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**DROP
DEAD**



Famous

JENNIFER PEARSON

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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One

Stevie Baker stopped in the parking lot of her high school's football stadium and looked up at her sister. All twenty feet of her. It had been over a year since she'd seen Blair, and now here she was, looming over her. A beautiful, two-dimensional giant.

The billboard of the blond-haired, platinum-album selling, Grammy-winning, international *music phenomenon* could probably be seen from the other side of town. Blair—Honeyville's most famous export since, well, honey—was dressed in the Honeyville High band uniform, though a much glitzier version, with thigh-high boots and a rhinestone-encrusted shako towering atop her head. The words Homecoming Tour were lit up around her. Her shiny red mouth was open—pink tongue sticking out.

It was all *very* Blair. Stevie's dad, Frank Baker, clapped his hand on her shoulder and gave her a vigorous shake. "This is quite something, isn't it, Little Bear?"

It was *something*, all right.

Five years ago, just before she turned sixteen, Blair and her guitar had stepped onto the stage of *America's Next Icon* and were catapulted from obscurity—aka Honeyville—into the national spotlight. Starting this homecoming tour in her hometown was

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an obvious PR stunt, Stevie thought, but a good one. Blair was about to turn twenty-one—become an adult—and this concert was her party. Three days, from June 1 to 3.

Everyone was invited—for the cost of a ticket.

Frank gave Stevie's shoulder a squeeze. "Mia would have loved this."

Stevie pushed back a sudden swell of emotion. "She really would've."

Just then, Marnie Baker marched toward them and threw her manicured hands in the air. "Always with the tongue. Why can't she just smile? Blair has a lovely smile. Who wants to see *tongue*?"

"The tongue's her *thing*, Mom," Stevie said.

It was a valid point though. Stevie was no fan of seeing her sister's tongue. Especially now with it looming above her, bigger than a pool float.

A group of freshman girls clattered past them, shrieking as they raced to join the steadily growing line of fans waiting to get through the stadium turnstiles. They were all wearing variations of the same outfit—sequined skirts, cowboy boots, arms covered in friendship bracelets, and glitter. A shit ton of glitter. Someone in the line had brought a speaker, and after squeals of delight, an impromptu singalong of Blair's biggest song, "Broken Roots and Burnt Bridges," started up.

Frank's eyes widened with concern. Marnie was not a fan of that particular hit. In fact, all playing or mention of it had been banned in the Baker household on account of it being about a drunk and overbearing mother. True, Marnie liked a glass of wine or a margarita from time to time, but she wasn't an alcoholic. At least not one who would shout at cats from the porch, as the song suggested. Blair had insisted the woman in the song was

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imagined, but Marnie still took offense. And Stevie liked to blast the track out at full volume over the house speakers whenever she and Marnie were arguing. Which, these days, was often.

Marnie flipped open her compact and teased her blowout with a comb. “Frank, where’s the VIP entrance?” Then, before he could answer, she continued: “You should have let Blair send us a car, Frank. Why didn’t you let her send a car?” Then, “Does this trouser suit look all right? Should I have worn the blue? I should have worn the blue. Why didn’t you tell me to wear the blue?”

Frank looked unsure as to which question to attempt to answer first, but was saved by a shout of “Mr. and Mrs. Baker?”

It was Hilton Moore, one of Hollywood’s top celebrity reporters. Stevie recognized him immediately: the dark, shoulder-length, wavy hair; the tight suit; the strong jaw. He was objectively handsome, Stevie admitted, though he was older. He had to be pushing forty.

Hilton strode toward them, teeth first, with a megawatt smile and microphone in hand and a cameraman behind, who was struggling to keep up. Stevie let out an involuntary snarl. Hilton was a jerk. He had been the one who had written that shitty story about Hal.

Marnie forced a huge smile and murmured, “Charm offensive, people. Don’t give him *anything* but ‘Happy Family.’”

Stevie looked at her doubtfully.

“Just smile!” Marnie hissed. Her eyes ran over Stevie, then slipped toward Frank. “Didn’t I tell you there’d be cameras? I told you both to dress smart—why don’t you ever listen?”

Stevie’s dad smoothed down the front of his shirt. “But we like the plaid.” Frank winked at Stevie. “Matchy-matchy!”

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Stevie gave her dad a weak smile. It was true—she was also wearing plaid. She would have avoided *matchy-matchy*, but she'd walked over straight from the gym and that was all she'd brought with her.

“Mr. Moore!” Marnie cried.

Stevie hung back, hovering behind her dad so she wouldn't have to talk to him.

“Mrs. Baker, you look positively radiant,” Hilton said, leaning in to kiss the air on either side of Marnie's cheeks. “That yellow—it's outstanding on you!”

“It's PANTONE twelve, resplendent canary,” Stevie whispered.

Frank snorted, coughed to cover it up.

“Oh, you,” Marnie said, slapping Hilton's arm playfully. “How are you finding South Carolina?”

“Absolutely charming, the whole town smells like fried dough and lake water. I had the best shrimp and grits I've ever eaten in my hotel last night,” Hilton said, then offered his hand to Frank. “Mr. Baker.”

Frank shook Hilton's hand, though it was clear he didn't want to. “And may I just say that you look positively radiant too!”

It was Stevie's turn to snort.

Radiant was not the word she would have chosen to describe her father. He was more . . . dependable. Sturdy. One hundred percent dad-like, maybe.

Frank looked mildly horrified. “Radiant?”

“It's the plaid,” Stevie whispered.

“Well, apart from the eye,” Hilton said, tilting his head to the side. “Is that a shiner I see there, Mr. Baker? What *have* you been up to?”

“Frank helps out at the Aaron Taylor Community Center,”

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Marnie said quickly, clearly worried that Hilton would intimate to his readers that Blair Baker's dad was some kind of street fighter.

"Aaron Taylor . . . why does that name ring a bell?" Hilton asked.

Stevie flashed a concerned look at her dad. This was a difficult subject for him—he'd been one of the first officers on the scene.

Marnie placed her hand over her heart. "He was the poor boy who was murdered on Independence Day four years ago. After he retired, Frank wanted to give back to the community, so he started volunteering at the center."

"And someone at the center is responsible for the black eye?" Hilton asked.

Frank waved a hand dismissively. "It was nothing. I got in the way of a couple of kids roughhousing. Some of the boys can get a bit boisterous at times."

Hilton smiled. "Oh, I bet they can! But I'm not here to talk about troubled teens—"

"I think they're just regular teens, actually," Stevie interjected. Hilton swung to look at her.

Oh great. Now she might have to speak to him. She should have kept her mouth shut.

"Oh goodness! I didn't see you there!" Hilton clutched his hand to his chest, a look of genuine surprise on his face. Sure, she was short, especially compared to Blair. But she wasn't *transparent*. "And who might *you* be?" he asked, thrusting the microphone at her.

She was eighteen and he was talking to her like she was a preschooler.

Her eyes shifted from the microphone to Hilton. "I might be Stevie." Her voice purposefully bright, not matching her scowl.

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“The sister!” Hilton threw his arms in the air. “Of course!”

“Yup, the sister.”

Not a person in her own right, or anything like that.

“I didn’t recognize you!” Hilton shook his head and laughed.

“It’s extraordinary how very different you look from Blair!”

Stevie got this a lot. Blair was five foot ten, slim, blond. Stevie was five foot three, built like a gymnast, and dark haired.

But they had the same bright blue eyes.

“You three must be very excited to see Blair kick off her new tour tonight. And back at her old school, in her hometown!”

Marnie nodded enthusiastically—too enthusiastically, Stevie thought. “We’re hugely, *hugely* excited, like everybody else in Honeyville. The concert has been the talk of the town for months. We’re extremely proud of her.”

Proud wasn’t one of the many words Marnie had used to describe how she felt about her daughter the last time Blair had graced them with her company. Exhausting, demanding, chaotic . . . Blair’s visits had always had the potential for tears, tantrums, and family drama. It was true what people said about fame changing a person. But fame hadn’t only changed Blair; it had stolen her away from them, too.

So, yes, Marnie was right—they were proud of Blair. But their pride was tinged with sadness.

“It’s wonderful to see her back performing after *another* one of her breaks!”

Annoyingly, Hilton emphasized the word *another*. Six months earlier, Blair had *checked into a clinic*. The party line, and one Marnie had desperately tried to swallow, was that she was going to a health spa for some rest and relaxation, but the rumor was that she was in rehab again.

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Hilton lowered his voice. “An emotional time though, I would imagine?” Hilton’s smile was replaced by a look of concerned interest. “Have family relations been . . . difficult?”

Stevie’s eyes moved from her dad to her mom. How were they going to field this one? She actually jumped when Marnie let out a very loud, forced laugh.

“What family doesn’t have their little disagreements? But we’re fine. Completely fine. Better than fine!”

It wasn’t the most convincing performance.

“That’s great to hear.” Hilton clearly didn’t believe a word of it. “So, Hal is coming to see the show?” He looked around as if to say, *Because I don’t see him.*

“Of course!” Marnie’s voice pitched up. She cleared her throat, found a lower tone. “He wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

Not what Stevie’s half brother had told her.

“I’m sorry, Hilton—we’d better be going,” Frank said, placing his hand on Marnie’s back, ready to guide her away.

Good old Frank. He was the expert at maneuvering Stevie’s mom out of all sorts of situations. Frank had prevented many a public showdown, including the time Marnie had confronted Stevie’s school counselor in the seasonal aisle in Target. Mr. Hassell had no idea how close he was to getting beamed by an ornamental pumpkin.

“I think that’s Bex Lyons over there,” Frank continued. “We’re meeting her so she can take us to our seats.”

“Oh yes!” Marnie said, eyeing her escape route. “That’s Ms. Lyons! Ms. Lyons!”

Bex was Blair’s manager’s assistant. At least, that’s who Stevie thought she was. It was possible she doubled up as a bodyguard, too. She was a short, stocky woman, with pale skin and hair

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cut close to her scalp and a *don't mess with me* aura around her. Now she was watching them from behind sunglasses, her face completely still, unmoved by the sight of a woman in a billowing yellow trouser suit hollering at her.

“Must dash!” Marnie marched off, leaving Hilton and his microphone in her wake.

“Is Hal coming, Dad?” Stevie asked as they started after her.

“Not sure. I thought I saw his truck earlier, but I guess that was wishful thinking,” Frank said. “Your mother tried to persuade him. He said he was too old for a concert.”

Stevie raised her eyebrows. Hal was only thirty-three, so they both knew that wasn't the reason. The truth was, Hal had never completely forgiven Blair for the story she'd leaked to the press about him a few years ago.

“Annie might have talked him around. She said even if Hal refuses, she might still come,” Frank said.

Hal wouldn't show. Not after the disastrous *Welcome Home, Blair* dinner that was supposed to happen the night before. When a huge bouquet of flowers arrived in Blair's place, Hal had been more than a bit pissed. Annie had tried to calm him down, but even her usually super effective wifely influence hadn't worked this time. Stevie understood his reaction—Hal had gone, ready to finally set things right with Blair, and he was hurt that she hadn't bothered to show.

Blair had sent Stevie a message, the first in four months according to her phone, clearly trying to get her to smooth things over.

Please don't hate me. Tell everyone I'm sorry. But this is super super important. Can't explain but believe me I have a reason.

Typically overdramatic and probably bullshit. *I have a really good reason but can't come up with one right now, so just take this*

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word salad as an excuse. Stevie had sent back a quick response.

Sure. No problem.

She didn't see the point in getting into it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Baker . . ." Bex pulled down her sunglasses a fraction of an inch and looked at Stevie. "And the *sister*?"

Again, with the surprise—and Bex had met Stevie at least twice before. Although she supposed that was a while ago now.

Music started up from inside the stadium—the support act, Dime a Dozen. A murmur of impatience rolled through the people still queuing up to get inside.

"Do you have your lanyards?" Bex barked.

Stevie flinched.

Wow. Bex Lyons was a real charmer.

Marnie frantically rummaged through her purse, handing Stevie an enormous can of hair spray, a fistful of receipts, and a Saran-Wrapped turkey sandwich before finally producing the three VIP lanyards with a triumphant "Ta-dah!"

Bex remained stoney-faced. "If you wouldn't mind putting them on, I'll take you through security and show you to your seats."

Bex led them right to the front of the lines, where the security guard was looking on with indifference as an overemotional Blair Baker fan begged to be let backstage.

"Heavens! Is that girl wearing a bathing suit?" Marnie whispered, loud enough for anyone in a thirty-foot radius to hear.

It was quite the outfit. A purple one-piece, with tassels running down the front and arms, and silver cowboy boots.

Stevie knew her—Colby Green—with her bouncy blond hair and too much lip gloss. Just over two years ago, Colby had transferred from East Side High to Honeyville midway through

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freshman year. When Colby had discovered that she was in the same year as Blair Baker's sister, she'd spent an entire semester hassling her. Stevie had tried her best to avoid her, but when Colby had accosted her while she was in the bathroom stall one lunch break, Stevie had decided enough was enough. Mid-flow was not the time to discuss whether Blair would do a live chat on Colby's Blair Baker fan page. Stevie told her to back off or she'd have her banned from all Blair's concerts for all eternity. Colby had left her alone after that.

Colby didn't look like she was about to give up this time though. The fringing of her bodysuit flapped about wildly as she waved her phone in the security guy's face. "I'm her number one fan! Look! I literally run the Blairites fan page! I—"

"I don't care if you have her name tattooed on your ass—you're not going backstage."

Stevie tried not to look too pleased when she cut past Colby. But it did make her feel a little bit important; maybe there were some benefits to being a superstar's sister.

Stevie and her parents flashed their VIP passes to a woman in a high-visibility vest who fired at them, "Names."

"Mrs. Marnie with an *ie*, Baker." Stevie's mom spoke loudly and with an air of importance that got a few people waiting in the queue whispering, "Is that Blair's mom?!"

Stevie's dad leaned in, cleared his throat. "Frank Baker."

The woman checked off their names on her clipboard, then frowned after Stevie gave hers. "*Stevie Baker?* Huh." She tapped the clipboard with her pen. "Do you have your ID?"

"It's in the car." Stevie's cheeks burned. Was she *actually* about to be turned away from her own sister's concert? This was karma for feeling all pleased with herself.

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Bex stepped in. “Is there a problem here, Janie? These people are Blair’s family.”

Janie fumbled her clipboard. “No, no problem, Ms. Lyons.”

Bex gestured inside. “If you’d like to follow me.”

Marnie nodded curtly—a *screwed up there, didn’t you, Janie?* look on her face.

Stevie heard a shout from behind. Sheesh. Colby and her tassels were getting increasingly animated.

“What if I got on my knees and begged?” Colby was asking.

Marnie tutted. “What a scene!”

“Might get you one of those purple numbers, Marnie,” Frank said, giving her a playful pat on the bottom.

Ugh. Stevie did not need to hear that.

Marnie rolled her eyes. “Behave yourself, Frank.”

Bex led them out onto the field, and Stevie took a breath, trying to take it all in. The stands were almost full. She’d heard there were ten thousand tickets sold, and looking around now, she believed it.

The inside of the stadium was unrecognizable. The Blair Baker production machine had rolled into town the moment Honeyville High had let out for summer. In under two weeks, they’d constructed an enormous stage on the north end zone, directly in front of the field house. Several covered walkways had been erected to allow access to the stage. Heavy-duty flooring had been laid over the turf and extra stands had been added to the bleachers to allow for more seating.

Marnie was loving life. She was nodding and waving and yoo-hooing when she spotted someone she knew in general admission seats, and reminding Frank who they were along the way.

Some of Stevie’s former classmates were there too. The concert

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was the start of their graduation celebrations. Tomorrow, they were heading to Folly Beach for beach week. She'd been invited but didn't feel she could go. She wasn't graduating and didn't feel she had the right to celebrate. She'd gone to kindergarten, elementary, and middle school with them, but after what had happened with Mia, she'd fallen behind in her studies, and had to repeat her freshman year. She'd drifted apart from them—all her fault—she knew that—still, she wished things could have been different.

“The whole of Honeyville is out in force tonight!” Frank said as Stevie watched her classmates heading toward the east stand.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You okay, Little Bear? You can go with them if you want.”

Stevie forced a smile. “What, and ditch my matching plaid partner?” she said, nudging his arm. She glanced toward the others, then back at him, and smiled properly when she saw the concern in his eyes. “Honestly, I'm good here.”

Bex Lyons led them to the front of the stadium and up the steps of the stand right next to the stage. They shuffled along the row to their seats, Marnie oblivious to the fact that she was managing to hit everyone in the row with her purse as she passed. The place was almost full, a sea of sequin-clad fans largely ignoring the support act, who were valiantly battling through their set despite the disinterest. Concert mascots, dressed up as giant teddy bears in the Honeyville High football uniforms, were clapping their paws together, trying to drum up some enthusiasm.

“Prime position!” Frank declared, rubbing his hands together as they reached the middle of the row.

“You'd hope so,” Marnie said, lowering herself into her seat in a queenly manner, as she nodded and smiled at people she didn't know and who clearly had no idea who she was.

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Stevie looked at the empty seat next to her, then glanced at Bex. Was she going to have to sit next to her for the whole concert? That would make for a cheery experience . . .

“That’s for Gunner Trip,” Bex said.

Oh, thank god. Wait. The Gunner Trip?

“He’ll be along later.” Bex said, already looking elsewhere. “I’ll give you my number in case you need to contact me.” Stevie handed Bex her phone and she punched the number in. “I need to get backstage. Lots to do. Enjoy the show. We’re pushing the limits with this new tour. You’re going to see a whole new, grown-up Blair.”

Pushing limits was something Blair was an expert at. Pushing people to their limit, and then straight over the edge, in Hal’s case.

Marnie elbowed Stevie in the side and mouthed, *Gunner Trip*, eyes flashing with wild excitement. Stevie tried to play it cool. But it was a bit exciting that he was going to be there, sitting right next to them.

Gunner Trip was a linebacker for the Titans. National hero after his stint on *Dancing with the Stars*. And Blair’s boyfriend, apparently. *Apparently* because, according to the laws of Marnie Baker, boyfriend status could not be confirmed just yet, as no one in the family had ever met him. Although it looked like that was about to change.

“Did you hear that, Frank? Gunner Trip!” Marnie cried, pushing herself to her feet, then swatting Stevie’s knees. “Stevie, swap seats with me!”

Stevie had only just managed to move out of the way when Marnie launched herself into her space.

“Gunner Trip!” Marnie said again, bouncing her shoulders up and down and rubbing her hands together.

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Stevie had never met the guy, but she already felt sorry for him.

She settled into her new seat and had a discreet look around. Maybe there were some other celebs in the VIP box. There was some old guy in the section below with someone who was probably his daughter. Stevie thought she recognized him—an actor, maybe? It wasn't until he turned around that she realized who he was—Kirk Tyler, Blair's manager. Stevie had never met him in person, but she had decided he may be a bit of a douche when Blair had missed Mia's thirteenth birthday because Kirk had made Blair perform at some shopping mall. His douche status was fully confirmed when Blair hadn't shown up for any of Mia's vigils last year due to *work commitments*.

His eyes fell on Stevie, then drifted to Frank and Marnie. He held up his hand. Marnie waved back. Frank managed a curt nod.

Stevie turned around, wondering if there was anyone else she'd recognize. Two rows back, the actor Todd Richards sat next to the supermodel Asha Deacon. She was scrolling through her phone, looking pretty cheerless. Probably because Honeyville local, Weatherman Stan, was on her other side, and obviously beyond excited—Stevie tilted her head—and, yeah, possibly a little drunk. Down the row from him were the members of the K-pop band KP1, and Roddy Ripper, recently retired Ultimate Fighting Champ.

Incredible, really, that they'd all made the trip to little old Honeyville, population five thousand.

By the time the support act left the stage, Gunner Trip had still not materialized. Marnie only stopped sighing with disappointment when the lights went off and the arena was plunged into darkness.

Then, two faces appeared on the huge screen under the words Honoring Those We've Lost.

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Stevie sucked in a breath so fast, she almost choked, and a weighted silence fell around the stadium.

Aaron Taylor and Mia.

What the hell was this?

Aaron wore a serious expression and an East Side High varsity jacket. His dirty blond hair was cut short at the sides but left slightly messy on top. His face was angular, almost hard-looking, and his intense green eyes stared out at the crowd. Stevie had never met him, though she had met his foster parents, Marvin and Gloria Thompson, a couple of times at the community center with her dad. Aaron was a good-looking guy, but there was a sadness behind his eyes.

In contrast, Mia's smile was luminous. Her photo was one Hal had taken on a Baker family vacation the summer after she turned twelve. Just before snapping it, he had said something corny—*The sun called, said you're outshining it*—and her smile was wide and completely unguarded. She was wearing a white dress and her charm bracelet. Her sandy blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and her usually pale complexion had taken on a soft bronze glow. This was a private family photo—one that Stevie knew hadn't been released to the press.

Blair's voice came blasting through the speakers. "Honeyville has been struck by tragedy twice. Today, as a community, we lift Aaron and Mia up in our hearts."

Stevie turned to her mom and whispered, "Did you know about this?"

Marnie, eyes filling with tears, shook her head.

Stevie turned to her dad—he looked shaken too. "I'm sure your sister is trying to do a nice thing . . ."

Nice? She was exploiting the town's pain.

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Thank god Hal hadn't come.

The fireworks started, shooting high into the night sky, exploding loudly in yellows and reds—the colors of Honeyville High. The crowd oohed and aahed, and then a voice echoed through the bleachers.

But Stevie couldn't move on from what she'd just witnessed.

Blair should have warned them. Should have *asked*.

The final firework exploded with a dramatic boom. The stadium fell silent, anticipation thrumming in the air.

"I'M BACK, BITCHES!" Blair's voice rolled over the crowd.

"Your sister, polite as always," Frank said to Stevie, trying to lighten the mood.

Screams and cheers rose. Everyone was on their feet. Smoke filled the stage. Lights flashed. Then a strum of an electric guitar so loud, it vibrated through Stevie's rib cage.

More screams, bordering on the hysterical now.

"HO-HO-HOMECOMING!" came Blair's voice again.

The lights flashed faster, and a platform climbed upward through the smoke.

Lying on top of it, bronzed legs draped over the edge, was Stevie's sister. She was wearing the outfit from the billboard, except her hat lay next to her, the stage lights bouncing off the rhinestones.

Stevie tried to push Mia's face from her mind—tried to let go and enjoy the show as the screams of the crowd intensified and the platform rose higher.

Her heart began to race. Blair certainly knew how to make an entrance.

"I hope she's strapped onto that thing," Marnie said, grimacing. "It's very high."

The guitar strummed again. The crowd whooped, recognizing

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the song. Stevie grinned. Blair was opening with “Broken Roots and Burnt Bridges.” Marnie bristled beside her. A group of fans in the standing section grabbed one another and jumped up and down, screaming. There were girls in the crowd who had already started crying. One shouted, “I love you, Blair!”—as though loving Blair was easy. Phones were raised, ready to capture the first song of Blair’s homecoming tour.

The guitar sounded again, settling into the song. The shouts died down, quieting to let Blair come in for the first verse.

“Four albums, over eighty songs to her name, and she chooses this one,” Marnie muttered.

“It’s a crowd favorite, Mom,” Stevie said.

“Why couldn’t she sing the one about her first love? That one’s lovely.”

A loud *shhh* came from behind them. Stevie swung around to see Todd Richards glaring at them.

Marnie turned around, waved, and smiled, while muttering angrily, “Who does he think he is, shushing me at my own daughter’s concert? The nerve of the man!” She quieted down after that though, ready for Blair’s vocals. But when the band played the opening verse, the lyrics went unsung.

“Isn’t that the part where she starts singing?” Marnie said.

“Usually,” Stevie said. “Probably part of the buildup.”

The lead guitar opened the verse for a second time, and the whole crowd seemed to lean forward as one, ready for Blair to sing the words *a queen of her own kingdom with a bottle in her hand*, but again, there was nothing.

“Do you think her microphone’s not working?” Marnie said, elbowing Stevie. “Go and tell someone you think her microphone might be broken.”

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“I’m sure her massive team will be all over it if it is, Mom. She’s just maximizing the tension.”

“Well, I wish she wouldn’t,” Marnie said.

“She looks very still up there—do you think she’s okay?” Frank said.

“I’m sure she’s fine. It’s just Blair being Blair—milking the moment,” Stevie said, but she thought she clocked a quick look of confusion on the faces of the band before they looped back to the intro again.

The verse started for a third time, the guitar louder, more urgent, like the guitarist was getting a little irritated. Stevie didn’t blame her. Marnie was right—Blair should just stop dicking around and sing.

But again, there was silence.

Murmurs rumbled through the arena as the band cycled back to the opening for a fourth try.

Weatherman Stan waved his hip flask in the air and bellowed, “Get on with it!”

Marnie turned around and snapped, “She’s building the tension, you fool!”

Stevie tilted her head. Frank was right—Blair did look awfully still up there. A creeping sense of unease spread through her.

Something felt off. Wrong.

The whole arena seemed to hold its breath when it was time for Blair to come in with her vocals.

Surely, this time, she’d sing.

It was only when somebody screamed that Stevie noticed the blood.

Two

Blood? Was it blood?

Stevie leaned over the railing. Below the platform, a pool of something dark and thick glistened in the stage lights. It couldn't be blood. It was something else—a spillage of some kind. Oil, maybe? A drop fell from above, disturbing the surface. Stevie's eyes traveled upward, to the source. To Blair.

Her dad was right—she *was* so still. Why was she so still?

A few whoops and cheers rose from the crowd, like they were still trying to encourage Blair to sing. Did they know this was all part of the act? Stevie's mind whirled, then latched on to what Bex had said about Blair pushing limits. It was an act. This was all choreographed. An artistic choice—a grim one after the tribute—but Blair would jump up any second, reborn in front of a hometown or some creative shit like that. Stevie shook her head, relieved but pissed, too. That wasn't blood, not *real* blood. Of course it wasn't. There was too much of it, for a start.

Blair was just messing with everybody . . . though maybe she should have told her band. They didn't look like they had a clue what was going on. They were still playing, although a critic might have said with little conviction. Stevie swallowed, unease

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rising again. Surely, if something bad had happened, they'd stop? Someone would do something—

Bex Lyons suddenly raced onto the stage, one hand on her earpiece, shouting words Stevie couldn't hear, the other hand waving at the platform. Stevie's stomach lurched—her skin prickled. What if . . . no. It could still all be part of the show. Just Blair screwing with everybody.

The music stopped, the bass guitar taking a little longer, its low notes resonating across the crowd of stock-still fans. Shit. Something was wrong. Really wrong. The platform began to lower and a team of paramedics ran onto the stage. Security next, escorting the band off. A wave of confusion rolled through the arena. Through Stevie.

"Frank?" Marnie said, eyes wild.

Stevie looked to her dad too, searching his face for reassurance. Frank was pale, his jaw stiff.

"Dad?" Stevie heard the desperation in her voice.

Frank put his hand on Stevie's shoulder. Looked her in the eyes. "Wait here. I'll find out what the hell's going on." His voice was steady, commanding, but his pupils flared with concern.

Stevie nodded dumbly as Frank made his way along the row. Reverting to cop mode.

The platform, Blair's motionless body draped like a rag doll on top of it, was still making its descent. Bex Lyons was shouting, pacing the stage, throwing her arms up in frustration while paramedics snapped on white plastic gloves.

Thousands of anxious voices rose and rumbled around the arena. A woman clutched two little girls in Blair Baker T-shirts close to her as she ushered them through the seats, her coat held up to shield their eyes from the stage.

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Static crackled—the PA system shrieked—then a booming voice sent the crowd silent.

“Attention, everyone. Due to an unforeseen medical emergency, we need to ask everyone to calmly and safely exit the arena. Please follow the instructions of the event staff and use the nearest exits. Satellite Entertainment would like to apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your cooperation. Thank you.”

For a moment everything was quiet. Except the sound of blood pounding in Stevie’s head. Then the whole place gasped as one—made the air contract, tighten around her. There was a wail. Then another. Then more and more rising up all over the place. Stevie wanted to put her hands over her ears. Tell them all to shut up.

The ground shifted under her feet. Stevie steadied herself on the railing. A hand clasped onto hers. She turned around, her body heavy, the world spinning.

“Stevie?” Marnie said, eyes searching, chin trembling. “Stevie, what’s happening?”

The platform reached the stage floor. Three paramedics swarmed around it—around Blair. Bex, hands on hips, eyes cast downward, was talking to a man in a suit who was gesticulating wildly. A stagehand brought out a screen, began to unfold it, but not quickly enough to stop Stevie seeing her sister’s face. Or the way her head lolled back. Jaw open. Eyes glassy. Or the shake of the paramedic’s head, after he’d placed his fingers on Blair’s neck.

A girl screamed, “Oh my god! Is she dead?! Is Blair Baker dead?!”
Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

Marnie clutched at Stevie’s wrist. “What’s going on? What did she say? Why did that girl just say that?”

Stevie pushed the picture of her sister out of her mind. Didn’t

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want to believe it. “I . . . I don’t know. Dad—let’s find Dad.” She took her mom’s hand, but Marnie batted it away.

“Stevie! What did she just say about Blair?!”

Stevie cried, “I don’t know!” A lie—but she couldn’t repeat the words.

“Is she unwell? A medical emergency? *What* kind of medical emergency?” Marnie said, frantically gathering up her bag. “Take me to Blair. I want to see my daughter.”

Stevie grabbed her mom’s hand, pulled her toward the steps among the bodyguards guiding their celebrities out of the VIP area. She needed to find her dad—he’d know what to do.

She reached the bottom of the steps. The arena was emptying. People shaking their heads in disbelief, others sobbing. Hands clasped over mouths or wrapped around friends. All rushing to get out of there as soon as possible. She pulled out her phone, tried calling Bex. No answer.

Stevie stood on her tiptoes, spotted the sign for backstage. She pushed forward—held her mom’s hand tighter as she battled against the flow.

“I need to see Blair!” Marnie said, pulling back. “Are you taking me to see Blair?”

Blair’s face in her mind again. The pool of blood. Stevie’s breath hitched in her throat and her legs hollowed. No—keep moving. She sucked in a breath. “This way.” She pulled Marnie forward, tried to shield her from the jostles and knocks of the crowd. She took an elbow to the ribs, then another. Anger rose in her and burst out when someone clattered into Marnie.

Stevie turned on them. “Watch where you’re going!”

Colby didn’t register her. Her mascara-stained face blinking at her phone, too focused on giving a running commentary. “It’s

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chaos here. I don't know what's happening!" Her voice charged, frantic. "I'll try and keep you all updated."

Stevie's insides curled with disgust. Colby was filming content for her fan site. She disappeared into the crowd, still talking to her phone. Her sister had just died, and Colby was reporting it live.

Because that was what had happened, wasn't it? Blair was dead. Her sister was dead.

"Stevie!"

A voice pulled her out of her thoughts, into the now.

"Stevie, over here!" A cop was striding toward her. His face clear among a sea of blurred faces.

"Uncle Jimmy?" Stevie's resolve wavered—she only just managed to stop herself from bursting into tears. She swallowed, fought for her voice. "Mom, look, it's Uncle Jimmy."

Marnie clutched his hands. "Oh, Jimmy! I think something awful has happened!"

"I just got the call. Got here as soon as I could." His eyes moved from Marnie to Stevie, assessing them. "How much do you know?"

The shake of the paramedic's head—that small final motion lodged in her mind. Stevie couldn't say it. Not in front of her mom. "Only that there's a medical emergency."

He nodded. From his eyes, Stevie sensed he knew more. "Frank with you?"

"Dad went to find out what was happening."

Jimmy sniffed, shook his head. "Always the cop, huh? Let's get you two somewhere private and I'll find out what's going on." He led them to a door with the words *Green Room* on the outside. His radio buzzed at his hip. A voice crackled, "*Unit forty-six, in attendance at incident at Honeyville High Stadium. Victim is a twenty-year-old female, confirmed to be dece—*"

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Jimmy turned it off before the voice announced what Stevie already suspected. But she wouldn't believe it, couldn't believe it.

Jimmy pushed the door open, looked around, seemed satisfied. "In here. Officer Dean will wait with you. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Stevie frowned. "Officer who?"

The young cop who was hanging back from them took a step forward. "Officer Dean," he said with a nod.

Stevie barely registered the name. Her eyes passed over him without really seeing—just broad shoulders beneath a neatly pressed uniform; brown hair clipped close at the sides, longer on top; and a face shaped by gentle angles.

"Find out what's going on," Marnie said, grabbing hold of Jimmy's hand, eyes urgent. "Then you come back and tell me my baby's okay, you hear me?"

Uncle Jimmy didn't meet her eyes. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

The door closed and the room grew quiet. Stevie stood there trying to make sense of the incomprehensible.

The walls of the Green Room were plastered with posters of Blair. Her face smiling at them from every side. That tongue again. It was perverse, waiting for news of her sister while she winked, and grinned, and laughed at them. So many Blairs. But where was *her* Blair? She had to be okay. That paramedic had gotten it wrong. Stevie had gotten it wrong. Blair wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead. Not her sister. Not her Blair. Stevie's heart raced in her chest—her breathing too shallow. Her mind was unraveling, her insides, too. There was so much blood. A sob burst from her mouth.

"Don't," Marnie said, heat in her voice. "She's going to be fine."

Stevie nodded, tugged the threads of herself back together, wished she could believe it.

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Marnie swayed, felt for the wall.

Stevie grabbed hold of her. “You should sit down.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Marnie said. “Not until I’ve heard Blair is okay. I just can’t talk.”

Stevie guided her mom onto one of the two massive, bright pink couches shaped like lips. Marnie sat bolt upright, twisting her wedding band around and around. She looked so small sitting on that giant red mouth. She was small, like Stevie, but usually she came across as taller. Probably because of the way she conducted herself—how her presence filled the room, squeezed everyone into the corners.

But not now.

The resplendent canary long gone, Marnie waited, gray-faced, eyes fixed on the door. There was so much hope in them, Stevie had to turn away, because that door was going to open, and when it did, the truth was going to walk right in and destroy them.

No. No. No. Blair wasn’t dead. Uncle Jimmy would come back and say Blair was okay.

Stevie got to her feet and began pacing the room. She didn’t know what to do with herself. The striplights too bright. The room too hot. She opened a can of Diet Coke. Left it on the table not drunk. She sat down on the couch, feet tapping. She knew this restlessness. The restlessness that came from not knowing what the hell was going on. She’d had the same itch in her bones for over a year after Mia had disappeared. It had driven her to distraction, and beyond. To a point where her mind was always spinning, and Stevie had started to wonder whether she was disappearing too.

“She’s going to be fine,” Marnie said fiercely, eyes still on the door. “Blair is going to be fine.”

Stevie swallowed. Couldn’t respond. She stood up. Paced some

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more. Chewed her fingernails. Stopped when she saw Officer Dean sitting on the other mouth couch, watching her with his solemn face—eyes too full of pity. She'd forgotten he was there. A rush of irritation swept through her that he was. "How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty-one, ma'am."

Three years older than her and fresh out of training, then. How would he be any help? He looked ridiculous, sitting on those giant lips. And he'd just called her *ma'am*. The whole thing was ridiculous. None of this should be happening.

"I'm sure Chief Baker will be back with news very soon," he said, a hopeful glance at the door.

"Good news," Marnie said. "He'll be back with good news."

Officer Dean opened his mouth. Shut it again. Sniffed. Settled for an unconvincing half nod. Looked relieved at the sounds of voices outside.

Stevie came to a stop and Marnie sat forward, right on the edge of the sofa. They waited for the door to open, for the truth to be let in, but when it didn't, Marnie looked at her and nodded.

Stevie took a shuddering breath, and with shaking hands stood and opened the door, then closed it behind her. Outside, she found her dad sobbing on his brother's shoulder. She locked eyes with Jimmy. And she knew.

Blair was gone.

"Frank," Jimmy said quietly, "Stevie's here."

Frank lifted his head quickly. Straightened himself up—the tears stopping, his eyes still red.

"Let's go inside." Jimmy ushered Frank through the Green Room door, jerked his head at Officer Dean to tell him to leave. He passed Stevie and she turned away, couldn't bear to look at his pitying eyes.

Drop Dead Famous

Marnie got to her feet, face hopeful. “Frank?”

Frank’s jaw tightened.

“Well, how is she? How’s Blair?” Her voice clipped with an impatience, an anger, borne solely from fear.

Frank breathed in deep. Shook his head. The same way the paramedic had.

“Don’t you shake your head at me, Frank Baker. Don’t you *dare* shake your head.” Marnie jabbed a finger at him. Left it in the air, trembling.

Frank took a step toward her. “Marnie—”

“Don’t you ‘Marnie’ me. You get back out there and go and bring me my daughter!”

Her chest was heaving, that trembling finger now pointing toward the door. Stevie wanted to shout at her to stop. To stop making everything worse.

But didn’t she want to shout at her dad too? Tell him to go and get Blair? Tell him to make everything better. Like he was supposed to. Her mind whirled, faster and faster, latching on to thought after thought until she couldn’t bear it anymore. She dropped into a chair, buried her face in her hands. Tried to wish it all away. But there was her mom’s voice again. “Frank?”

Frank closed his eyes. Swallowed. Shook his head again.

“Say it,” Marnie said, her voice a low rumble now.

Frank hung his head, heaved in a breath. He couldn’t do it.

“Say it!” Marnie shouted.

Stevie lifted her head, shouted back louder, “She’s dead!”

Marnie turned to her, disbelief in her eyes.

“Blair’s dead, Mom.” Stevie spoke more gently this time. Her voice distant, not her own. “Blair’s dead.”

Marnie blinked at her, like she couldn’t comprehend a word she

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was saying. Stevie reached out to take her hand, but Marnie drew back. “No! I won’t have you say that!”

“Mom, I—”

Marnie let out a deep, guttural moan and clutched her hand to her mouth as she doubled over. “Hasn’t this family suffered enough!”

Frank crossed the room in three strides, pulled his wife into him. She fought against him, thumping her fists on his chest. Frank waited, took the blows, then held her as she cried in his arms. He rested his chin on her head, eyes closed against his tears. Stevie had witnessed a scene like this before—her mother unraveling, her dad trying his best to hold her together.

A scene just like this.

After Mia.

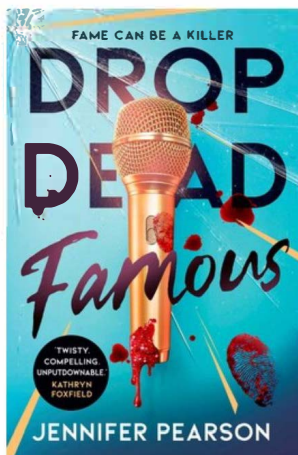
When Mia had gone missing, Frank and Marnie had lost their granddaughter, Hal and Annie had lost their daughter, and Stevie had shattered into pieces. Losing her niece had thrown her emotions too far apart, spread them too wide, and Stevie had lost herself. Coming up on three years later, she was still trying to put the shards of that hurt back together. They all were. And Stevie could feel herself splintering again. She couldn’t let that happen. Wouldn’t let it happen. She had to block herself off from the pain. Push it deep down into herself. With Mia, so many questions went unanswered. That couldn’t happen with Blair.

She turned to Jimmy. He was leaning against the wall, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “How? Did she . . .” Stevie looked at her mom—her chin wobbled, couldn’t say the words.

Jimmy looked over at her, jaw tensing. “She was shot, kiddo. I’m so sorry. Somebody shot her.”

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