatening to use her dad's influence to tank my grade on our music class project, too. She's making sure everyone knows that I'm the bad tom here."

I felt a roar rising in my throat. "So, this is all just because she's jealous!" I growl. "She can't stand that you're spending time with me instead of sticking with her band."

Darcy's shoulders slump, and he stares back out at the courtyard. "Pretty much. And to make it worse, Felworth's doing nothing about it. He's playing favorites, letting Lily get away with whatever she wants because her dad's so... connected."

I clench my paws into fighting fists. This is vintage Lily. She's fiercely jealous and obsessed with winning, no matter who takes the fall.

"You don't deserve this, Darcy," I mew compassionately.

He lets out a flat, humorless laugh. "Fair doesn't really factor into it. Lily gets what she wants, and everyone else is just left to pick up the pieces."

"Well, not this time," I growl, my voice firm and determined. I put a paw on his arm. "When me and my Lunatics win the festival, Lily's going to be humiliated. She won't have a paw left to stand on. And you won't be her scapegoat—you'll be my hero."

Darcy's eyes soften just a bit. "I appreciate that, Tiffany. I really do. But..." He trails off, shaking his head. "I don't know if it'll be that simple. Lily doesn't take losing lightly. She'll find a way to twist everything around."

My heart aches for him. I can see how much this whole mess is weighing on him. It isn't just about the rumors or the competition. It's about being trapped by someone who can manipulate everything around him. But I'm not about to let Lily win.

"We'll deal with Lily, together," I meow. "I promise."

Darcy gives me a long, searching look. After a moment, he stands up, slipping his paws into his pockets again. "Thanks, Tiffany," he mews. "But I've got to go. I'll see you later."

I open my mouth to say more, but the bell rings, signaling the end of lunch period. Darcy walks off, leaving me alone.

My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten anything. But food is the last thing on my mind right now. I feel drained, overwhelmed, and unsure of what to do next. The stress of

everything—the competition, the drama with Lily, and now Darcy’s problems—it’s all hitting me at once.

Instead of heading to my fourth period music class, where I’d have to deal with Lily anyway, I make a beeline for the nurse’s office. I barely can new *help* before collapsing onto one of the small cots. Exhaustion finally catches up with me. The nurse looks at me with some concern. But I just wave her off, mumbling something about needing a break.

I close my eyes, thoughts swirling, unable to make sense of anything. I want so badly to keep that promise I made Darcy—that we’ll win the festival and show Lily she can’t control everything. But right now, the weight of the world is pressing down on me. I don’t think I’m strong enough to carry it. Still, I think there’s someone who can.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As I drift off into some sort of unconscious daze, the nurse's office is replaced by a dim, dreamlike haze. The world feels both blurry and sharp at the same time. Where I end up in this dream looks a lot like a place I visited as a pre-teen, out on the edge of a canyon on the other side of the continent. It's unreal, yet too surreal for comfort.

I blink rapidly, disoriented, as a familiar quiet snickering reaches my ears.

"Well, by the Goddesses, look at you!" a voice scoffs from behind me. "You're an absolute mess!"

I whirl around and freeze at what I see. There, leaning casually against a shadowy tree in this strange twilight dreamscape, is Trixie. That tree stands at the edge of a cliff, while Trixie's silhouette wavers like a mirage.

The ground beneath my feet doesn't feel solid anymore. It feels awfully shifty. Above us, a dark sky churns, dark clouds morph into familiar faces I can't quite place, mouths moving as if to warn me.

Suddenly, a spotlight floods down from nowhere onto my alter ego. Trixie looks just like my twelve-year-old self. She sports the electric blue hair streaked with neon highlights, just as I'd worn it back in middle school. There's rebellious fire in her eyes, accented by heavy cat-eye mascara.

"Hi, Trixie," I mew. "I'm so displeased to see you."

She pushes off the tree, strutting toward me with a mockingly appraising look, her arms crossed. "Look at your hair!" Trixie whines. "It's awful. So... plain. Even those cute curls don't save it!"

My paws immediately grab at my platinum locks, the ones I curl every night just so they won't hang lifelessly around my face.

"Yeah? Well, I damaged it forever just to be rid of you," I shoot back. "And honestly, it was worth it."

Trixie is unimpressed by my biting remarks. "Oh, was it now?" she asks, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're a stressed-out wreck with no idea what you're doing."

Trixie's voice slithers into my ears, low and syrupy, as a brisk, chilling wind picks up, carrying with it a scent I can't place. The air suddenly feels too thick to breathe. The skin beneath my fur tingles, sharp pinpricks of sensation racing up my arms. It's like the wind itself is trying to burrow into me.

I open my mouth to snap back at her, but I stop short. Instead, I let off a heavy sigh, the weight of my exhaustion pulling my shoulders down further. I hate that Trixie, of all furrykin, is right. The fight drains out of me. I lower my paws from my hair, admitting defeat on that front.

"You're right," I mutter, rubbing my temples. "I am a mess. But don't think for a second that I miss being you."

Trixie's smirk widens. "Oh, come on, Tiffany. Let's not lie to ourselves here." She tosses her blue-streaked hair dramatically. "You loved being me. Admit it."

I clench my jaw, realizing I'm losing ground to this reckless former version of myself. I don't know what I'm supposed to say, especially considering this is myself I'm talking to.

"Come on, Tiffany," Trixie purrs, holding out her paw. Her gaze is fixed on me, magnetic and unnerving. The biting, cold wind

howls even more strongly around us, lifting her hair in wild tendrils. Her presence is both otherworldly and far too close for comfort.

“No, you know I can’t,” I contest.

“I can give you everything you ever wanted,” she purrs. “All you have to do is trust me. Trust in yourself.”

My heart races, my instincts screaming to pull back, but her pull seems stronger than my fear. The earth below me begins to split, cracking in rhythm with my pulse.

The sky now turns into endless darkness. One by one, the stars blink out.

“You don’t need anyone but me,” Trixie whispers, her voice wrapping around my thoughts. “They don’t understand you like I do.”

For some reason, I believe what she says. The thought of letting go, of falling into her world, is tempting. It feels so much easier than the constant push and pull of the expectations everyone has for me, the band, and everything else. Never mind all the doubts people have about me and those I have for myself. Everything is simpler with Trixie—so much quieter.

There’s a long, uncomfortable silence before I finally give in and meet Trixie at her level.

“Fine, I loved being you.” I concede. “Happy?”

Trixie smirks. “Of course you did,” she snarls. “You loved being bold, fearless, unpredictable, even when you cared more than you’d ever admit.”

I swallow hard, memories of my Trixie phase flooding back. Yeah, at the time, I loved every wild, rebellious moment of it. But it would’ve cost me so much if I really went with it.

“I got the name Trixie from that bedtime story,” I remind myself aloud, changing the subject slightly. “The one about the little devilkin girl, Trixie Troubadour. She was always trying to help people, but every time she tried, she just made things worse. She was misunderstood. Kind of like me, I guess.”

Trixie gives a small, thoughtful nod. “Yeah, of course, I remember. We love that story. And ‘Pawless’? That’s how we felt, wasn’t it? Like we didn’t have a paw to stand on. So, you invented me—Trixie Pawless. I was your escape, your way of saying ‘screw the rules’ and living for yourself.”

I bite my lip, staring down at the dreamlike ground beneath my feet. “Yeah, but I couldn’t keep doing it. I couldn’t keep being you. Not with all the expectations being forced on me.”

Trixie groans, tossing her arms in the air. “Ugh! Now here we are, back to expectations! Let me ask you something, Tiffany. Do you really think you’re doing any better now? Following all those rules? Bending over backward to meet everyone’s expectations? Because from where I’m standing, you’re still trapped.”

I flinch at the bluntness of Trixie’s words. Maybe she’s right. I think back to Lily, to Darcy, to the pressure of the festival, and to how much I’m bending and breaking just to keep everything together. I haven’t escaped anything at all. What if I’ve just traded one cage for another?

“What would you do, then?” I whimper, almost defeated by my alter ego, this bold, fearless version of myself I think I’ve left behind.

Trixie grins, and she comes close to me. Around me, the world warps even more dramatically. Colors bleed into each other, bright and too vivid, then drain away, leaving everything flat and grey. Except for Trixie, of course, whose bright blue eyes and

colorful mane are more vivid than ever. Trixie's paw takes mine, but her touch burns. Yet I can't let go.

"What would I do?" she mews, sounding more like Lily than how I ever sounded. "I'd take that stage at the festival and make sure everyone knew who the real star is! I wouldn't let Lily—or anyone else—push me around. I'd be Trixie Pawless again. I'd be unapologetic. Loud! Us, for real!"

I look down, considering her words carefully. I want to pull away, to break free from her grasp. But something inside me urges me not to, like if I let her go, I'd lose everything I am and ever will be. I'd be powerless again, just Tiffany Larsen—ordinary, predictable, and never enough. As Trixie, I could be untouchable, the unstoppable force I long to be.

But what if I can't stop her once I let her in? What if I let her take too much?

Whatever the case, I need to do something. I can't keep hiding behind my family name. I need to stop playing by the rules that everyone else sets for me. I just might need to reclaim that fearlessness, even if it isn't about the blue hair or the devil-may-care vibe anymore.

"Maybe I don't have to be all of you or none of you," I tell Trixie. "I can be a little bit of both. Find a balance."

Trixie crosses her arms, tilting her head. "Or maybe you should just stop overthinking everything and do what feels right."

I chuckle softly, shaking my head. "That's probably right."

Trixie shrugs, her smirk softening into a real smile. "Of course I'm right. I'm you."

Before I can respond, the dreamscape fades as the real world bleeds back into view. The nurse's office comes into focus around me. I blink again, slowly coming around.

But even as the dream fades, Trixie's words stay with me. I can't play it safe anymore. Maybe it's time to take that stage as Trixie, or whoever I need to be in the moment. I've got to stop letting everyone else's expectations hold me back.

As I sit up the nurse is looking at me with this bizarre, judgmental look. Then I look to my left and Assistant Principal Felworth is standing there, tapping his foot, looking at me like I've just murdered someone.

"Miss Larsen. Principal's office. Now!" Felworth declares.

When I open my mouth, it's not my voice that bursts out. It's the dark, sarcastic lilting voice of Trixie.

"The hell I am, Felworth!" I shout.

Felworth shudders so hard with shock that his glasses fall off his face. As he scrambles to find them, I lean over and grab them. I give them back to him, because I actually feel pity for him at the moment.

Before he can scold me further, I growl, "Yeah, sure, let's go hear what Principal Latchkey has to say."

Felworth is silent as we leave the nurse's office. But as we make our short walk down the hall to the principal's office, I can tell he wants to tear me a new one.

I suddenly realize that I'm not Tiffany right now. Trixie is back. She's about to say what I couldn't. How bad can it possibly go, right?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Assistant Principal Felworth's grip on my arm loosens as we approach Principal Latchkey's office, but his glare stays sharp. He stays silent as we walk. His self-righteous indignation vibrates off him like static, probably rehearsing his little speech in his head. You know, the one about how I'd cut class and needed to be punished. But he didn't even know who he was dealing with right now.

Tiffany isn't walking into that office. Trixie Pawless is, and she doesn't play nice.

The principal's office smells of polished wood and expensive leather, but the walls are too bare for my taste. The sleek furniture looks uncomfortable, not even functional, like it's all just for show. Latchkey sits behind her oversized desk, lips pursed, barely glancing up from her stack of paperwork.

Felworth lets my arm go and steps forward, his back turned to me. Before addressing Latchkey, he stares out into the misty early afternoon like a tomcat with secrets too heavy to carry. Even in the soft lighting, I can see the slight tremor in his paws as he decides what he's going to say.

"Hm, what brings you here today, Miss Larsen?" Latchkey asks, quite surprised to see me.

Trixie's voice snickers in the back of my mind. *Now's the time, darling.* Trixie suggests. *Show Felworth he's out of his league in dealing with us!*

Latchkey looks almost amused, as though Felworth dragging a student in for cutting class was just a nice change of pace in her day.

“Principal Latchkey,” Felworth booms, his voice laced with smug satisfaction, “I’ve caught Miss Larsen skipping her fourth period. I demand that she face the proper disciplinary actions.”

Latchkey slowly sets her pen down and leans back in her chair. She looks at him, then at me—clearly seeing the defiant Trixie lurking just beneath my fur—then back to him. Then, to my surprise, a small smile creeps across her face.

“I’m sure that Miss Larsen has a good reason for this,” she meows, her tone even and calm. Latchkey’s reaction isn’t what Felworth was expecting.

He sputters for a moment, thrown off balance by Latchkey’s stoic response. “A good reason? She’s... she’s blatantly disregarded school rules! This kind of behavior...”

“That’s enough,” Latchkey cuts him off, her calm authority slicing through his resolve like a blade. She turns to me, her eyes sharp, but not unkind. “Well, Miss Larsen. What’s going on?”

That question is more of a formality than anything. She knows something is off with me. This is Trixie’s opening. I take a deep breath, then let it out slowly, letting Trixie come fully to the surface.

“Oh, you want to know what’s going on?” Trixie roars sharply, completely forgoing my usual polite tone. “I’ll tell you what’s going on. This guy...” I jerk my thumb at Felworth, “He’s been sneaking around our homeroom and listening in on our conversations. Like, what could we possibly have to offer him? Then, all of a sudden, this whole idea for a Love and Tragedy themed Battle of the Bands? That was all my idea!”

Well, it was Trudy’s mostly, of course. But I’m letting Trixie tell it the way she wants.

Felworth's fur stands on end, and he starts sputtering like an old motorcar, "That's—that's ridiculous! How dare you make such an accusation!"

"Oh, yeah, and he's been doing favors for Lily Featherstone," Trixie explains. "Stealing bits of my genius in trying to worm his way into her dad's good graces. You know, Senator Featherstone. Isn't that right, Felworth?"

"What in the blazes of the nine hells are you getting at, Larsen?" Felworth bristles.

"Oh, save it," Trixie cuts him off, glaring at him. "I've noticed how you're always lurking around and eavesdropping when me and my band are just chatting. Then, what a coincidence! Lily suddenly knows every single detail. You're pathetic. Using a high school student to get in with a politician? How much lower can you get?"

His mouth opens and closes like a fish gasping for air, his composure slipping. But I'm not done. Trixie has more to say.

"And as for Lily," Trixie continues, turning back to Principal Latchkey, now clearly intrigued by this turn of events, "she's been manipulating Darcy Valerian this whole time. She's been dragging his name through the mud, spreading rumors that he's unreliable, that he's just using me to get ahead."

"Don't talk about your class president like that!" Felworth roars.

Trixie just ignores him and continues, "All because she's jealous that he'd rather sing a duet with me. It's pathetic! Darcy doesn't belong to her! He's his own tomcat, and he should be allowed to be more than just his family name or whatever Lily expects of him."

I can feel adrenaline rushing through me as the words spill out. This is Trixie, unfiltered and unapologetic, laying it all bare. It feels so good!

For a moment, the room goes silent. I half-expect Latchkey to scold me. At the very least, I expect her to tell me that I've crossed a line. But instead, she steepled her paws in front of her, looking thoughtful.

"Thank you, Miss Larsen," she finally meows, her voice measured. "You've certainly given me some things to consider."

"Look, Miss Larsen!" Felworth roars, sticking his foreclaw in my face. "You have no idea what's at stake!" His eyes are bloodshot now.

"Uh, huh. You got Featherstone in your pocket." Trixie chortles. Latchkey smiles with intrigue.

"Featherstone..." Felworth groans. "He's not who you think he is. I've worked with him for years. Decades! And now you think you can come in here and unravel everything I've built with your little power play?" His voice wavers, adjusting his cufflinks as though this simple action could calm his fraying nerves.

I cross my arms, leaning against the doorframe, my lips curling into a Trixie-like half-smile. "Power play?" Trixie laughs. "Funny, coming from you. What's your angle, Felworth? Is Senator Featherstone your golden ticket back to relevance?"

"What are you on about?" Felworth roars.

"I know you used to be Principal at one of the Pawston high schools," Trixie reveals. "But, something happened, and now you're here."

Felworth scoffs, shaking his head. "You think this is about relevance? It's about survival." He takes another step toward me,

his paws gesturing wildly now, and his composure slipping. "You don't understand the lengths I've gone to... the alliances I've had to make just to stay in Featherstone's good graces. But it's not just him. His network... it runs deep. You don't say no to Featherstone, Tiffany. You don't cross him without—" He falters, his eyes darting toward Latchkey, then back to me.

"Without what?" Trixie eggs him on. "Come on, Felworth, spill it. What did you have to do to stay on his radar? How many friends did you throw under the bus? How many students' academics and futures are you sacrificing for your ill-gotten gains?"

Felworth's expression darkens, eyes narrowing as though he's weighing his options. "It's not that simple," he mutters. "Featherstone... he has leverage... He knows things, about me, about my family, things I can't let see the light of day."

Latchkey shifts in her chair, visibly uncomfortable, but says nothing. Felworth's paws twitch. I know I'm getting closer to the truth, thanks to the extra push from Trixie.

Let him squirm. I'm thinking. He's already losing control. Just give him a little more of a push.

I step close, my heels clicking on the hardwood floor. Felworth's eyes darted to Latchkey, but there was no help coming from that corner.

"You're in over your head, Felworth," Trixie meows, sounding much more like Lily than me. "You think Featherstone will keep you around once you've outlived your usefulness? You're a pawn to him, a means to an end. But me?" Cold fire ignites in my eyes. "I'm the one with options."

Felworth's face twitched, his façade of control finally slipping. "You think you're untouchable, don't you?" he grumbles. "That you can just... manipulate everyone around you, like you're some kind of puppet master."

I raise an eyebrow, but my Trixie-fueled smile doesn't falter.

"Manipulate?" Trixie guffaws. "No, Felworth. That's Lily's game. Not mine. I just see the game for what it is. And you... well, you're not as good at it as you think."

Now, Felworth backs up, the fear betrayed by his eyes. "Latchkey! Put her in her place!" he insists.

Latchkey shakes her head. "Continue, Miss Larsen," she meows coolly.

"So, you sold yourself out," I growl at Felworth, my voice uncharacteristically cold now, the game turning in my favor. "All for a seat at Featherstone's table."

Felworth's panic is now on full display. His paws tremble as he shoves them into his pockets, pacing the length of the room. "You don't understand," he roars. "Featherstone... he doesn't just control the political landscape, he owns people. He has dossiers, records, enough to bring anyone down if they cross him. You think you're immune to that just because you're a kid? You think you're safe just because you're clever?"

I tilt my head, watching him with the same detached curiosity as I would a clever mouse. "That's the difference between us, Felworth," Trixie meows. "I don't need to be safe. I need to be smarter. And right now, you're not looking very smart."

Felworth's face pales, the weight of his mistakes crashing down on him. "I do what I have to do," he mutters, more to himself than to me or Latchkey. "Featherstone... he promised me everything... promised I'd be untouchable if I just..." His voice trails off, the confession caught in his throat.

"If you just what?" Trixie presses. "Sell out your students? Ruin a few lives?"

Felworth's eyes dart toward Latchkey, then back to me. "It's not that simple. You don't understand the pressure I'm under, the stakes here!"

"Oh, I do," Trixie mews confidently. I cough, and suddenly, Trixie just decides to go silent. It doesn't matter though. I still feel pretty good.

Felworth, on the other paw, looks like he's about to explode. "Principal Latchkey, you can't seriously be thinking... You know Featherstone..."

"That's enough, Mr. Felworth," Latchkey interrupts, her tone now cold and decisive, "I will deal with this situation from here. Miss Larsen, you are dismissed. Please go to your next class."

I blink, momentarily stunned. "Wait... you're not mad?" I ask, my voice returning to normal. I'm back in control again.

Latchkey's smile is almost conspiratorial. "Not at all," she meows. "In fact, I think you've carried yourself remarkably well. Now go on. Study hall, isn't it?"

I nod, still in shock, but Trixie's influence makes me smirk. "Yeah, study hall," I confirm.

"Then you'd better get going," Latchkey meows authoritatively, her eyes flicking to Felworth. "I'll take care of things here."

I turn to leave, my heart still racing as I reach for the door. Just as I step out, I hear Principal Latchkey's voice turn sharp and commanding. "Mr. Felworth, sit down. We need to have a conversation about your... extracurricular activities."

I can't help myself, but press an ear against the door for a moment, just long enough to hear Latchkey absolutely tearing into

Felworth. The satisfaction is sweet, and I grin just as Trixie would. For once, justice has been swift.

Finally walking away, satisfied at the results of that confrontation, I push Trixie back down where she belongs. I don't need her right now, not for what comes next. I hurry down the hall, heading toward my study period. For the first time in a while, I'm calm.

Today, Trixie got her moment in the limelight, and I've made my point. I call that a win-win, for sure. But now, I need to focus a whole lot more on planning for the festival.

Just outside my study hall, I hear footsteps rushing up behind me. Before I can even turn around, Darcy barrels into me, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug. I'm so startled, I just freeze for a second. How do I process the fact that *Darcy Valerian* is hugging me in the middle of the school hallway?

"What's this for?" I ask, my voice breathless as I look up at him.

"Thanks," he mews, pulling back from his hug just enough to meet my eyes. His expression is grateful in a way that makes my heart skip a beat. "For standing up for me."

I smile, feeling warmth spread through me. "I've got your back, Darcy. Always."

He releases me, his posture relaxing a bit as he takes a breath.

"I told Principal Latchkey everything," Darcy reveals. "About Lily, Felworth, all of it. So, then my mom came in... Latchkey sent her to Felworth, and she absolutely *let him have it*." He smirks a little. "That's probably why Felworth came after you. I hope you're okay."

I blink, piecing it all together. “So, that’s why Latchkey wasn’t mad at me!” I realize aloud.

Darcy nods, his eyes still holding a grateful warmth. “Yeah, you were just... taking my side. But I had to promise to keep all my commitments to Lily’s band.” He pauses for a beat, then adds, “Still, Latchkey said for your bravery that I owe it to you. So I’ll be able to perform *Written for You* with you. I’m not backing down on that.”

I feel my heart fluttering. It’s Trixie, no doubt, deep down doing celebratory cartwheels. But I’m solidly Tiffany right now, grounded in this special moment with Darcy.

“We’re going to kill it at the festival,” I meow. “Lily’s not going to know what hit her.”

Darcy flashes that rare smile that I’m starting to see more often. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

As he walks away, I suddenly find myself no longer concerned with Lily’s schemes, the pressure of the festival, or any expectations. Now, I feel ready.

After just a few minutes of study hall, the dismissal bell rings. When I go to meet the other Lunatics, who else do I run into but Lily? Of course, she strides right up to me.

“Hope your band’s ready,” Lily comments snidely with her patented fake smile. “Wouldn’t want to embarrass yourself.”

I just smirk. I feel like Trixie wants to come back out to play for a moment. But I won’t let her. Not yet anyway.

“Oh, we’re ready. Are you?” I ask.

Lily’s smile falters for a second before she stalks off. Looks like I struck a nerve.

“Well, I got somewhere to be,” she growls. “Good luck, Tiffany.”

I shake my head. Trixie wants to shout something mean at her, but I keep her bottled up for the time being.

But as I head to the courtyard to meet my four favorite furrykin, I hear a deafening roar. Felworth bursts down the hallway in a fit of rage and right out the front door. I don’t think we’ll be seeing him again any time soon.

Still, now that Felworth is clearly being dealt with, the real battle is coming—the Autumn Music Festival, the Battle of the Bands—and I’m going into it with the people who matter most at my side.

Let’s see who comes out on top.

Oh, and let’s hope Trixie doesn’t make things more interesting than they need to be.

~ *Tiffany Larsen* ~

ACT THREE

From the Diary of Danika Doby

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The familiar clash of cymbals, bass growls, and guitar riffs vibrate through the Scratching Post, as we all get into the groove to unleash some melodic madness. This is our last shot to get *Purrfectly Prejudiced* right before the festival. No one says so, but we all know it. The feeling of anticipation is quite intense.

This song is our opening rock anthem, inspired by the classic novel, *Paws and Prejudgments*, one of Trudy's favorites. Of course, we've given it a Lunatics twist.

Usually, the fall festival is just an excuse for the school powers-that-be to show off their weird obsessions with corn mazes and pumpkin carving. I mean, that's fun, but it's never been more than that. This year, though, is different. They combined the festival with the Battle of the Bands, usually a spring event. Suddenly, we're all playing for something bigger. Trust me, the stakes have never felt higher.

Every year the grand prize for winning the Battle of the Bands is a shot to play at the Moonlight Melodies in the sprawling metropolis of Pawston. It's like a golden ticket to future stardom. Anyone who plays there gets noticed, meaning a prime chance to be something more than just another 'high school band' that fades into memory after graduation. That's what we're really after, being taken seriously. While yeah, there's another chance in the Spring, something tells me that prize is going to be some scholarship or something else lame.

Trudy stands up front, clutching her sax like it's an appendage. She's been obsessing over *her song* for months. For us, it's just another song. But for Trudy, it's much more. I can't quite put my paw on it, but I can tell by how she's pacing that she's not settled yet.

She looks over at Tiffany, who's busy twisting her guitar pegs like she's trying to distract herself from the building tension. I pretend to adjust my keyboard settings, just to give myself something to do. But really, I'm watching Trudy and trying to read where her head is right now. Everyone sees me as the dreamer, and I am, yes. But I also am all about vibe check, and right now, things are a bit unsteady for our blue-braided darling.

"So," Trudy starts, with that slight tremble in her voice that she always gets before she says something important. "I've been thinking..."

I raise an eyebrow. For Trudy, thinking is like breathing for the rest of us. What else is new?

"The lyrics," she meows with frustration, pulling out a crumpled paper with unreadable. "I think we need to change a couple of lines in the second verse. I'm feeling it's too focused on the wrong kind of pride. I've been too stuck on the idea of being misunderstood, but I think I'm the one who's misunderstanding."

She gives me the paper, and I glance over the words. I can't even read them.

"I like it," I lie, but only because Trudy needs to hear it. "It's got depth now. Feels like you're letting people in."

Perri, ever the cheerful one, pipes up from the corner, adjusting her bass strap. "Yeah, you've really come a long way this year, huh?"

Trudy exhales, and I watch a little of that tension slip away from her. It's subtle, but I notice.

"Let's try it," I manage, leaning forward on my keyboard. My hair falls into my face, but I don't brush it away. It's a shield, sometimes. It's easier to observe from behind the curtain.

Gloria taps her drumsticks to count us in. “One, two, three, four...”

The guitar comes in fast and gritty. Tiffany likes to play aggressively, but never lets it go overboard. Perri’s bass locks into place right behind her, keeping everything steady. Then Gloria, who’s always in the pocket, pulls the rest of us along for if and when we start to lose ourselves.

Now comes Trudy’s uneasy vocal. It’s hard to hear her at first. To my surprise, she starts out in spoken word for the first two verses.

*In the mirror, I see, what I couldn’t before,
Pride built up my walls, but now I’m ready for more.
Misunderstanding you, meant misunderstanding me,
Now I see through the fog, now I can finally breathe.*

*I thought I knew it all, but I was blind to see,
That pride was my downfall, my own worst enemy.
But now the walls are gone, I’m ready to be free,
To understand the truth, and finally see me.*

She takes a deep breath and starts singing in a beautiful, haunting voice that I don’t think any of us ever heard before. It’s so unexpected that we just go with her energy. In turn, we probably jam a little too hard, almost drowning her out.

*I thought I was so wise,
But turns out, I’m just a queen with nine lies.
Scratched my way out of this maze,
Now I’m done with my stubborn phase!*

*Purrfectly prejudiced, I wore it with pride,
But now I’ve shed that fur—no longer wanna hide.
I once was so fierce, claws out all the time,
But now I see clearer, I’ve ditched the grime!*

*Purrfectly prejudiced, but now I confess,
I was my own problem—ain't that a mess?*

It's like we're all breathing in sync now, moving as one. Even Tiffany, who always tries to steal the spotlight, is holding back a bit, giving Trudy space to breathe. So, when Trudy hits that sax solo, it's like she's tearing open a part of herself we haven't seen before. She then continues to sing, with the third verse.

*Thought I had the world, but it slipped through my paws,
Now I'm rewriting life, and redefining my cause.
No more petty fights, no more toxic grind,
Found the courage to be kind and leave the past behind.*

Then comes the bridge.

*So, here's the truth—time to spill the tea,
The only claws I need are in my strategy.
I'll pounce on love, not fear or spite,
Guess this feline's learned how to make things right.*

This song hits us harder than we expected. It's not about the volume or the tempo, which we certainly add on top of it in spades. It's the honesty of Trudy's words that really hits home. Trudy's always been the quiet thinker of our quintet. Now, she's finally saying what's been sitting underneath the surface.

Seriously, Trudy's song has unlocked a new level for all of us. Gloria's locked in like she's found the best groove of her life, for real. Tiffany's shredding through her solo but not overpowering it—letting it breathe. Perri, always our rock, is steady and unshakable with the bass line we perfected over the past couple weeks.

We're all feeding off each other now. This song is alive. It's moving through all of us, pulling us along with it.

Gloria leans back, wipes the sweat from her brow. “That felt... different.”

“Yeah,” I meow, though it’s more of an understatement. “It did.”

Trudy’s glowing. I can see it in the way she’s standing, the way her shoulders have dropped. She’s proud, but not in the way she used to be.

“Okay, I’m satisfied,” Trudy meows humbly. “You all are great.”

Perri claps, her eyes shining. “This song’s gonna blow them away. It’s our opener, for sure.”

I nod. “For sure,” I echo my childhood bestie.

Trudy ducks her head, trying to hide how much the praise means to her, but I can see it.

“Yeah,” Trudy mews. “I just want it to *matter*.”

My eyes meet hers, and I nod again. “It will. We’re ready,” I meow happily, but this time it’s not just hollow encouragement. For the first time, it feels true.

“Well, we still have two more songs to rehearse,” Gloria meows matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, but like, we got this!” Tiffany said, beaming with an exuberance I hadn’t seen in a while. Of course, she would. The next song we’re doing is hers, *Soundtrack of Summer*.

“But for now, I’m hungry!” Perri shouted. “Salmon Sammy’s anyone?”

We all vote yes and head off for some much-deserved grub.

Salmon Sammy's is exactly the kind of place you go when you need comfort food that's way too greasy and tastes just right. It's a Pawston area staple—a fast-casual diner with neon signs flickering in the windows and the smell of fried fish lingering in the air. We pile into our usual booth by the window, where we've spent countless hours decompressing after rehearsals.

Perri immediately kicks her feet up on the empty chair next to her, relaxed and confident. "Ah, this is exactly what we needed," Perri purrs. "Grease, carbs, and fish—three essential food groups."

The server is a young tom who looks about ready to bolt from his shift. But when he sees us girls, he rushes over to take our orders. He's particularly taken with Perri, which is unfortunate, as all she cares about is food and tunes.

Anyway, I've learned you can learn a lot about someone based purely on what they decide to stuff their face with after a long day of rehearsal.

Perri goes for the most extravagant option: the Triple Trouble Combo. It's literally everything on the menu crammed into one tray: a tower of fried fish, shrimp, calamari, and sweet potato fries, plus a large strawberry milkshake for good measure. That's Perri in a nutshell, over the top and always ready to try everything at once with no regrets. She always tells me that life's too short not to go for the biggest option on the menu. Honestly, she may have a point.

Gloria has an immediately response. "I'll have the Classic Tuna Melt, add extra cheese," she meows.

Glo just wants something that'll get the job done and taste good doing it. After all, as our rhythm section, she's been holding us together in rehearsals, making sure the rhythm is tight, making sure we stay grounded.

Tiffany's lounging across from me with her guitar case still by her side, flipping her hair dramatically before ordering. "I'll take the Salmon Supreme Burger, extra sauce, with a side of calamari rings."

Of course, Tiff goes for the most theatrical option. She can't just have a regular fish sandwich—no, it must be the 'supreme' version. She always must be the showstopper. Tiff's got an image to maintain, even in something as simple as a meal choice. It's part of her charm, though. There's no halfway with her—whether it's her music, her style, or her food, it's all or nothing. That's why this competition is so important to her. She doesn't just want to win; she needs to win. Being 'just another band' isn't an option for her, not when she's supposed to be the heir to the Larsen's Home Goods empire.

Trudy quietly glances at the menu without much interest. "Just the fish and chips. No drink." Before the server can ask why she wants no beverage she puts her Nalgene bottle of crystal-clear seltzer water on the table. For some reason, Salmon Sammy's doesn't seem to care about outside drinks.

Trudy's order seems almost too light, but that's who she is. She's not here for the food. Her mind is already somewhere else, probably mulling over the lyrics for our set or some jazzy blue note stuff she wants to work in somehow. Trudy's always been more in her head than the rest of us, and it's why her songs hit so hard. But even she's feeling the grind these days. I can see the way she's been clutching that notebook lately, like it's the only thing keeping her grounded.

Finally, it's my turn. I glance at the server, who's barely hanging on. Of course, I'm the one who considers the menu as some kind of puzzle I'm still yet to solve, even if it hasn't changed in years. The waiter taps his hind claws impatiently as I hums her way through the options. Eventually, I give him my best indifferent smirk as I order. "I'll take the Sardine Caesar Salad—hold the crackers."

I play it cool, as always. I'm not here to indulge like Perri or make a statement like Tiff. I just want something light that'll keep me going. Plus, it lets me maintain an air of mystery. No one knows what to expect from me, not even my own bandmates sometimes. That's how I like it. Also, I like crackers, but theirs are always much too stale.

We dig in once the food arrives, letting the grease and carbs work their magic. For a little while, it feels like everything's back to normal—just us, a bunch of friends, eating too much fried food and laughing about nothing.

But, the festival is days away. There's no way we can stop talking about it for long!

"You know, queens," Gloria offers. "We're not just fighting for a trophy. We're fighting for a shot at something bigger. After all, Moonlight Melodies is our chance to be taken seriously, not just by Catbridge or even Pawston, but by the whole world!"

"Yeah, if we win the Battle of the Bands, we get a spot in Moonlight Melodies next May!" Tiffany squeals. "You know, like so many of the bands that play there end up going on to tour the world, and maybe even get record deals!"

"So, we're not just doing this for fun anymore?" Trudy asks.

"Oh, Trudy, you doll!" Perri purrs. "It's not like when we were kids playing in garages and basements. It's time to be recognized for what we can do!"

"So, what if we lose?" I ask. "The second and third prizes I've heard are scholarship prizes, but they're just consolation."

Perri shrugs, "I mean, the money put towards college would be nice, but really, coming out on top is what matters. If we don't win, we're literally just going to be another local band playing

school dances and birthday parties. That's not what any of us want, right!"

We all shake our heads.

"I don't mean to be a downer or anything, girls," I offer. "But you know, I've always been content sitting in the background, to let you all shine. I've always been totally fine with lifting the vibe."

"And we love you for that, darling!" Tiffany purrs. "Well, lately, I've started to want more," I admit. "I'm not just the keyboard player anymore. I'm part of something bigger, and I want people to see that. I want them to see me."

Tiffany takes a sip of her soda, looking thoughtful for once. "We're going to win this thing, Dani. We've got great songs, unbeatable chemistry, and sassy stage presence. No one else is bringing our own special combo!"

Perri nods, wiping some fish sauce off her chin. "Yeah, Lily and her band can't touch us. They've got the polish, sure, but we've got heart."

Trudy's quiet, but I can see her wheels turning. She's always thinking three steps ahead, already planning how she's going to tweak the set to make it even better.

Gloria looks up from her sandwich, her eyes a little more serious than usual. "We can't take anything for granted. There are other bands out there—not just Lily's. Some of them are really good. We've worked our tails off, but we gotta stay sharp."

I nod, agreeing with Gloria's cautious optimism. "Yeah, we can't get cocky," I meow. "But if we stick together, play like we've been playing in rehearsal? Like Tiff said, we've got this."

“The good news now,” Tiffany meows with a smile, “Felworth is long gone. He won’t be giving Lily or anyone else all our ideas anymore.”

“True that!” Gloria roars. “To Principal Latchkey for being really cool and kicking that bum out of our school!”

“Here! Here!” Perri cheers. We all toast to our hopeful success.

For a long time, I’ve always been good at playing things cool, at acting like none of this really matters. But now, I crave victory as much as any of them. I just haven’t let myself admit it until now. Tiffany at least has her family company to fall back on after school’s over. The rest of us, though? Well, we’d have to go to college and maybe get real jobs. I’m not looking forward to that possibility!

As we finish up and head out, we discuss our rehearsal plans before the festival. Our camaraderie is stronger than ever, but the stakes are also higher than ever. Winning for us isn’t just about glory and fame---it’s about the survival of our hopes and dreams as a band. While we’ll have a couple more shots in our high school career at winning this, I feel like this is going to be the one that makes or breaks our future aspirations.

I also know that Lily is keen as ever on showing us up. Fortunately, I have a meeting with her tomorrow afternoon at some upscale cafe. Apparently, she wants to brag about how awesome her set is going to be, and I can’t wait for her to spill!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next afternoon, Tiffany has some errands to run. The other girls had some school stuff to deal with, too. So, I planned this out perfectly. Using homework as a cover, I head down to Lily's favorite haunt downtown to meet up with her. I'm especially curious to see how she's holding up without Felworth at her back.

The *Claws Café* is everything you'd expect from a place Lily Featherstone frequents. It's trendy, overpriced, and filled with the kind of patrons who look like they care more about being seen than actually enjoying their food. It's also the one place she can preen in front of an audience without her dad breathing down her neck.

I sit across from Lily, pretending to sip my weak excuse for a latte while she lounges back, basking in the artificial warmth of the café's fluorescent lights.

The café is too pretentious for my taste, and I'm pretty sure my latte is just flavored milk with a hint of burnt coffee. Lily Featherstone sits across from me, draped in her usual too-much-confidence for the occasion. Her usual high ponytail is split into two pigtails today, though her signature curtain bangs, the ones I stole from her, are looking particularly curly and spiffy this evening.

She flips her curtain bangs, looking entirely too pleased with herself. "Hey, gorgeous, you're looking amazing," Lily purrs.

"Um, thanks?" I politely respond, taking a sip of the latte. It doesn't taste all that good, but for what I spent on it, I'm drinking it regardless.

"So, *Danika*, how's the band coming along? Getting ready for the big day?" Her voice is too sweet, like she's just waiting for me to give her an opening to brag. I do like the way she says my name, though, as if it's something exotic.

I keep my smile tight, playing the part she expects me to act. “We’re almost ready. We’ve been working lots of new stuff.”

“Oh?” Lily leans in slightly. “I’d love to hear it sometime.”

I nod, knowing full well she has zero interest in what we’re doing unless it gives her an advantage.

Lily twirls a lock of curly hair around her foreclaw, her eyes glinting with mischief. “Well, I’m sure you’ll love our set,” she meows. “Darcy and I have been working so hard on it. It’s really going to show off my vocals. You know how important it is to make an impression.”

“What’s on the setlist, if you don’t mind sharing?” I prod.

Lily grins, clearly thinking she’s already won this whole festival before it even starts. “Oh, nothing too complicated. We’re opening with a pop-rock ballad—*Lustrous*, it’s called. It’s about, you know, feeling like you’re glowing under the spotlight. Totally relatable, right?”

I nod with a polite smile. Every conversation with Lily somehow managed to bend back to how the world so obviously revolves around her.

I mean, come on, *Lustrous*? The title alone makes me cringe. That’s the kind of shallow, empty song that’s built to be a crowd-pleaser without saying much of anything. But I just nod.

“And then we’ll move into *Glitterbomb*, which is just... well, you’ll see. It’s got that high-energy vibe, perfect for getting people on their feet.” She pauses, waiting for me to react, but I just nod along, taking mental notes. I feel like her set just keeps getting worse by the moment.

“And the final song?” I finally ask, as Lily seems to drift off into a daydream.

“Well, it’s one I wrote with Darcy, obviously. It’s called *Starlit*, and it’s a slow, romantic ballad. You know, just to really hit the emotional high point.”

“Uh, huh, that’s neat,” I meow, taking a big gulp of the latte and pretending to enjoy it.

“You know, Darcy and I talked about doing a duet. But it seems he had other plans...” Those last words out of Lily’s mouth sounded awfully bitter. Still, I wanted to blame the latte. It was bitter, too. Hers couldn’t be much better.

“Well, you know Darcy,” I mew. “That calm, collected rich tomcat doesn’t know how to have fun.”

Really, what I wanted to say is that Darcy is just letting her have a bit of fun. But I must reframe things to keep up my part in my little intel scheme. It doesn’t matter that my cover was already blown a few days ago. Lily seems to like me anyway, for what reason I’m not sure.

I said just the right thing, apparently. “Wow, Danika. You have quite the insight, don’t you?” Lily asks.

I just shrug and finish my remaining latte in one gulp. I apparently make my displeasure with the beverage obvious because Lily chuckles.

“Yeah, you think I come here for the lattes, either?” Lily asks. “They taste so bad, but you know, they got so much good stuff in them. So, I’ll take looking and feeling great over my drinks tasting great.”

“So, that’s it. They’re healthy?” I ask.

“Yeah, that’s probably why they taste so bad.” Lily offers.

Suddenly, I see a different side of Lily. She always has a way of getting everyone to fall in line, trying to use her self-absorption like some sort of black hole to pull people in. I can’t deny that her confidence has a certain gravity to it. But her being candid like this really catches me off guard.

Still, I’m only here for one thing: information. We Lunatics have the music down, sure. But the real competition is in the way you play the game. Lily’s a master manipulator, after all. Now I’m finally getting a peek behind the curtain. Maybe I can crack her code.

“So, you think this set will win the festival?” I ask, feigning a casual tone while trying not to gag from my ‘healthy’ drink going down too fast.

“Oh, you know it, darling!” Lily waves her freshly manicured paw, “It’s going to bring the house down—*pure emotion*, really. I’m thinking it’ll be the perfect blend of pop energy and rockin’ derring-do!”

Of course, it will. Also, I love that word: derring-do. It means “brave and adventurous” which is something that Lily certainly isn’t—she’s all about playing it safe while professing she’s doing the exact opposite. If anyone has derring-do, it’s me, trying to squeeze myself into her good graces just to better understand what makes her tick. The more I get to know her, the more I realize she’s more like a ticking time bomb than any kind of fearless diva.

Yeah, she talks a big game, but I get the sense she’s not quite herself today. Suddenly, Lily keeps glancing at the door, like she’s expecting Darcy to swoop in and save her from whatever hole she’s digging for herself.

“Wow,” I mew, layering on the false awe. “You always have such a clear vision for your performances. It’s impressive how you get everyone to rally behind it.”

She beams. I know exactly what she wants to hear, and it costs me nothing to let her have it. Meanwhile, I’m thinking about how we Lunatics are going to shred her paper-thin setlist to pieces.

But I’m careful. Lily doesn’t know it, but I’m learning a lot from her. I do admire her polished style and the way she commands attention without even trying. I’m not interested in becoming Lily, but there’s no harm in understanding her tricks. Besides, while she’s busy having her entourage write love letters to her ego, we’re crafting something real.

“I’m really excited to see how it turns out,” I meow, meaning every word. I am excited, indeed, to watch us steamroll her cotton candy set at the festival.

Lily leans back, pretending to be satisfied with herself. She acts like she’s already won, and maybe that’s the edge we need. But still, I feel that confidence is only fur-deep. Of course, then there’s the voters. No matter how good we are, no matter how much better our songs are, it’s the handpicked voters of the school board that decide the fate of all school competitions. Even those stuck-up furrykin love a good show, even if it’s all smoke and mirrors.

Lily keeps twisting her hair, trying to keep it perfect when it’s already flawless. I’ve always known Lily was insecure, using her dad’s political clout to her advantage. But today, she’s trying much too hard, even for her.

“Should be an interesting competition,” I add, standing up to leave. I don’t want to linger too long. Lily’s a shark, and if you stay in the water with her for too long, she starts looking for blood.

“Interesting? Darling, it’s going to be a spectacle,” Lily grins, her eyes flashing with just a hint of something more sinister. “I’m just glad you’ll get to witness it.”

I give her an approving nod, pretending to be impressed. “Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

Lily beams, clearly pleased with herself. “Oh, absolutely. Darcy’s been such a big help, too. He’s really committed to making this performance perfect.”

I stifle a laugh. “Yeah, I’m sure Darcy’s thrilled about it.”

Lily doesn’t pick up on the sarcasm. She just shrugs. “He’s got range. Besides, it’s not like he has anything better to do.”

Ouch. I feel a small twinge of sympathy for Darcy, not that I’d ever admit it out loud. He’s talented, sure, but I doubt he even wants to be part of this spectacle. Darcy is still trying to play both sides. Is it because he feels trapped? Or is he up to something, too?

“Well,” I meow, standing up from the table and grabbing my bag, “good luck. I’m sure it’ll be... something.”

Lily gives me one last smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You too, Danika. It’ll be a fun competition.”

I smile, wave, and walk away. I’m thinking it’s best I let Lily bask in her illusions. But as I walk away, I hear a tumbler glass smash onto the floor. Everyone turns in Lily’s direction.

Lily is choking! Apparently, she downed that “health drink” too quickly just like I did. But for her, it went down wrong! I immediately act as one of my adoptive parents would, instinctively giving her the Heimlich maneuver. She spews out a couple mouthfuls of her gross latte, spits, then turns and glares at me.

“What was that for?” Lily roars, fury in her eyes.

“You were... I had to do something!” I stammer. The crowd gives me a weak round of applause, absolutely stunned at Lily’s reaction.

“Ugh! Get away from me!” Lily screams, streaking out the door.

A tomcat walks over to me and clears his throat. “You gonna clean that up, girl?” he asks me. The nerve! I show him my middle foreclaw and scurry out after Lily.

But by now, Lily is long gone—nowhere to be seen. But I do see a familiar car parked across the street. I see former Assistant Principal Felworth give me a nod in the driver’s seat before he speeds off.

I knew something was up. I think to myself. *Lily is being followed by that creep?*

I take a deep breath as the tomcat from the Café comes chasing after me. He demands I come in and clean up Lily’s mess. I just flick my tail with contempt and briskly walk away. I just saved the girl’s life. I think her dad will pick up the tab.

But I’m shaken by this encounter. Evacuating the area with great haste, I pull out my phone, scrolling through my contacts. I try calling Tiffany. She should hear about this first. But when I hit her number, it goes straight to voicemail.

“Hey, it’s Tiff,” her familiar melodic voice cries out, “Can’t talk right now—business stuff. You know the drill. Leave a message.”

Business stuff? I frown, a little annoyed. Tiffany’s been wrapped up in some mysterious family business here and there

over the years. But right now is the worst possible time. We've got a band to think about. I hang up without leaving a message.

With no luck reaching Tiffany, I text Trudy. She sends a quick emoji that suggests she's busy helping her mom with some function at a restaurant. I hit up Gloria, and she replies with her usual 'hey ya' I tell her I just saved Lily from choking on a health drink, she immediately calls me. But it's Perri's voice I hear first.

"Oh, by the Goddess, are you OK, Dani boo?" Perri asks.

"Yeah, Dani, you cool?" Gloria asks. I wish I knew how she did these little conference things. "I only got a minute, but I gotta get the scoop."

"I just can't believe you actually went to Claws Café, girl!" Perri meows. "What were you thinking?"

"I need to know what we're up against with Lily," I mew. "And I know now. Felworth is stalking her."

"So, she saw him outside and choked on her drink?" Gloria asked.

"Yeah, I guess that's what happened. She must have better eyesight than me," I meow.

"Well, what did she do to thank you?" Perri asked.

"She told me to get away and took off," I sighed.

"Figures. Classic Lily." Gloria scoffs.

"Look, Dani, I know you want to get the info on Lily and her little fan club," Perri meows. "But you know we Lunatics have something that really rocks. That's what's going to set us apart."

“Yeah, that’s what I tell myself, too,” I admit. “But you never know. Those voters, especially those self-proclaimed *educators*, they can be as shallow as any lyrics Lily gets furrykin to write for her.”

“That bad, huh?” Gloria asked. I hear a crash come from her end. “Oh dang-nab-it, I gotta go. Perri, you’ll fill me in, right?”

“Sure thing, Glo!” Perri meows. There’s another crash before Gloria’s end disconnects with a click. “Man, I wonder what her dad’s on about now,” she adds.

I didn’t want to brooch that subject with a ten-foot pole right now. “Anyway, Pear, I now know what we’re up against.”

“That Felworth is still in on this, somehow,” Perri groans.

“I’m not so sure. But Lily’s definitely still under his watch, for whatever reason,” I mew.

“I gotta say Lily’s ambition is admirable,” Perri meows. “In her own way, she’s got all the same talent as Tiffany. But she’s cocky in all the wrong ways. That’s going to be her downfall.”

“Yeah,” I mew. “She’s so focused on the presentation, on looking perfect, that she’s forgotten what matters. Theatrics are great and all. But music is about connection. The best music, you know, is about making people feel something, not just in the moment, but for life!”

“I couldn’t have possibly said that better myself,” Perri admits with a grumble.

“As for Lily’s set,” I continue. “It’s exactly what I expected. Fluffy pop-rock filler that’s more about showcasing Lily’s vocals than saying something meaningful. There’s no depth, no risk. She’s playing it too safe, in fact.”

“Lemme guess,” Perri mews. “Her songs are predictable, dazzling but surface-level. Sure, the crowd might clap, but they won’t remember any of the words the next day.”

“Much as I can’t stand Lily sometimes,” I reply. “I can’t help but feel bad for her. She’s so wrapped up in her own image that she doesn’t see how hollow it all is. It’s like she’s literally choking on the expectations she’s been given by her dad. And everyone else at school for that matter!”

Perri hums in agreement. “I kinda feel for Lily, honestly,” she admits. “But in all our furrykin hearts, we want more than just a pretty voice matched with a pretty face. We want heart. Well, that’s something we Lunatics have in spades, and we wear it all on our sleeves.”

“Exactly, Pear,” I mew with a smile. “Couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“You’re funny,” Perri snickers. “Oh hey, I’d love to join you for a bite in a bit, but we’re all going out as a family. You know the drill.”

I sigh. I need my bestie more than ever, and now even she has to go. “OK, darling. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Have a great din-din!”

“Cya, gorgeous!” Perri roars, then hangs up.

...

Needing to put some grub in my tummy, I decide to head down to Salmon Sammy’s for a proper meal. The coffee and tension at Claws Café left a bad taste in my mouth, and I need something to clear my head.

When I walk into the diner, I’m surprised to see Darcy sitting at one of the back tables, hunched over a notebook with a

half-eaten sandwich in front of him. He looks distant, like his mind is a million clicks away.

I hesitate for a moment, but curiosity gets the best of me. I grab a table nearby, casually ordering a ready-to-go Sea Bass Caesar salad at the counter. It's a bit more filling than the latte disaster from earlier—and sit down to eat while keeping an eye on Darcy.

It's not long before he notices me. His eyes narrow slightly, and he straightens up, clearly not in the mood for small talk. Still, I can't resist.

“Hey, Darcy,” I call over, keeping my tone light. “Mind if I join you?”

He glances at me, his expression unreadable, but after a moment, he nods. “Sure.”

I slide into the seat across from him, setting down my plate. There's an awkward silence for a moment before I speak up.

“You working on something for Lily's set?” I ask, gesturing to his notebook. I take a bite, right into a stale cracker. Yeah, the ready-to-go ones are always like that. Whoops.

Darcy sighs, running a paw through his fur. “Yeah. Trying to make it... presentable.”

Something in his tone leads me to believe he's not entirely invested in Lily's set. “You don't sound too thrilled about it,” I suggest.

He shrugs, not meeting my eyes. “It's fine. It's just a gig.”

I lean forward, lowering my voice. “Darcy, no gig is just a gig. You got to treat them all like your last, you know?”

Darcy stiffens slightly but doesn't respond. He just keeps staring at the table, his claws tapping against the edge of his notebook.

"Come on, you gotta realize Lily doesn't have your best interests in mind, right?" I ask.

Again, he seems to ignore me.

"She's using you," I continue, trying to keep my tone neutral. "This whole thing? It's about her. You're just along for the ride."

For a moment, I think he's going to shut me down, but then he lets out a soft laugh. "Yeah. I figured that out a while ago," Darcy admits.

His admission surprises me, but I don't let it show. "Then why stick around?"

Darcy finally looks up, meeting my gaze for the first time. "Because sometimes it's easier to go with the flow. Politics, music... it's all the same. Everyone's just playing their part."

I frown. "Politics? I thought you were more into business."

He tilts his head slightly, his expression unreadable again. "Business, politics—they overlap more than you'd think. It's all about power and influence."

There's something in the way he says it that makes me suspicious. What exactly is he after?

Before I can ask more, Darcy stands up, grabbing his notebook and his barely touched sandwich. "I should get going. Good luck at the festival, Danika."

"Aren't you doing that thing with Tiffany?" I ask.

“Oh, yeah, right. I’ll see you, then,” he meows hurriedly. Then, just like that, he’s gone, leaving me alone at the table, more concerned than ever.

Darcy’s always seemed like a background character in all this—just another player in Tiffany and Lily’s game of divas. But I really think Darcy’s playing his own game, too.

So, I finish my meal, my appetite for food satisfied but my hunger for answers grows stronger. This whole situation feels off. If I’m going to protect Tiffany—and the Lunatics—I need to figure out what Darcy’s up to, as well.

Then my phone lights up with a text message. It’s Tiffany. *What’s up?* It reads.

I decide to just play it cool. *Just checking in. Looking forward to jamming to soundtrack of summer tomorrow. Got some ideas. It can wait.*

Tiffany’s response was her typical ‘*K Cool.*’ I want to say more, but right now, I decide to just let things ride. That’s my thing after all, go with the vibe.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We're shifting gears today at the Scratching Post. Trudy's song, *Purrfectly Prejudiced* is feeling great. So now, today we're rehearsing Tiffany's *Soundtrack of Summer*.

There's something fierce and magnetic about Tiffany when she's in her element. Still, there's a duality to her that I can't quite figure out. On stage, she's a storm, commanding attention, but then there's this other, vulnerable side of her she doesn't like to show. Sometimes it feels like she's caught between those two versions of herself. Today, under pressure, I'm not sure which one will show up.

Tiffany adjusts her guitar strap, her movements a little too precise, like she's trying to steady herself. She stretches her left foreclaw more than usual, as if she's cramping up before we're even starting. I see the nervous energy bubbling beneath the surface, and I wonder if the others notice it too.

Trudy does, of course. She tilts her head, watching Tiffany with those eyes that see everything. "You alright, Tiff?"

Tiffany nods, but it's tight, controlled. "Yeah, just... it's my first solo composition. The first one I ever wrote without you darlings. Feels different."

I'm surprised to hear her admit that's she scared of writing something solo. Sure, I'm used to slipping into the background. But Tiffany? She's always been the one in the spotlight, whether she wants it or not. Still, this is not just another song for her. It's personal. That's messing with her.

Gloria, ever the optimist, twirls her drumsticks and grins. "You'll be fine. We're all dying to hear it."

Perri chimes in, her voice soft but steady. “Think of it like telling your story. You’ve got this.”

I nod along, my claws brushing the keys absentmindedly, waiting for the moment Tiffany starts to play. She catches my eye for a second, and I know she’s ready.

“So... this song’s called *Soundtrack of Summer*.” Her voice wavers just a little, but she pushes through.

We all nod, getting ready to follow her lead. I know this song is more than a little ditty about summer, though. After all, I’ve read the lyrics. But musically, it’s the kind of song that makes you want to roll down your windows and let the breeze carry your worries away. But there’s also an unusual weight to it, like even Tiffany’s trying to hold onto something that’s slipping through her fingers.

She strums the first chords, soft and melodic, and the room falls silent. There’s something in the way her claws move across the guitar, the way the notes she plays seem to shimmer in the air. It’s like she’s trying to hold onto something, even as it fades.

*The ice cream truck is like the soundtrack of summer,
One that I never wanted to end.
But seasons change, and so do we,
Fading into ghosts in the wind.*

Her voice starts soft, almost hesitant, but it grows with the melody, building slowly. Gloria’s drums pick up the rhythm, Perri’s bass adding that grounding depth we need, while my claws find their way across the keys.

Going into the pre-chorus and chorus, Tiffany’s energy level spikes.

*And though the summer slipped away,
I swear I’ll find it again someday.*

*We're just kids with hearts on fire,
Playing tunes in a band of liars.*

*I can still hear the laughter,
Feel the sand between my toes.
But time's a thief that steals too fast,
And summer always goes.*

The second verse hits, and her voice grows stronger. She's the Tiffany we all know, yet, there's an undercurrent of something else, hiding just beneath the words on her tongue.

*We chased the sun like it owed us a ride,
With melting cones and rollercoaster highs.
Sneaking through backyards, garden-hopping at night,
Trying to outshine every fading light.*

We're all in it now, the music flowing between us like water. Gloria's drums shift in tempo, giving the song a heartbeat, while Perri locks in with that steady low pulse. I try to add something dreamy with the keys.

Tiffany's voice rises with the music. It's beautiful, but it's also bittersweet, singing about something she knows none of us can keep. The bridge comes, and Gloria shifts the beat again, to something more urgent. It's like we're racing against the clock, trying to hold onto those last moments of summer before they slip away, regardless of the date on the calendar.

*Don't let it fade, don't let it die,
Hold onto the sun before it says goodbye.
This is the soundtrack of who we are,
A song that lives on in our hearts.*

The final chorus swells, and we all come together, the music rising and falling like a tidal wave. When the last note fades into the silence, the room is still, like we're all holding our breath. I can feel what Tiffany was feeling when she first came up with this tune. This

song isn't just about summer but about *her*, about everything she's afraid of losing if this festival doesn't go our way.

Perri is the first to break the silence, her voice soft but full of awe. "Tiff... that was beautiful."

Gloria grins, leaning back in her seat. "I told you it'd be amazing. You're, like, the queen of nostalgia."

I nod, my voice quiet but sure. "It's got this... wistful feel. Like you're reaching for something just out of your grasp, but you're okay with that because you know it's still there, somehow."

Tiffany's eyes are bright, and I can see she's trying not to let the emotion spill over. "You really think so?"

Trudy, who's been watching in silence, finally speaks up. "Tiff, you've written something special. It's honest, and it's real. And it's something everyone's going to feel."

Tiffany exhales, and I see that dualism between the performer and young queen settles into something more balanced—at least for now. She smiles, and it's the first time I think she really believes in this new track.

Just as the last note fades and we start packing up for the night, Tiffany's phone buzzes. She pulls it out, glances at the screen, and her expression changes fast. Her eyes go wide for a split second before she stashes the phone back in her pocket.

"Sorry, girls, gotta scram. Catch up tomorrow!" Tiffany rushes out the door before anyone can say a word. Even her voice is hurried.

I exchange a look with Gloria. Tiffany's not the type to just bail like that, especially not when we're this close to the festival.

“What’s that about?” I ask, hoping Gloria, who always seems to be on Tiffany’s wavelength, has an answer.

Gloria hesitates, twirling a drumstick between her fingers. That’s never a good sign.

“I’m not sure,” she mews slowly, like she’s choosing her next words carefully. “But... there’s something different about Tiff lately. I think I know what it is, but... I’m hoping it’s nothing.”

Perri, perched on her amp and tuning her bass out of habit, looks up, intrigued. “What do you mean ‘different’? She’s been a little intense, but that’s just Tiff being Tiff, right?”

Trudy doesn’t seem to be paying attention—her mind’s still on the music, no doubt. She’s scribbling something in her notebook, probably tweaking some little thing about *Purrfectly Prejudiced* for the millionth time.

Gloria finally stops spinning her drumstick and sighs. “You guys remember that... alter ego thing Tiffany used to have? The one I told you all about a while back?”

Perri blinks. “Alter ego?”

“Yeah, it was years ago,” Gloria mews. “Before any of us besides me were in the picture. She had this whole other persona she’d slip into when things got tough. I don’t know, it’s complicated. But she hasn’t talked about it in forever.”

I feel a strange chill creeping up my spine. I’ve seen sides of Tiffany I didn’t expect, that very dualism I just thought about. But this is new.

“What does this persona have to do with now?” I ask.

“Well, ever since this whole rivalry with Lily started heating up, I think it’s... resurfaced,” Gloria muses. “Like, she’s trying so

hard to outdo Lily that she's slipping back into that old version of herself. And it's not just the usual drama. I heard she really let Felworth and Latchkey have it the other day—about how Lily's been walking all over everyone, especially Darcy.”

Perri looks genuinely surprised now, her usual optimism faltering. “Wait, she confronted Felworth *and* Latchkey? About Lily?”

Gloria nods. “Yep. Apparently, it was pretty intense. I wasn't there, but I heard it was bad.”

I'm not sure how to take this. Tiffany's always been a force of nature, but the idea of her slipping into some darker, more volatile version of herself? That's unsettling. “So... what are you saying? We should be worried?”

Gloria shrugs, though her eyes betray more concern than she's letting on. “I don't know. Maybe it's nothing. But if Tiff flips out, you know, because of everything with Lily and Darcy, just... be ready, okay? She's not as in control as she usually is.”

I nod slowly, taking it all in. Be ready. How could I ever be ready for something like that? “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Perri tries to brush it off, smiling that sunny smile of hers. “Tiff's just being dramatic, like always. She'll snap out of it. I mean, come on! She's not going to lose it over Lily Featherstone, of all people.”

But just as she finishes, Trudy snaps her notebook shut and looks up, her eyes sharp and focused for the first time since Tiffany left. “It's not nothing,” she mews. “If Gloria's worried, then it's something. We need to watch her.”

Perri looks taken aback, but Gloria nods in agreement. “Yeah... that's what I'm afraid of,” Glo admits.

I don't know what to say. I've never seen Tiffany lose it. But if there's one thing I know, it's that Trudy's instincts are almost always right. If she's concerned, that means we all should be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As I walk through the door of my house, a cozy two-story cottage on the edge of the neighborhood, everything feels a little too quiet. It always does after band practice. The noise and the chaotic energy stay with you, still humming in the back of your mind like an echo, long after the music stops.

I shrug off my jacket and kick off my shoes. My ears perk up as I hear Auntie Donna humming one of our tunes from the kitchen. The scent of roasted fish and herbs hits me almost instantly, making my stomach growl.

“Danika, is that you?” Donna’s voice rings out from the kitchen, warm and familiar.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I call back, heading toward the dining room.

Uncle Jethro is already seated at the table, the grizzled detective looking as gruff and tired as ever, his deep red fur a little duller than it used to be. He doesn’t say much when I walk in, just grunting and nodding in my direction, but I’m used to that. It’s not that he’s distant. He’s just Jethro, grumpy as usual.

Meanwhile, Donna’s already bustling over to me, a big smile on her face as she sets down a plate of food. “Just in time for dinner! How was practice?”

I take my seat and try to settle into the comforting routine. “It was good. We’re really tightening up the set for the festival.”

Donna claps her paws together. “I can’t wait to see you all up there on stage! I’m telling all the girls at the station about it.” From her demeanor at home, you’d never suspect she was a warrant officer at the local precinct by day.

Jethro snorts into his cup of tea. “You’re gonna make her blush.”

I smile despite myself, but my mind is elsewhere, circling back to the tension with Tiffany and Lily. I hesitate for a moment before bringing it up.

“Actually, there’s been... some drama,” I admit. “Tiffany and Lily are really going at it over this tom, Darcy.”

Donna raises an eyebrow as she sits down across from me. “Oh? Teenage rivalry, huh?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s more than that, though,” I add. “Lily’s really pushing Tiffany’s buttons, and it’s getting kind of intense.”

Donna waves it off, smiling gently. “Oh, sweetie, I’m sure it’s nothing serious. Lily’s just being an angst-y teenager. They’re all like that at some point. I bet deep down, she’s not as bad as she seems.”

Jethro, who’s been silently chewing his food, suddenly looks up, his ears twitching in that way they do when he’s about to say something serious. “I don’t like you hanging around that Featherstone girl. Bad influence.”

I blink, a little caught off guard. “What?”

He nods, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Yeah. There’s something off about her. That attitude. The way she struts around like she owns the place. She’s trouble, mark my words. A senator’s kid. The crabapple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I try to laugh it off, but it doesn’t land. “She’s just, uh, competitive, Uncle Jethro. It’s not a big deal.”

Jethro isn’t convinced. “You don’t need to be mixed up in all that. Focus on the music. Leave the drama to her.”

There's an awkward silence for a moment. I know he's just being protective. He always is, but it stings a little. Maybe he doesn't fully trust me to deal with it, or he doesn't think I can.

I finish my dinner quickly, making excuses to leave the table. "I'm... going to head upstairs. Do homework and stuff. Thanks for dinner."

Donna smiles warmly at me as I stand. "Of course, sweetheart. Let us know if you need anything."

Jethro grunts again but gives me a nod. "Keep your head on straight, Danika."

Once I'm in my room, I flop down on the bed and pull out my phone, typing a quick message to Perri.

I'm kind of worried about Tiff. I type. Gloria said she's been... off lately. What do you think?"

It doesn't take long for Perri to respond. She's always quick with optimism.

Tiff's just being dramatic, as usual. Don't stress! She'll be fine! She finishes the text with a smiling face with smiling eyes emoji.

I stare at the screen for a moment before letting out a sigh. Typical Perri—always finding the silver lining. I wish I could believe her, but something in my gut tells me that this time, it's different.

I toss my phone on the bed and close my eyes, trying to shut out the noise in my head, but it doesn't work. My thoughts keep drifting back to Tiffany—her intense focus during practice, the way she left so abruptly today. Then there's Lily—always pulling strings, stirring things up.

Eventually, I drift off into a restless sleep.

The dream starts like many others. I'm at the Scratching Post, the band around me, the sound of guitars and drums filling the space. But then I realize, Tiffany's not there.

I'm standing in the center, holding a microphone, and all eyes are on me. It's not for a solo. I'm the lead. The entire band is waiting for me to start the song. My heart races. The music starts, and I open my mouth to sing, but no sound comes out. Suddenly, I realize I'm not in the Scratching Post anymore, but at a gig. Not just any gig, the Moonlight Melodies Extravaganza!

Panic sets in, and I can feel the eyes of the audience—thousands of them. They're watching, waiting, and my hesitation is leaving them wanting. I try again to sing something, but nothing. The pressure builds, and I can't breathe. I look around for Tiffany, for someone to take over, but it's just me. The spotlight feels like it's burning me alive.

I wake up in a cold spell, my heart pounding in my chest, panting hard. It takes me a moment to realize where I am—to remember that it was just a dream. Yes, it's only a dream. But the feeling of being thrust into a role I'm not ready for still lingers.

The next morning, the sky is perfectly violet-blue, and everything seems a little lighter. It's the weekend, and for the first time in what feels like ages, I'm not rushing off to practice or a gig. Instead, I'm heading over to Perri's place for breakfast—well, more like brunch.

By the time I get there, Perri's already in the middle of a conversation with her parents, Art and Simone, as they sit around the kitchen table. The smell of toast and eggs fills the air, and I can hear the faint clatter of dishes from the sink. It's comforting, the kind of scene you see on those cheesy family sitcoms before someone drops the bombshell that the episode will be about.

I plop down next to Perri, grabbing a slice of toast. “Morning.”

“Morning, beautiful,” Perri meows, slapping me on the back. It catches me off guard. I don’t feel particularly put together today. I just have my hair in a messy bun and I’m wearing nothing fancy. But I’m glad Perri knows how to set the mood.

Perri’s brother Conrad rolls his eyes. “Oh great, another *girl* at the table!” he jests. I know he’s just playing. Simone gives him a death stare, and his eyes roll almost back into his skull.

Art grins at me from across the table, his honey-blond fur catching the light. “Morning, Danika. How’s life in the rock star lane?”

I laugh. “Complicated, as usual.”

“That’s just life for everyone these days,” Simone mews warmly.

“Where’s Lisha?” I ask, wondering where Perri’s younger sibling is.

“Oh, she ate already,” Art explained. “You know how Lisha is. She’s on her own schedule.”

We have a casual, easy conversation, but as I sit there, taking in the warmth of normalcy, I can’t help but blurt out the question that’s been nagging at me.

“What’s it like, you know, having a normal Felona family?” I ask.

Perri freezes, her eyes going wide. “What?”

Art bursts out laughing, almost spilling his valerian root brew. Perri's mom, calm and collected, smiles softly at me. "I don't think we're as normal as you think, sweetie."

"But you are!" I insist, gesturing around the room. "I mean, look at you guys. You have a nice house, and have breakfast together, and you all look like you enjoy spending time with each other."

Perri's mom leans forward, resting her chin on the back of her paw. "Danika, families are families. Trust me, ours isn't any different than yours. We've got our ups and downs, just like everyone else. You know Perri's little brother and sister keep us on our toes, especially with Lisha's special needs."

Art chuckles. "Yeah, and don't forget that time Perri nearly set the living room on fire trying to build her own guitar amp."

Perri flushes, giving him an exaggerated eye roll. "Dad, that was years ago."

"Still happened," he meows with a grin.

I laugh along with them, but a part of me can't help but feel a little envious. Sure, they've got their struggles—just as every family does—but they've got something solid. It's something normal that I've never known.

The conversation drifts to more mundane stuff, but then my phone vibrates. I glance at the screen and see it's a message from Gloria.

At Tiffany's. The text reads. Gonna hang here for a while. Big blowup at home, again.

I sigh, send a quick concerned emoji, and look up at Perri, who's raising an eyebrow. "What's up?"

“Gloria,” I mew, putting the phone down. “Apparently, there was another fight at home.”

Art’s expression changes instantly, his usually jovial demeanor darkening. “Her dad lose it again?”

I nod. “Yeah. Glo didn’t say much, but... you know.”

Art leans back in his chair, his arms crossed. “Gloria’s old man—bad temper, that one. We go way back, and let’s just say... not in a good way.”

I don’t press for more details, but I can tell by the way he says it that there’s a lot of history there. Gloria’s always been good at keeping her home life separate from everything else, but when things get bad, it’s hard to hide. I’m glad she has Tiffany to go to, at least.

“Families, huh?” I mutter, half to myself.

Art looks over at me, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t go thinking everyone else’s family is perfect, kiddo.”

“Yeah, well,” I mew with a sigh, “I wish my family was more like Trudy’s. The Fantalicas are like... a model family. Her dad’s this hardworking accountant, her mom’s a master chef, and her little brother’s basically a genius. I mean, what’s not to love?”

Art chuckles, and I can see the glint of amusement in his eyes. “Fanton Fantalica, huh? I know him. We go way back, too. But in a good way.”

Perri and her mom start laughing, and I can’t help but join in. It’s a good moment, the kind of light moment I’ve been needing.

The four of us chat for a while longer, laughing about old stories and joking about the festival coming up. For just a little while, I forget about the tension with Tiffany and Lily, about the

stress of everything that's been piling up. Here, with Perri's family, everything feels normal.

Normal is exactly what I need right now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We have just one week left before the Autumn Battle of the Bands. So, while we've nailed *Purrfectly Prejudiced and Soundtrack of Summer*, this last song—the *duet*—is still a mystery to most of us.

As everyone sets up for what could be our final rehearsal before the show, there's an uneasiness in the air. Sure, we're all feeling pressure from hoping we'll nail the song today. But there's more to it than that.

Gloria's off today. She's been fidgety, her usual calm replaced by something sharper. I catch her rubbing her temple, her jaw set, and her movements kind of twitchy as she taps the edge of her drumsticks against her thigh.

"Hey, Glo, you okay?" I ask, trying to keep it casual.

Gloria doesn't look up at first. She just lets out a sharp breath, mutters a choice curse about her dad under her breath, and then turns to me with a half-smile. "Family's a mess, as usual. But whatever. Let's play."

I nod, knowing better than to push her. If there's one thing about Gloria, it's that when she wants to forget something, she dives straight into the music. Right now, I think that's exactly what we all need.

Tiffany clears her throat, stepping to the center of the room, and everyone goes quiet. The duet is the heart of our set, and it must be perfect. Of course, Darcy is fashionably late, as expected.

Tiff smooths out the sheet of paper in her paws, as if it's the most delicate thing in the world. "Okay, so... this song, it's different from anything we've done. It's, like, personal."

Perri raises an eyebrow, strumming a low note on her bass. “Wait, like, *really* personal?”

Tiffany blushes, just a little. “Yeah. Darcy wrote it for... well, for us. It’s about how we didn’t really get each other at first, but then everything kind of... clicked.”

Danika and Perri exchange smirks. Trudy, being the serious one, tilts her head thoughtfully.

“So, it’s about finding connection, basically,” Trudy offers.

“Exactly,” Tiffany mews. “So, I need this song to feel real, to feel like us.”

Gloria, despite whatever storm is brewing inside her, gives a supportive nod. “Then let’s make it real. Let’s play.”

Tiffany starts the first verse alone, the chords soft and intimate. Her voice, usually so powerful and commanding, is more vulnerable than usual.

*We were worlds apart, on different shores,
Speaking different languages behind closed doors.
But somewhere in the distance, I heard your song,
And somehow, you were where I’d belonged all along*

The melody wraps around us, and for a moment, it’s just Tiffany and her guitar, the sound floating through the air like a confession.

Then, just as she finishes the first verse, the side door to Scratching Post opens, and Darcy walks in, his black fur sleek against the setting sun outside. He doesn’t say a word. He just picks up the old acoustic guitar waiting for him by the door and steps into the music like he’s been there all along.

The shift in tone and energy is instant. Darcy's voice joins Tiffany's, rich and deep, the perfect counterpoint to her higher, lighter tone.

*I thought I knew it all, but I was wrong,
Lost in the noise, in the crowd, in the throng.
But then I heard you, clear as day,
And I knew, I had to stay.*

His voice adds weight to the words that wasn't there before. Gloria hits a steady rhythm on the drums, grounding the song, while Perri's bass hums underneath. My keys fill in the spaces with a haunting, subtle echo of the melody.

For a second, everything just falls into place, like the universe was waiting for this moment. The chorus hits, and their voices rise together, intertwining like it was destiny.

*In the noise, we found our song,
In the chaos, where we belonged.
No more misunderstandings, no more lies,
Just you and me, under open skies.*

I can feel the power in the way their voices lock together and fill the room, the emotion pouring out from both. It's like they've written a story together that's playing out in front of us, and we're just along for the ride.

But while things are great to this point, things go south in the second verse. Darcy sings:

*Falling like the autumn leaves, soft and slow,
Caught up in the breeze, nowhere to go.
But with you, I've found a place to land,
A love as golden as the harvest sand.*

I instantly notice Gloria cringe and she screws up the rhythm a little bit before righting the ship. Then on the next verse, I hear Tiffany almost stumble over the lyrics, ones she didn't write.

*I used to think that love was just a game,
A passing fancy, just a fleeting flame.
But now I see it's more than just a rhyme,
A perfect poem written for all time.*

After one more pass of the chorus, Tiffany modulates beautifully, that extra flourish she kept saying the song needed.

As I tap out the final notes on my keys, the room goes still. I glance over at Gloria, who for once isn't hiding behind her usual sarcasm. Whatever it is, I can tell the music took something out of her.

"That... was perfect," Tiffany whispers, her voice trembling just a little.

Darcy nods, his paw still resting on the guitar strings. "Yeah, it was."

Before the weight of the moment can settle too much, Perri gives her bass one last strum. "Alright, that's it. We're winning this thing, no question."

Tiffany chuckles, smiling at Darcy. "Yeah, that chorus is going to hit *hard*."

I try to be romantic about it. "It's more than just a song, Tiff," I observe. "It's a confession."

Even Trudy, who's usually more reserved, nods in agreement. "We've got our set. Three songs, and every one of them means something. It's complete."

I sit back, taking in the moment. For the first time in a long time, it's like all the pieces have finally fallen into place. At least, that's what I'm thinking until Gloria taps her drumsticks together. She's more than a little flustered.

"So... you guys didn't use any of my lyrical changes?" Gloria asks.

Darcy, still relaxed, offers a gentle smile. "I appreciated the suggestions, Gloria, really. But I wanted to keep the song the way it was. You know, keep it original."

Gloria's face hardens. "Original, huh?" Her voice is tight, a sharp edge I don't usually hear from her.

"Well, Darcy," Tiffany mews, "You did tell me these updated lyrics took Glo's ideas into account. But that last verse, especially, I'm not sure what you did there."

"Just trust me, Tiffany," Darcy meows, his gaze quite serious. Tiffany wants to reply, but nothing comes out of her mouth.

"Trust you? Ha!" Gloria roars. Before anyone can react, she slams her drumsticks down and storms out the side door.

"Gloria!" Tiffany calls after her. But Gloria's already gone, the door slamming shut behind her.

Tiffany just freezes, unable to process what just happened. Gloria's her oldest friend, the one who's always had her back, no matter what. Now, she's off just like that?

I glance at the others, then back at the door.

"I'll handle this," I meow, not waiting for a response before heading outside.

“Be careful, Dani,” I hear Perri meow.

I find Gloria leaning against the old cranky garage door of the Scratching Post, her back to me. Her head’s down, and she’s sobbing. That’s something I never thought I’d see from her. Gloria’s always the tough one, the one who laughs things off and powers through. But right now, she’s pulling at her hair like she’s trying to tear herself apart.

“Gloria,” I mew, sitting beside her.

She doesn’t look at me, and just keeps staring at the ground. “Why can’t I have a nice family like yours, Danika? Or like Perri’s or Trudy’s? I mean, yeah, Tiffany’s grandma is overbearing, but it’s *always* out of love, you know?”

“Glo, we’re your family, too,” I meow.

Her voice cracks, and she pulls harder on her hair. “And why can’t I just be... pretty? Like the rest of you? You all walk around like it’s so easy, and I’m just... I’m not.”

I’m momentarily stunned.

“What are you talking about?” I mew, trying to stay calm. “We all think you’re the prettiest of all of us. You’ve got that natural, confident thing going on.”

She snorts, not believing me. “Yeah, right! I’m a mess!”

“I’m serious,” I insist. “You don’t think Tiffany’s jealous of your style sometimes? She is. We all notice it.” I pause for a second, then add with a grin, “Just... don’t tell her I told you that.”

Gloria finally looks at me, her eyes red but wide with disbelief. “Tiffany? *Tiffany* is jealous of me?”

“Absolutely,” I mew, giving her a little nudge. “She’d never admit it, but yeah. You got your own vibe, and that’s awesome.”

Gloria sits there, stunned, for a moment. Then she snuffles and wipes her eyes with the back of her paw. “Thanks, Danika. I... needed that.”

I smile at her. “Anytime. Now, you ready to go back in there?”

Gloria nods, taking a deep breath. “Yeah. Let’s go,” she purrs.

When we walk back inside, Tiffany and Darcy are standing close together, sharing a quiet moment. They’re not saying anything, but it’s like they’re in their own little world.

Without hesitation, Gloria storms back in. She shoves Darcy to the side, nearly knocking him off balance as she throws her arms around Tiffany in a giant bear hug. Tiff looks startled at first, but then she hugs Gloria back, tighter than I’ve ever seen.

To his credit, Darcy steps back with a sheepish grin.

“Alright, alright,” he meows, holding up his paws. “I’m not getting between you two. If you want me to use your lyrics, Gloria, go ahead. I won’t stop you.”

Gloria pulls away from Tiffany, her face lighting up with the first real smile I’ve seen all day. “Really?”

Darcy nods. “Really. I’m not about to come between you and Tiff.”

Tiffany grins, her arms still around Gloria. “See? He’s not so bad.”

I lean against the wall, feeling the tension in the room dissolve. We've still got a lot of work to do, but at least now we're on the same page.

"Alright," Gloria mews, "let's finish this thing."

Well, just like that, we're back on track!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tonight, the air in the gymnasium is thick with anticipation and hairspray. You'd think we were at the Felona equivalent of a royal gala, but no. This is just the "preview night" for the Autumn Music Festival. Everyone involved in the upcoming Battle is here. To be fair, I'd be here anyway, just to see how seriously everyone is taking this.

Of course, Lily is dolled up to the nines. Her dress is some custom designer piece, all shimmering gold fabric that catches the light every time she moves. She's practically glowing, but not in a metaphorical sense. Heck, she literally looks like a walking starburst. She's chatting up half the room, moving from group to group like she's running for prom queen.

Honestly, she kind of is. Her dad's a senator, after all. The entire school knows it. Half the school thinks she's untouchable, and not because she's the best, but because no one wants to cross her family. In Felona society, it's always about who you know and whose pockets you can claw into without crossing some imaginary, arbitrary line.

The gymnasium is humming with excitement as everyone waits for the special guest band, the Catulets from Mewton, to take the stage. But for now, we're stuck in the limbo of mingling, pretending to enjoy the festivities when we all know the real reason we're here: sizing up the competition.

Gloria's tugging at her outfit. It's a frilly, over-the-top number that her stepmom Francesca forced on her. This lace monstrosity is supposed to be "avant-garde," I guess, but Gloria just looks ready to crawl out of her own fur.

"I feel like I'm wearing a doily," Gloria mutters, scowling at her reflection in the mirrored wall.

“You look fine,” I mew, trying to suppress a grin. “Besides, no one’s going to be looking at you. They’ll be too busy staring at Lily.”

Gloria scoffs, “Ha, true that!”

I’m leaning against the wall, trying to pretend I’m not about to vibrate out of my fur with nerves. The rest of the Lunatics are scattered around, getting ready for today’s festivities in various ways.

Perri’s leaning against a pillar, tapping her foot impatiently, clearly not in the mood for small talk. She’s wearing a blazer and boots, the kind of edgy outfit that screams don’t mess with me. I mean, that’s exactly the vibe she’s going for tonight. But I can tell she’s distracted. Her eyes keep flicking toward the stage, like she’s already anticipating the Catulets. Who can blame her? Tonight isn’t about us. It’s about them.

Tiffany, on the other paw, is in full rockstar mode. She’s got a leather jacket, ripped jeans, and this vintage band tee that looks like it’s seen more stages than we have. Yeah, Tiff’s trying to play it cool, sipping on her punch like she’s too chill to care. But every now and then I catch her glancing toward the stage, too. She won’t admit it, but the Catulets have been in the back of her mind for weeks. Ever since they were announced as the headliner for tonight’s preview, it’s like we’ve all been living in their shadow. And they haven’t even played a single note yet.

Meanwhile, Trudy’s at it again, somehow always looking like she just stepped out of an art exhibit. She’s in this flowing dress—navy blue, of course—with little golden stars embroidered along the hem. Her long braids are pinned up in a way that looks effortless but probably took ages to get right. Trudy’s always got this calm, wise look about her, like she’s seeing the world on some deeper level that the rest of us can’t access. She’s sipping on a cup of herbal tea—because of course she brought her own beverage—and watching the crowd with those heterochromatic

eyes of hers. If anyone could be cool while we're all stewing in nervous energy, it's Trudy.

Then there's me, trying to keep my cool. I'm pretending I'm not totally dazzled by all the lights, the glitter, and the noise. But honestly, I'm half a second away from retreating into a quiet corner with my sketchbook. Only thing is, I can't tonight. I need to represent for the Lunatics, after all.

I'm in my usual getup for this kind of 'superficial gathering,' as Darcy would put it. I don't do fancy, and I never have. My dress is a simple bohemian affair—easy to move in, easy to fade into the background. That's exactly where I'd rather be right now. The lights, the noise, and the constant chatter are all a bit much.

Lily sweeps past us like she's royalty—which, okay, she basically is. She's not smug, though. No, she's too well-trained for anything as common as gloating. Still, we all know what that glance means: "I'm going to finish first, and I'm going to make sure you remember it."

"Ugh, it's like she's got a spotlight permanently attached to her head," Gloria grumbles under her breath, nudging me with her elbow. I smirk, but it's half-hearted. Gloria's right, though. Lily's presence alone makes the rest of us look like we crawled out of a garage somewhere—okay, that part's kind of true. We did crawl out of a garage. But we wear it better than you'd expect.

Trudy gives me a quick smile, but I can tell she's not totally convinced we're going to win this Fall Battle. None of us are.

"Not worried, are you?" I ask her, half-joking.

She gives me a slow smile, one that feels like she's already five steps ahead. "Worried?" Trudy asks.
"No. But, curious? Always."

“Those Catulets going to be the talk of the night,” Gloria growls, not even bothering to mask the frustration in her voice. “By the time they’re done, no one’s going to care about the rest of us.”

“Does it matter?” Tiffany shrugs. I can tell she’s annoyed, too. “We’re not going up against them anytime soon.”

“Yet,” Perri offers, trying to raise the mood. “But the time is coming.”

Gloria’s still fussing with her lace disaster. “Well, at least we’re not playing tonight. Could you imagine going on after them? Talk about a death sentence.”

I laugh, but it’s short-lived. We all know Gloria’s right. The Catulets are local rising stars—polished, professional, and connected in all the right ways. Meanwhile, we’re still figuring it out. We’ve got the talent, sure, but talent only gets you so far in a world where connections are everything. Like Lily, the Catulets got it all.

“Speak of the devils,” Tiffany mutters, nodding toward the entrance.

The Catulets now make their grand entrance. Their singer and lead guitarist, Romeow Whistler, leads the way, of course. He’s got that kind of effortless charisma that makes the whole room pause, like the lights just got brighter because he walked in. He’s sleek, with black fur, sharp yellow eyes, and a stupid scar over one eye that only makes him look cooler. It’s like the universe gave him every advantage, including a pity mark.

Behind him is Luna Eclipse, the Catulets drummer. I don’t think that’s her real name, but it’s what she goes by. She’s intense—dark fur, even darker hair, violet eyes, and a crescent moon marking her forehead. There’s something about her that makes you want to stare, but also makes you nervous. It’s she’s got some kind of untapped power she’s not sharing with anyone, not even her bandmates.

Next is Cedric Cymbal, their keyboardist. He's got that social butterfly energy, all bright ginger fur and easy smiles. He looks like the kind of tomcat who gets invited to every party, not because he's important, but because people like having him around. He's always chatting, always laughing, always *on*.

Then there's Serena Solace, their bassist, with her sleek gray fur and spiky silver hair. She's got this cynical look on her face, like she's already bored of all of us. She's sharp-tongued, sharp-eyed, and the kind of furrykin who probably never loses an argument.

Finally, there's Victor Virelay, their saxophonist. He's the strategist of the five. He's calculating, ambitious, and always three steps ahead of everyone else. Victor's got mottled dark fur and heterochromatic eyes, just like Trudy. But where Trudy's are full of curiosity, his are cold and analytical. You can tell he's the one pulling the strings, and everyone else is just following his lead.

The Catulets move through the room like they own it, and in a way, they do. Ever the opportunist, Lily immediately makes a beeline for them, all smiles and compliments. She knows where the power is, and tonight, it's with the Catulets. There's no denying it—Lily's already securing her spot in their orbit. It's what she does best. But while they certainly notice her, they pretty much just wave her off. They're too good for even her, apparently. She shows her frustration only slightly, but is happy to cheer them on, in any case.

When the Catulets take the stage, the energy grows even more tense and electric, like everyone's just waiting for something to explode. They're impressive—sleek, sharp, and oozing confidence. Their edgy vibe is half intimidating, half mesmerizing. Romeow steps up to the mic, and it's like the entire crowd leans in, holding its breath. He hasn't even sung a note yet, and they've got us wrapped around their paws.

As they launch into their first song, I can't help but glance at Tiffany. She stares at the Catulets with this intense look. It's part admiration, part frustration. She's not just envious of their fantastic talent. It's more about their aura. They've got the kind of swagger that makes you feel like they're not just playing music—they are the music personified, and we're just lucky to share in their magical world.

Perri mutters under her breath, "It's a good thing we're not going up against them. We wouldn't stand a chance."

I nod. She's right. These are professionals. But as impressive as they are, I'm not intimidated. I know we Lunatics have got a fire that doesn't go out just because someone else burns brighter.

No one has pushed them yet, though. I wonder how long their cocky confidence can last.

As the Catulets finish, the crowd erupts with applause. They've earned it. But I glance around at my bandmates, and I know what we're all thinking.

"We're lucky we're not playing tonight," I murmur, mostly to myself.

Perri nods grimly. "Yeah. We'd be dead in the water."

But even as I say it, there's a part of me that wonders what it would be like—to share a stage with them. What will it be like to go toe-to-toe with the hottest band from Catulet Prep and come out on the other side? It's a thrill that I don't dare voice, not yet. But maybe, one day, we'll be ready.

For now, though, we watch and wait. Tonight's just the preview. In a few days, it's our turn.

...

The Fall Festival preview show is over, and honestly, the Catulets stole the night. I'm supposed to be heading back home with the rest of the Lunatics, but something nags at me—curiosity, maybe. Seriously, I just need to know what makes those Catulets tick.

The others left a few minutes ago, but I'm hanging back behind the auditorium building, watching the Catulets as they pack up their gear. Romeow is smirking like he already conquered our school, Luna's doing her best 'too cool to care' act, and the rest of them are swaggering around like they're already famous.

Not that we Lunatics are any less confident, but there's something different about the way the Catulets carry themselves—something almost untouchable. They've got that prep school edge, that whole 'we're better than everyone else' vibe. Yeah, it grates on me. But I must admit, they're phenomenal performers. That makes them a real threat in the local music scene.

I decide to get a closer look. Lily's been trying to weasel her way into their inner circle for awhile now, but even she hasn't gotten anywhere. That says a lot. Lily's the queen of social chutes and ladders, after all.

I'm almost at their equipment van when I feel eyes on me. I glance up and catch sight of Cedric Cymbal, the Catulets' keyboardist. He's staring at me, arms crossed, eyes narrowed like I've wandered onto sacred ground.

"You lost, Doby?" Cedric grins at me with condescension, like he's already decided I'm not worth his time. "Or just trying to pick up tips from the superior band?"

I stop in my tracks, letting his words hang in the air for a second. He wears this smug little smirk, like he's just nailed some sort of intellectual checkmate. I'm just shocked he knew who I was.

“I was just checking out the competition,” I meow sweetly. “You know, seeing what we’re up against.”

“Competition?” He laughs, and it cuts through the air so sharply that feels like he’s puncturing any hope I had of a real conversation. “Girl, we’re not in the same league. But hey, nice try.”

I should be mad, maybe even insulted. But instead, I just feel this weird sense of confirmation. The Catulets—especially Cedric—are exactly what I thought they’d be. They’re all pride, with no humility in sight.

“You really think you’re untouchable, huh?” I say, more to myself than him.

Cedric steps closer, looming over me. He’s got that kind of smooth charm that makes many furrykin instantly trust him—until they realize he’s using it as a weapon. “We’re the Catulets,” he snarls. “Of course we are.”

I don’t flinch, though I can feel the heat of his arrogance radiating off him. “Pride goes before a fall, you know,” I purr.

His smirk fades back into a cool, aloof mask. “Huh, you’re just like that Featherstone girl. But Lily’s a wannabe, too. Like the rest of you.”

I shrug, letting his insult roll off me. “Maybe. But don’t count us out just yet.”

With that, I turn and walk away, leaving Cedric standing there, probably wondering why I’m not more rattled. But I’ve seen enough tonight to know the truth. The Catulets might be riding high now, but that kind of seemingly unshakable and untouchable pride—it’s fragile. It’ll crack sooner or later.

When it does, we’ll be ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next week is a whirlwind of assemblies. Each day feels like a never-ending parade of acts—always loud, always filled with the electricity of competition. It’s all everyone talks about in the hallways. I keep my ears open, and I listen to everything I can dig up—whether it’s about Lily’s band, our rivals, or anything else useful for us Lunatics to benefit from.

The way the schedule works out, the Lunatics in Love and Lily’s band are set to play on different days. Thank goodness for that. It would’ve been a disaster if we had to go back-to-back on the same day. Everyone’s been on edge, especially Tiffany, but now we can just focus on our set.

But today, it’s Lily’s turn. These assemblies are a parade of bands, duets, and solo acts, some predictably very bad, others surprisingly enjoyable. Today’s schedule concludes with Lily’s band, *Lily and the Lilacs*. Yeah, they’re called that. Her dad probably hired a marketing team for her, and they always seem to go for the safest, lamest options.

I’m in the audience with Gloria, Perri, and Trudy, and we’re watching like hawks. Tiffany wanted to stay home today altogether, but I told her we needed to see what we’re up against. Perri agreed, and we dragged Tiff along for backup. Trudy had initially considered bailing too, but after some coaxing, she decided it’d be good to gather intel on our foes.

Trudy sits beside me, scribbling furiously in her notebook. She’s taking notes like she’s in a tactical briefing, her sharp gaze flitting between Lily, Darcy, and the rest of the stage.

Lily and her so-called band—let’s be real, they’re more like groupies than actual musicians—are already on stage when we file into the auditorium. They’re positioned perfectly under the stage lights, every detail meticulously planned. Of course, Lily’s in the

center, her auburn fur gleaming under the lights, with her trademark high ponytail looking as sharp as ever.

Darcy's off to the side, standing tall with his guitar, looking a little stiff but composed. I can't quite read his expression. He doesn't seem as into it as he should be, though. It's like he's just going through the motions. He's been distant and distracted, and now it seems like that's the case more than ever. I think I know why, but I don't want to say what I think just yet.

Principal Latchkey gives her usual introduction, with a little extra enthusiasm since Lily's dad is such a big shot in Pawston. Then, it's showtime.

The lights dim, and the auditorium falls silent. Lily steps forward, a smug smile on her face, and I can feel the heat of her ego radiating off her. She raises her arms, and the spotlight catches her perfectly. It's clear she thinks this is her moment—the one where she finally proves she's more than just the class president.

The music starts. It's polished, I'll give them that. The sound is clean, tight, and rehearsed to perfection. But there's something missing. It feels too controlled, too manufactured.

They open with their pop-rock number, Lustrous, clearly written by one of Lily's "professional" tutors. The lyrics are generic, the kind of stuff that's been done a million times before. It's all about fame, self-confidence, and how Lily's a "queen" or something. The audience claps along, but it feels more like they're clapping because they're supposed to, not because they're blown away.

Gloria leans over to me, her voice a low whisper. "This is what we're up against? It's so... bland."

I nod. "It's all surface. No depth."

Perri whispers, “I mean, they’re talented. But yeah, it’s missing heart.”

Trudy taps her pencil against her notebook, then whispers, “It’s like she’s trying to create something larger than life, but it feels hollow. The lyrics are telling you what to feel instead of letting you feel it.” She jots something down, likely another observation about the formulaic nature of Lily’s set.

Darcy plays his part, keeping to the background, his guitar lines smooth and steady, but there’s no fire in his playing. It’s like he’s holding back, or he just doesn’t care. Either way, he’s not feeling this set, either.

Then comes the second song, Starlit. This one’s supposed to be their big number, the one that was supposed to be a duet with Darcy. But it doesn’t unfold how I picture. It’s even slower and more melodramatic than I expected. Lily stands at the microphone, her eyes closed, belting out a ballad about lost love or something equally predictable. Her voice is good, sure, but there’s no vulnerability behind it. It’s all flash and no substance.

Then, halfway through the song, Lily turns to Darcy, and he steps forward to play a guitar solo. The audience perks up a bit, probably expecting something impressive, but Darcy keeps it short and sweet, almost as if he’s holding back on purpose. He’s really good—but it’s like he doesn’t want to steal the spotlight from Lily. More like he doesn’t want to share it with her at all.

That’s when I realize it: Darcy’s not invested in Lily’s band, at all. He’s just going through the motions because it’s expected of him. That, right there, is Lily’s fatal flaw. She’s built this entire band around herself—around her ego—and she doesn’t realize that Darcy isn’t really with her. He’s just there. The verses he was supposed to sing clearly were just taken by Lily herself. What happened at the last minute?

As the song finishes, the applause is polite but not overwhelming. Lily soaks it in, preening like a Felona who's just caught a particularly vexing mouse, but I can see the cracks forming.

They finish their set with another upbeat pop song, Glitterbomb, more of the same lyrics from old-school hits about how amazing Lily is, and the audience claps along halfheartedly. It's clear that some of the students are impressed by Lily's stage presence. But there's no standing ovation, no wild cheering. It's not bad, but it's not memorable, either. When the Lilacs finish, there's polite applause yet again. Lily bows like she's just performed at the Galactic Opera.

Gloria raises an eyebrow as the applause dies down. "Well, that was... anticlimactic."

Perri shrugs. "Glitterbomb, huh? I'd say their set bombed, if you ask me."

"Yeah, we've got more heart," I admit. "Let's hope that makes the difference."

Trudy leans in, her voice thoughtful. "The problem with Lily's band is that it's all for show. They're hitting the right notes, but they're not making you *feel* anything. We Lunatics are making music that tells a story, music that people really feel."

As Lily and her band leave the stage, I catch a glimpse of Darcy. His eyes scan the crowd, but when he spots me, there's something unspoken in his expression—something that tells me he knows this isn't his real place. He gives a slight nod, and I nod back. There's still time for him to show what he's made of, for real. When he does, it won't be with Lily's band. It'll be with *us*.

Backstage, I overhear Lily talking to her groupies. She's already planning how she's going to "crush" us on the "strength" of that performance. I don't need to hear any more. I scurry back to

the other Lunatics to watch the other acts. None of them really leave much of an impression on any of us.

As we finally head out of the auditorium, Gloria stretches her arms above her head, her muscles relaxing after the tension of the performance. “Lily’s good, I’ll give her that. But there’s no way she’s got what we have.”

Perri grins. “Yeah, she’s a good performer, but she doesn’t have the chemistry we’ve got. We’re going to blow them away.”

Trudy tucks her notebook into her bag, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “We’ve got the right mix of heart, storytelling, and emotion. Lily’s band might have all the bells and whistles, but they’re missing the one thing they can’t fake—authenticity.”

“Exactly,” I meow. “And Darcy? I think he’s already on our side. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

As we make our way down the hall, I think about everything I’ve learned. Lily’s got connections, she’s got the teachers wrapped around her tail, but she’s missing the one thing that really matters: heart. She doesn’t understand what it means to play for something bigger than herself. So, that’s where we’ve got the edge.

The rest of the performances today aren’t anything to write home about. If Lily had a shot, this was her chance. I can’t believe how underwhelming she was. But you wouldn’t know it by the way she acts after school, gloating and praising all her bandmates. Notably, we don’t see Darcy the rest of the day. Apparently, he slipped off somewhere.

Well, he better show up tomorrow. This will be our chance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

There's a charge that thrums through the student body as they cluster eagerly near the stage in the school auditorium. A banner reading "LIVE TODAY" with Lunatics in Love listed among its acts flutters slightly from the anticipation vibrating in the air.

Backstage, the five of us prepare for what feels like the moment we've been building toward for an entire month. I adjust my hair in the mirror. I decided to try something new for today, wearing my hair in high pigtails on either side of my head. My long purple hair is divided into two playful tufts, with the shorter pieces framing my face and the longer bangs tucked back behind my ears.

"Wow, Dani, you look adorable," Perri exclaims, her amber eyes lighting up as she watches me fiddle with my look.

Gloria grins from where she's tightening her drumsticks. "You've outdone yourself, girl. Seriously, that's the look of a pop star."

I give a casual shrug. "Eh, I just didn't want to show up Lily too much. You know how she is about being the center of attention. If she doesn't win the festival, though? I'm keeping her high ponytail look forever. It's too adorable not to steal."

Tiffany turns from where she was tuning her electric guitar, giving me a thumbs-up. "You are adorable, for sure, Dani. But let's not pretend. You're already showing up Lily just by being here."

We all laugh. "We're gonna knock 'em dead," Trudy chimes in, adjusting her glasses as she warms up her sax. She gives me a quick once-over before adding with a grin, "Yeah, Lily and the Lilacs don't stand a chance with you slaying like this!"

I give my pigtails a final fluff before turning to face the rest of my bandmates. “Well, thanks for the support, ladies. Now let’s go out there and blow everyone away.”

Each of us is dressed in our signature looks—Tiffany in her shimmering silver, Gloria in her edgy all-black, Perri with her playful stripes, Trudy in her knockout dress she wore on preview night, and me, of course, looking effortlessly adorable with these high pigtails and one of my favorite bohemian numbers.

As we line up backstage, waiting for our cue, I can feel the rising energy of the audience beyond the curtains. The energy in the auditorium is shifting from casual anticipation to something more focused. They’re waiting for us.

Tiffany glances back at us, her expression confident but with a hint of nerves in her eyes. “Alright, Lunatics. This is our moment. We’ve got three songs. Let’s make every one count.”

Gloria gives her drumsticks a quick twirl. “You know we will.”

The curtain lifts, and the bright lights flood our view. I’m momentarily blinded as we step onto the stage. The crowd erupts in applause. Whether they’re clapping for us or just excited for the show, it doesn’t matter. The energy is all the same to us.

We take our places, each of us falling into our natural rhythm as if we’ve done this a hundred times before. In a way, we had, in the garage dozens of times, and Tiffany’s living room hundreds of times before that. But tonight is different. Tonight, it matters.

Tiffany strums her guitar, testing the sound, and the familiar hum of the amps filled the room. Gloria taps out a quick beat on the snare, and I feel the adrenaline rushing through me as I check my keyboard settings.

Trudy glances over at me as she fiddles with her sax, and I nod. Perri gives us all a quick smile before taking a deep breath. Then, we're off.

We open with *Purrfectly Prejudiced*, the song we'd worked on the longest. It's Trudy's masterpiece—catchy, rebellious, and full of heart. Seriously, it's the perfect opener for a school function. But we all decided, upon Trudy's request, to just have Tiffany do all the singing. Letting her focus on the sax feels like the right choice.

The crowd is with us from the start. I see students nodding along to the beat, a few even mouthing the lyrics. It's surreal—watching something we'd created in our late afternoon and evening jam sessions come alive in front of an audience.

Tiffany's voice is stronger and clearer than ever, her southpaw guitar riffs sharp. Gloria's drums are like thunder in the background, holding the song together with perfect precision. Perri's bass growls beneath the melodies and harmonies, giving the track its pulse. Trudy's sax solo in the middle is, in my humble opinion, legendary. Finally, my keys add the whimsical, dreamy notes that make the song feel alive.

When we finish our opener, the applause is deafening. The room shakes with it. As we exchange quick smiles, we know we have them hooked! Trudy looks quite relieved. Her words, delivered by our world-class diva, hit just as hard as we hoped they would!

Next comes *Soundtrack of Summer*, Tiffany's song. It has that perfect balance of nostalgia and youthful rebellion. The lyrics are a bit simple for my taste, but powerful in their own way. Besides, the melody makes you want to throw your paws in the air and forget all your worries.

The crowd sways with the rhythm, and by the second chorus, they're singing along. Tiffany's voice oozes with emotion, every word hitting like an ocean wave of bittersweet memories. I try to make my keyboards shimmer like August sunlight on the water,

while Perri's bass and Gloria's drums keep the beat steady and strong.

This performance is everything we've hoped for and more. As we reach the final chorus, the lights dim, and Tiffany holds the last note, her voice echoes through the auditorium with such a haunting beauty. The room falls silent for a moment, then without warning, there's a boom of thunderous applause. They're even louder than before.

Finally, it's time for Tiffany and Darcy's duet *Written for You*. Darcy steps out from the wings, acoustic guitar in paw, looking every bit the dashing gentle-tom we've gotten to know over the past couple weeks. The crowd murmurs in surprise. Clearly, they hadn't expected to see him again on stage so soon.

The song goes even better than we thought it would. This duet between Tiffany and Darcy feels more like a conversation now that it's on this stage, a back-and-forth of emotions and confessions. The lyrics, the ones heavily rewritten by Gloria, are raw and real.

Tiffany's voice and Darcy's blend perfectly, harmonizing in ways I didn't think were possible. His guitar solo is soft and haunting. For the first time since I've known him, I can see the fire in his playing.

The song begins with an acoustic guitar intro, both Tiffany and Darcy's parts complimenting each other. Then Tiffany starts singing.

*We were lightyears apart, drifting off course,
Talking in riddles—your favorite sport.
But through the static, I caught your tune,
And wondered if you were just a little unglued.*

Then Darcy comes in:

*I had it all figured out—what a lie,
Wading through nonsense, not sure why.
Then your voice cut through like a twisted chord,
And suddenly, you were the chaos I adored.*

Next, the chorus together:

*In the wreckage, we found our song,
Two misfits in a world gone wrong.
No more pretending, no more disguise,
Just you and me, laughing at the sky.*

Verse two starts with Darcy and while he sings the words well, they lack the passion we'd expected.

*Drifting with the winds of change, lost and loose,
No destination, just a bad excuse.
But then you pulled me down from the clouds,
Turns out gravity can scream out loud.*

Tiffany smiles at her rewritten verse:

*I used to think love was a game for fools,
A cheap thrill, just a set of rules.
But now I see it's more like setting fires—
Burning bright, while fueling all your desires.*

Now, we're at the bridge that Gloria made them add to Darcy's dismay. They sing it together.

*We're not perfect, we're not clean,
More like a matchstick and gasoline.
But hey, at least we're not afraid to burn,
And in the ashes, we never learn.*

Finally, the big finale:

*In the wreckage, we found our song,
Two misfits in a world gone wrong.
No more pretending, no more disguise,
Just you and me, laughing at the sky.
No more pretending, no more disguise,
Just you and me, setting fire to the sky.*

The crowd is mesmerized. Even I become mesmerized, and my claws get lighter on the keys. When the song ends, there's a beat or two of silence, and then—absolute euphoria. The combination of applause, cheering, and stomping feet is like nothing I've ever heard before.

Backstage, after it was all over, we were buzzing with adrenaline. We've done it. We played our hearts out, and the crowd loved every second.

Tiffany turns to Darcy, her eyes bright. "That was... incredible. You were amazing."

Darcy, his usual calm demeanor a little shaken, smiles. "I couldn't have done it without you."

I bounce over to Tiffany, my pigtails swishing. I feel like a kitten again. "Well, that was legendary!" I exclaim. "If we don't win this festival, I'm keeping the pigtails as a protest."

We all laughed, the tension melting away into shared victory.

"Win or not," Gloria said, "We just made history."

Honestly, she's not wrong.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It's the next day after our great performance. Yet, our rehearsal space feels tenser than it should. Tiffany strums her guitar absentmindedly, humming a tune that doesn't quite fit the mood. Gloria's setting up her drums, all calm and cool on the outside, but I know better. I can feel the undercurrent—like there's a spark waiting for the right moment to catch fire.

Then, Darcy saunters in, acting like nothing happened yesterday. The second he walks through the door, everyone freezes. He's got a smug look on his face again, and I know trouble is coming before he even opens his mouth.

"Hope you queens are ready to lose to the Tabbytones," he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "They've got something special. I don't know how we're supposed to compete with them."

Tiffany sighs but doesn't look up from her guitar. "That's your opinion, Darcy."

Gloria doesn't miss a beat, literally. She starts tapping out a rhythm on her drums, but there's an edge to it, like she's hitting them a little harder than usual. "Funny," she snarls, not even looking his way, "I didn't realize we were competing for your approval."

The air shifts. Darcy narrows his eyes, crossing his arms as if trying to assert some kind of authority. "You know, Gloria, maybe if you didn't rewrite my lyrics into some angsty teen diary garbage, we might have had a chance."

I knew Darcy was up to something, but I didn't see him going at Gloria of all furrykin! I'm just standing by my keyboard, trying not to look too uncomfortable, but my claws keep drifting

over the keys like they're searching for a melody to cut through this mess.

Gloria turns to face him. Her eyes flash that green fire she gets when she's about to go for the jugular. "Angsty teen diary garbage?" she repeats, slow and deliberate. "Maybe your precious Tabbytones will write you something more your speed—something soft and sappy for you to cry along to when they beat us."

Tiffany stands up at this point, guitar still slung over her shoulder, trying to play mediator. "Okay, that's enough, Darcy!" she meows firmly. But Darcy's not done.

"Hey, at least they know how to stick to a melody," Darcy shoots back. "And you took my carefully chosen words and turned them into a ramble!"

Gloria smirks, crossing her arms. "Better to ramble than make a song that puts people to sleep."

Before Tiffany can say anything, Darcy steps closer to Gloria, voice low but sharp. "You keep acting like you're the genius behind this band, but let's be real. Without Tiffany, you're nothing. You're just trying too hard to be edgy and it's pathetic."

Gloria doesn't flinch, but I can tell the words hit their mark. "I'd rather be 'trying too hard' than not trying at all," she growls coolly.

I'm holding my breath at this point, waiting for an inevitable explosion. But Tiffany, bless her, steps right between them, paws raised like she's trying to separate two feral rats. "Enough. Both of you."

There's a long silence, and I think for a second, they're going to start swinging at each other. But instead, Darcy backs off with a scoff, shaking his head. "Whatever. You'll see. When the Tabbytones win, don't say I didn't warn you."

He turns and leaves the garage, slamming the door behind him. The sound echoes, and we all just stand there in the aftermath. Gloria rolls her eyes and goes back to setting up her kit, pretending like nothing just happened. But I can see her paws shaking, just a little.

Tiffany sighs, running her left paw through her platinum hair. "I'll talk to him later," she mews, though even she doesn't sound too convinced it'll help.

I press a few keys on my synth, trying to lighten the mood with a little melody, but it doesn't land. No one's in the mood for music now.

We've got a couple days before the final votes are in. But if things keep going like this, I'm not sure how we're gonna make it that long without something or someone breaking.

"What if he's right, queens?" Trudy asks. "I mean, the Tabbytones are fantastic. They may blow everyone away tomorrow."

"How much you want to bet that Darcy slipped the Tones some free sheet music?" I wonder aloud. "Not like Jinx, Louie, and Dan need any help. They're solid."

Tiffany laughs. "Yeah, OK. Hey, I like those three. Jinx is a jazz genius. But compete with us? Ha!"

Perri strums her bass in a playful rhythm. "Darcy's just salty. He can't take it like a man! After all, we kept all the music!"

Gloria bangs hard on the cymbals. "Damn straight! Hell, screw the audience. They come last. We come first. We bleeping rocked that dang school!"

“Wow, Glo,” Tiff mews. “You really wanted to stick it to Darcy this whole time? You’ve never really liked him, did you?”

Gloria bursts out laughing. “I was sizing him up, Tiff! But you went all ga-ga over the rich boy, going bug-eyed like you always do. You know all I care about is what happens to you. I’m not letting him ruin everything we’ve built these last eight years!”

“Yeah,” I mew. “Glo, you’re the best!”

“Wait,” Tiff groans. “Were you all in on this the whole time? Did you all suspect Darcy was up to something? Were we right to be suspicious?”

“Absolutely,” Trudy agrees. “On the last two points. No, Dani and Glo were in cahoots.”

Tiff looks at Gloria with a blank gaze. “Why? Why, Gloria?”

“Because...” Gloria begins, then clears her throat. “Because I love...you all.”

“Wow, that’s deep,” Perri meows sarcastically.

“Let’s just jam, queens,” Gloria suggests. “How ‘bout a little Tunes and Tails?”

“Yeah, win or lose,” I meow. “We already won the hearts of our peers. That’s all that matters.”

“But, Darcy?” Tiffany sniffles.

“Screw that Valerian prick!” Gloria roars. “Let’s bleeping play!”

We all start jamming, but Tiffany just walks out of the garage. We don’t hear from her again that night.

The next morning I get a text from Tiffany. It's a group text to me and the other three. It simply reads: *Darcy is sorry*.

No one else responds to the text. I just type OK, and get ready for the day.

It's the final day of performances. Now, everything we've worked for is left up to fate. We're sitting in the auditorium, already having taken our turn, and I'm trying to stay calm.

The Tabbytones are up next. They're school's favorite to win. They're a three-piece, but you wouldn't know it from the sound they make. It's smooth, polished, and jazzy, but with enough pop flavor to keep the crowd hooked. They've been practicing for months, perhaps even longer, and it shows. Their lead vocalist, Jinx, steps up to the mic like she owns the stage—because let's be honest, she does.

The first few notes ripple through the auditorium, and it's like everything else fades into the background. Dan might be the best drummer besides Gloria in the province. The upright bass player, Louie, is laying down grooves like he's just casually reeling in the audience one by one. Meanwhile, Jinx's voice is low and sultry, but when she hits those soaring notes, everyone just gets sucked into a trance. Even I get goosebumps watching her perform.

I glance over at Tiffany. She's sitting next to Darcy, who's leaning back with his arms crossed like he's not impressed, but I can tell from the way his foot is tapping that he's trying not to show it. Tiffany's face is harder to read. She's listening, really listening, like she always does when she's scouting out the competition.

In the row behind them, the rest of us sit like a broken unit—me, Gloria, Perri, and Trudy. There's this unspoken agreement that none of us want to be anywhere near Darcy. Not after yesterday's rehearsal blow-up, even if he is sorry. He hasn't said a word to any of us yet, especially Gloria.

I can feel Gloria still seething, her arms crossed, staring daggers at the back of Darcy's head. Trudy's got her notebook out, scribbling away like she's plotting the next chapter in some Felona crime novel, but I know she's just trying to distract herself. Even Perri is noticeably miffed, trying to force a smile just to fake her way through this assembly.

The Tabbytones finish their set with a flourish, and the crowd goes wild. They know the audience is theirs. They smile, wave, and walk off the stage like they've already won the whole thing. A part of me hates to admit it, but they were really good.

"Well, that's gonna be hard to beat," Darcy mutters, glancing at Tiffany, trying to gauge her reaction. She doesn't give him one. Gloria groans, Perri shrugs, and Trudy just scribbles faster.

Next up are the Silver Claws, a scrappy five-piece that's got more energy than talent, but they've got heart, and the crowd eats it up. They thrash through their set like they're playing to save their lives. Gloria cracks a smile for the first time all day.

"They're gritty, and I appreciate that," Glo whispers to Perri, "Even if they're not quite polished."

Then comes Tommy and Sasha, the wildcard. They've been making waves since the start of the competition—a stripped-down acoustic duo who have this weird, haunting vibe that somehow works. Tommy's on guitar, and Sasha's got this voice that's soft but cuts through the air like a knife. Their harmonies are tight, almost too tight, like they've been playing together since they could crawl.

When they start playing, it's like the whole auditorium takes a breath and holds it. It's just them, two voices and one guitar, but they manage to fill the space in a way that's almost eerie. There's something raw about their performance, something that sticks with you long after the song is over.

I glance around the room. People are leaning in, listening harder than they did for the Tabbytones, even though they don't want to admit it. Darcy shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable, and I wonder if he's finally realizing just how close this competition really is.

The song ends, and there's this long moment of silence before the applause starts. Tommy and Sasha walk off stage without so much as a nod to the crowd, like they don't care what happens next. I guess Gloria must have given them that pep talk about 'screw the audience' too?

We've got a couple more bands to sit through, but no one's really paying attention anymore. It's all in the paws of fate now, as Gloria would say. Right now, though, I'm not thinking about us. I'm thinking about how strong the competition is. I'm thinking about how the Tabbytones were dripping with jazzy confidence, and how Tommy and Sasha seemed like they were playing for themselves, not for the crowd.

Tiffany glances back at us, her blue eyes meeting mine for a second. She gives a small nod, and I know she's ready. She's always ready. But as for the rest of us... I'm not so sure.

Darcy leans over to whisper something to her, but she doesn't respond. It's like he's not even there anymore. The rest of us sure wish he wasn't.

The day's nearly over, and so is the battle. May the best group win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Two days later, it's the announcement of the Music Festival Battle of the Bands winners. There's an almost palpable tension, like the crackle of a storm waiting to break. Everyone who's performed is on edge, but none more so than us, The Lunatics in Love, and Lily's band of clingers, the Lilacs.

Our performance was something special, one that felt like white and black magic collided and created something worthy of cosmic importance! Now, we await the final tally, to see if we came out on top, or anywhere close to it.

In the auditorium, the murmurs grow louder as Principal Latchkey takes the stage, flanked by the judges, who are some of the most judgmental teachers we have. I sit with the girls, feeling a mix of nervousness and excitement. Even Tiffany, who usually exudes confidence, is fidgeting with her silver guitar pick necklace. Darcy, sitting just a few seats away, has that calm, brooding expression on his face. I can tell he's tense. We all are. I'm just glad she's sitting with us now.

Principal Latchkey clears her throat, the microphone squeaking for a second, making the room wince in unison.

"Students, thank you all for your incredible performances at the Autumn Music Festival. The talent and passion on display made it difficult for our judges to decide the winners. But now, the results are in."

The room falls silent, everyone hanging on her every word.

"The third prize goes to..." There was a pause. "The Tabbytones!"

A smattering of polite applause follows. The Tabbytones were expected to win! They played everything technically perfect.

Plus, we know they got help from somebody behind the scenes. Gloria and I's suspicions are confirmed when Darcy throws up his paws emphatically. If the Tones got third place, who's gonna win?

"Second prize goes to... *The Silver Claws!*"

Another round of applause, but this time with a little more energy. The Silver Claws had some solid songs, but they weren't what you'd call revolutionary. Still, they'd put on a good show, and second place wasn't a shock.

"And finally, the winner of the Moonlight Melodies Concert date is..." Mrs. Latchkey pauses dramatically, drawing it out until the tension was unbearable.

"Tommy and Sasha!" Latchkey roars.

The room explodes into applause, before cascading into confused chatter. I glance around at my friends, and their faces mirror my shock. I like Tommy and Sasha. They're cool cats, and they have a lot of heart. But how did they win the whole thing?

"Wait, are you kidding me?" Gloria mutters under her breath, shaking her head in disbelief. "What, did the judges just pick the last three acts that played in order and call it a day?"

"Tommy and Sasha? Seriously?" Perri echoed, her tail twitching in irritation. "They were fine, but..."

"But they didn't even compare to us!" Tiffany cuts in. I've never seen her so rattled.

"Rigged," Trudy mews. "Completely rigged."

"Talk about prejudgments," I meow. "They set everything up the way they wanted it to go. We got played, huh?"

Even Darcy looked taken aback, his usual composure slipping for a moment as he comes over to meet us. “Well, that’s... unexpected.”

At first we pretend to ignore him. But Tiffany can’t help herself. “You think, Darcy?” she asks him sarcastically. He immediately realizes she’s throwing shade and sighs.

The crowd’s applause wanes quickly. It isn’t just us who thought the decision was off—everyone seems thrown by the result.

“Congratulations to all our winners! These three groups truly took their academics seriously and showed that through their performances!” Latchkey announced.

“So, that’s it?” Tiffany growls. “We didn’t put enough *academics* into our shows? Lame!”

“Clearly, girls,” Darcy offers, clearing his throat. “They decided the order in advance. Even I was completely unaware of this. I promise you.”

“For once,” Gloria meows. “I actually believe that.”

The other Lunatics and I, plus Darcy, all look down in shame. We worked so hard, and we only lost because the assignment was stupidly rigged.

But then, like a slow rumble of thunder, the murmurs grew into something more.

“Wait, what about the Student Choice Award?” a familiar voice shouts from the back of the auditorium. Sure enough, it’s Lily! Of course, why wouldn’t she want to win? I completely forgot about the Choice. Of course, I voted for us, as did the other four. I honestly think Darcy voted for us, too, smooth cat that he is.

Mrs. Latchkey straightens up, clearly not expecting the outcry. She adjusts her glasses and raises her paw to calm the crowd. "Yes, we also tallied the Students Choice votes," Latchkey confirms. "I was getting to that."

The auditorium falls silent again with a sense of anxious hope. The Student Choice Award is the one that really matters to us now, anyway—the one voted on by our peers. This shows who really won the hearts of the school. The prize, well, is bragging rights. But right now, if we beat Lily at this, we've already won something better than any rigged gig anyway.

"The winner of the Student Choice Award, by an overwhelming margin..." Latchkey pauses, glancing down at her notes with surprise, "...is the *Lunatics in Love!*"

The roar of applause is deafening. I can't help but grin, the energy rushing through me like a bolt of lightning. Tiffany jumps up, fists in the air, and the rest of us follow, unable to contain our excitement.

So, we did win something, after all. It may not be the official prize, but right now, it's the one that matters most. Our classmates loved us. Obviously, they weren't going to let some snooty, prejudiced judges' decisions take that away from us.

There's a sudden surge toward the stage, students chanting, "Lun-a-tics! Lun-a-tics!"

The excitement is so intense that Mrs. Latchkey and the other teachers look rather panicked, scrambling to keep order.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouts, "Give the Lunatics a shot at Moonlight Melodies!" We all realize quickly that it's Tommy of the duo that won!

The chant picked up immediately. "One song! One song!"

It's now pandemonium, and in the middle of it all, I see Lily glaring from her seat, her arms crossed. She looks livid, her plan for glory completely backfiring.

I nudge Tiffany, still buzzing from our unexpected victory clawed away from the jaws of defeat. "Looks like the rabble are on our side."

Tiffany grins, still catching her breath. "Yeah, but let's see if the teachers budge."

Mrs. Latchkey finally gets the microphone back under control, her voice shaky but authoritative. "Alright, alright! Settle down, everyone. I understand you're all passionate about this, and that's commendable. However, the rules..."

Suddenly, another voice cuts through the cacophony.

"Actually," a booming female voice announced, standing tall near the side of the stage, spoke up, "I think it would be a fair compromise to let the Lunatics in Love play one song at Moonlight Melodies."

"Mom?" Darcy shouted. Indeed, apparently, this was Mrs. Valerian. She basically looked like Darcy, just with longer hair, claws, and eyelashes. Every eye is now on her.

Mrs. Latchkey, clearly caught off guard by the sudden intervention, stammers for a moment before nodding. "Lady... Misteria... Valerian, I understand, you may be disappointed, but these are the results."

"It's clear that the students know what they want," Lady Valerian insists. "In this case, I'd say their voices deserve to be heard, as well."

"Well..." Latchkey stumbles. "I suppose we could make an exception, given the circumstances, and your standing, my Lady."

“No disrespect to Tommy and Sasha,” Lady Valerian roars. “But, I will see to it that these young voices are heard, even if it is only one additional song. So, Lunatics? What do you say?”

All five of us roar in unison. “Yes, Ma’am!”

The crowd erupts into cheers once more. It was happening—we’re getting our moment on the Moonlight Melodies stage. Latchkey notices her notes went mysteriously missing. So, she just shouts out “Dismissed!” and everyone files out like school’s already out for summer.

Soon as we escape the mess, we end up by our usual morning hangout spot and huddle together. Naturally, we’re still reeling from everything that had happened.

“So... we only get one song at Moonlight,” Gloria meows, shaking her head slightly, but with a grin on her face. “Which one do we go with?”

“Easy,” Perri chimes in. “The school loves Soundtrack of Summer. That’s what they’re expecting.”

But before we can all nod in agreement, I watch as Darcy comes over to join us.

“I think we all know what song actually has to happen,” I suggest. “Tiffany? Darcy?”

Tiffany’s face turns to stone as the rest of us grin at her. “Wait, no, you guys...” Tiffany protests.

But Darcy, standing quietly beside her, cuts in with a soft smile. “I think it’s only right we perform the duet. If you’ll have me.”

We Lunatics in Love exchange glances, and in that moment, the decision is unanimous.

Tiffany blushes as her eyes meet Darcy's. "Alright then. Let's make this one count."

Gloria edges up to Darcy. "Oh, so now you're cool with my lyrics?"

Darcy stares blankly at Gloria for a moment, before nodding his head. "I'm okay being proven wrong sometimes. I think without you doing that, we wouldn't have even gotten to this point."

"So, you're sorry?" Trudy asks.

"Yes, Miss Gloria. I'm terribly sorry," Darcy apologizes. It sounds genuine, but I don't think any of us trust him at this point. "But before you ask, no, I didn't help the Tabbytones. I simply gave them some advice with arrangements. I was just hurt that my words meant that little to you."

Trudy looks furious, along with Gloria, but Perri cut them both off at the pass. "You got a lot of nerve bringing your mom into this. We appreciate it, but it's still pretty under-pawed."

"I had nothing to do with that," Darcy meows. "Apparently, Mom likes you five over Lily's... whatever that was."

Tiffany has a quizzical look. I don't know what to think. The other three don't, either.

"Darcy," I mew, "This is all a team effort. And I know your mom loved it. Didn't she?"

Darcy sighs. "Yeah, she liked Gloria's lyrics better than mine. Of course, she's a girl. She knows better, apparently." He laughs. But none of us find it funny.

"Yes," Gloria meows, pridefully. "Yes, she does."

Then we all burst out laughing. Even Darcy chuckles, but I can tell in his eyes he wants to run off and hide. In any case, we'd won something. Still, I see everyone mobbing Tommy and Sasha in the courtyard. I'm deflated, but I'm still happy for those two.

"What I really wanted to tell you all," Darcy meows, clearing his throat. "I had a poor feeling about this whole affair. It felt rigged from the start. I assure you, Mom has nothing to do with this."

"You know, Darcy," Tiffany mews. "I was wondering, why is your mom so into the Battle of the Bands?"

Darcy stares at her with bemusement. "Oh, I didn't tell you? She runs the Moonlight Melodies Extravaganza."

"Wow, and Tommy and Sasha are going to be headlining it," I meow.

"The hell they are!" Darcy growls. "They're good, sure. But not as good as us." He doesn't really mean us, of course, but him and Tiffany.

"Well, I'm just glad we got a shot," Gloria meows. "And Darcy, you better not screw this up for us!"

"Believe me, Miss Quazar. I won't." Darcy groans.

As the crowd starts to thin out, I spot Jinx of the Tabbytones slipping away quietly, her usual confident strut replaced with a slow, almost defeated shuffle. Her sleek black fur and even darker hair catches the sunlight, but there's no shine in her yellow eyes. She keeps her head down as she heads toward the outskirts of the courtyard, clearly trying to hold it together. Louie and Dan are nowhere to be seen, likely still crying at their lockers.

I make my way over, weaving through the lingering students and musicians, and catch up to her just as she starts to walk home.

“Hey, Jinx,” I say softly, not wanting to startle her.

She stops, shoulders tense as she turns to face me. Up close, I notice just how perfect her slicked back hair is—silky black with subtle hints of dark blue, like the night sky. Her eyes, usually bright and sharp, look dull now, her pupils narrowed in pain. She’s wearing her signature silver choker, and her stage outfit—a chic, asymmetrical velvet dress—only makes her look more striking, even in her current state.

“Oh, hey, Danika,” she mews in her Southern drawl, forcing a smile, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Congrats on placing higher. You guys deserved it.”

I can tell she’s trying to be gracious, but there’s a crack in her voice. She was so sure they had it. Everyone was. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look so... lost.

“Thanks,” I reply, stepping closer. “But honestly, you guys were incredible. I mean, third place? That’s still huge.”

Jinx shrugs, her tail flicking in frustration. “Yeah, I guess,” she drawls. “The scholarship money helps. It’s just... I really thought we had it this time, you know? All that practice, all that work...” Her voice trails off, and she lets out a bitter laugh. “Guess it wasn’t enough.”

I place a paw on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You were more than enough, Jinx. Seriously, your set was flawless. That crowd loved you. It’s not always about the trophies.”

She looks up at me, her golden eyes shining with unshed tears. “But it feels like it is. I just... I wanted this so bad.”

“I know,” I mew. “It’s that hunger, that drive that pushes us all towards greatness. But hey, this isn’t the end. You’re Jinx Brody! Everyone knows you’re a star in the making.”

She sniffs, wiping at her eyes with the back of her paw, and for a second, the confident, sharp-witted girl I've always admired seems so small. I can't stand seeing her like this.

"You know," I continue, trying to lighten the mood, "I was thinking... maybe, for our next big gig, you could guest on one of our tracks? I mean, your voice would add something really special. I'm sure the others would be into it."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and for the first time tonight, there's a flicker of hope. "Really? You'd want me on one of your songs?"

"Absolutely," I meow with a grin. "We're all about collaboration. Besides, it'd be a crime not to showcase that voice of yours."

Jinx blinks a few times, then finally gives me a real smile—small, but genuine. "Thanks, Danika. That... that actually sounds amazing."

"Then it's a deal," I promise, offering my paw. "We'll make some magic happen."

She takes my paw, her grip firm but warm, and nods. "I'd love that."

We stand there for a moment, just smiling at each other, and I can tell she's starting to pull herself back together. Third place isn't what she wanted, but it doesn't have to be the end of the road for her—or the Tabbytones. In fact, this could be the start of something even better.

"Let's keep in touch, okay?" I say as we start to head back toward the rest of the crowd.

Jinx nods, her tail flicking back up with a bit more bounce now. “Definitely. And... thanks again, Danika. You have no idea how much this means.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” I shrug.

As she walks away, a little of that old confidence creeping back into her stride, I can’t help but smile. I’ve got a feeling this isn’t the last time we’ll see Jinx on stage—far from it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The park is never this beautiful in the daylight. By moonlight, it's magical. I can't help but think how everything—us, especially—has been transformed by the music we'd made over these past weeks.

We Lunatics gather around a stone bench, the weight of the past month finally sinking in. This win isn't even about our music anymore—it's about everything that led us here. Maybe I'm feeling extra dramatic tonight, but it really feels like we've crossed some kind of threshold.

Tiffany sighs with a mix of relief and pride. "What a night! I can't believe we pulled it off, even if it wasn't exactly how we expected to win."

I lean back, adopting my best dramatic tone. "Believe it, Tiff. We're kind of a big deal now."

"It was more than an amazing performance," Gloria adds thoughtfully. "I think what mattered most is that our message got through."

With a teasing glint in her eye, Perri nudges Tiffany. "Speaking of messages... how's Mr. Broody doing? Or should I say, Mr. Darcy?"

Tiff's eyes glisten in the moonlight. "You know, I learned something big from all this," she reveals. "I was quick to judge Darcy based on overheard gossip and... you know, my own assumptions. But he's talented, even if he has a bit of a mean streak. And he has killer taste in music, obviously."

I grin, unable to resist. "Surprises all around. A classic lesson, Tiff."

Trudy pipes in with a knowing look. “Almost like... you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover?”

Tiffany nods, smiling at the irony. “Exactly. Or, you know, a tomcat by his fur.”

Gloria throws her arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. “I’m proud of you, Tiff. It takes guts to admit when you’ve been wrong.”

Tiffany smiles back, the tension she’s carried for weeks finally starting to melt away. “Thanks, Glo. It’s just, life’s too short for petty judgments. Reading *Paws and Prejudgments* helped me realize that.”

“I’m sure my tribute song Purrfectly Prejudiced helped, too,” Trudy grins.

Perri laughs heartily. “The power of a good book! One day, they’ll write one about us—The Pride and Prejudices of Some Lunatics in Love!”

I laugh. “As long as I’m portrayed as the mysterious, gorgeous keyboard player with a heart of gold.”

Trudy rolls her eyes. “You mean the dramatic, glitter-obsessed keyboardist with a flair for the theatrics?”

I pretend to be offended. “Same thing, right?”

We all dissolve into laughter, the sound bouncing around the park, mingling with the faint hum of wallpaper music from the little outbuildings meant to set a peaceful atmosphere. This is our night, and no one can take that away from us.

As our conversation lulls, I can’t help but think about how much we’ve grown—individually and as a band. We started this festival with something to prove, but now we’ve proven it to ourselves. Sure, we didn’t take first place, but we’ve won

something even more important—the respect of our peers, and the understanding that we could create something truly special together.

Tiffany raises an imaginary glass high. “To new beginnings, understanding, and always rocking out with our claws out!”

We all clink our imaginary glasses together with a resounding “Cheers!” We know this toast, however fake, is just the beginning of something much bigger.

But I’m not done yet. “And,” I add, “to Darcy too. After all, would we have made it without him?”

There’s a brief pause before everyone nods. “Yeah, alright,” Perri admits. “He didn’t hurt.”

Tiffany rolls her eyes but smiles, a softness in her gaze that wasn’t there before. “Yeah. He didn’t.”

For hours that night, we stay there, under the moonlit sky, soaking in the aftermath—the lights, the laughter, and the lingering dopamine rush of our unexpected victory. There will be other battles, other songs to write and play, but for now, it’s enough just to be here, together.

Yeah, while this marks the end of the fall festival, it’s also the beginning of the next phase of our band’s career. As I see it, there’s no one I’d rather share it with than these Lunatics—my best friends, my band, my chosen family.

TWO WEEKS LATER...

It’s strange how much can change in just a few weeks. Ever since the festival, the energy at school has shifted. The usual whirlwind of student life carries on, of course—classes, tests, gossip. But a particular someone has become very different.

One morning, headed toward third-period history, I notice Lily Featherstone. She's been keeping her distance from the Lunatics and me since the festival. Today, though, her usual pristine, perfectly curated appearance was missing. Gone is the high ponytail, curtain bangs, and polished look that were once her signature. Her hair's tied back in a severe bun and she walks with far less confidence than usual, slightly bent as if carrying the world on her back.

As for Darcy, Lily is avoiding him like the plague. She barely even glances in his direction anymore, especially as he and Tiffany have gotten pretty tight recently. After all that anger and resentment about him not sticking by her side, it seems like Lily can't even bring herself to acknowledge his existence. It's a far cry from the Lily who once pranced down these very halls, treating them like her own personal stage.

Later, I see Lily sitting alone near her locker, fiddling with the fraying edges of her bookbag. I wasn't planning on stopping, but something in her posture, the way she seems so much smaller than usual, tugs at my heartstrings.

Taking a deep breath, I saunter over. "Hey, Lily."

She looks up, surprise in her eyes. "Oh, hey, Dani." Her voice was softer than I expected, and I could tell something was eating away at her.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing," I meow, leaning against the locker next to her. "You've been... quieter lately."

For a moment, Lily doesn't respond. She just stares down at her paws, twisting her foreclaws nervously. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she coughs.

"I owe you an apology," she murmurs, now barely meeting my gaze. "For everything. For being so mean... to you, the Lunatics, and especially Tiffany."

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” I meow with a shrug. “I know you’re not a bad queen. We all know that.”

“That’s really kind of you to say, Dani,” Lily mews, her eyes flitting back and forth between me and her books, as if taking inventory of all the things she wants to say to me, but won’t. “I wasn’t just angry at you or Darcy,” Lily continues. “I was angry at myself, at...everything. My dad puts so much pressure on me. I’m constantly expected to make him look good, and when I didn’t win anything at the festival, it was like the whole world came crashing down.”

Her words hit me harder than I expect. I never appreciated how much pressure she’d been under. Now, this makes me see her in a completely different light. The girl who had been our rival, who made our lives difficult in so many ways, was now completely vulnerable.

I reach out and pull her into a hug, surprising us both. “Lily, I’ve always admired you. You’re so smart, so talented. You just...you don’t have to be perfect all the time. No one does.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, Lily smiles, one that’s real and genuine, not practiced. “Thanks, Danika. I needed to hear that.”

“You know, I wasn’t just hanging out with you to spy on you for the band,” I admit. “I actually think deep down, you’re really neat. You’re just figuring things out, just like the rest of us.”

“Samesies,” Lily says, picking up her books and smiling even wider. “You pull off that look way better than me. The violet really does it.”

“This is actually my natural color,” I offer. “But you don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“Well, Dani, since we’re clearly chill now, I have something I’ve been meaning to tell you.” Lily looks at the floor.

I figured a bombshell was coming. “What’s up, Lily?”

“Well, my dad’s not happy about the festival. He saw it as an embarrassment,” she mews.

“Yeah, I had a bad feeling about you spending so much time on that only to not win,” I admit.

“But that’s not what made him mad. Because I tried so hard to beat Tiffany, I wasn’t ready for the Summit,” Lily sniffles. “I blew it big time, trying to wing it when I wasn’t prepared. I made a total mockery of myself.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I meow. This time, I’m serious.

“So, next semester,” Lily continues. “Dad’s sending me to Catulet Prep Academy. He says this is so I get serious about my studies. It’s in the next town over, so... I guess this will be goodbye.”

I blink rapidly in shock. “Wait, what? You’re leaving Catbridge High?”

Lily nods, her expression mixed with sadness and resignation. “Yeah. My dad thinks it’ll be better for me...better for his reputation. But I’ll make sure to keep in touch. It’s not like I’m moving across the country.”

I was still processing the news, but then a thought popped into my head that made me grin despite the situation. “You know, Catulet Prep has that rockin’ up-and-coming band.” I told her. “The one led by that pawsome tom named Romeow Whistler. Hey, could you...get some intel on them for us?”

Lily's eyes sparkle for the first time in days. "You want me to get in good with Romeow, huh? I'll see what I can do."

We both laugh, the tension almost completely evaporated between us. I think back to when Lily told me about her set and she used the word derring-do. Finally, I see a look in her eyes that makes me think maybe there's more adventure and bravery in her than I thought.

"Well, I gotta go," she mews with a sniffle.

"Hey, take care of yourself, Lily," I reply.

"Oh, and Dani?" she asks. "Thank you. For saving me at the café that day. I don't know why you did. But I owe you."

"You don't owe me a thing," I meow. "Just pay it forward, okay?"

"OK, I'll see ya," she mews, then scurries off.

I'm shocked that suddenly I feel bad. I can't believe that a couple moon cycles from now, she'll no longer be a part of our school days. But I have a feeling Lily needs this change. Maybe this is the fresh start she needs. Who knows? One day, the Lunatics in Love will probably find themselves facing off against The Catulets in some future Battle of the Bands.

For now, though, we Lunatics have our own stories to keep writing. I'm eager to see where the next chapter will take us.

But as I walk away, I hear a familiar chuckle. I turn and see Lily grinning at me, that old confident look back in her eye. Whatever happens next, I know we haven't seen the last of her.

~ Danika Doby ~