

For the Win

I scroll through new names for the band, a list eight entries long on the notes app on my phone. Almost Roses. Athens Attic. Saturday's Missing Pages. My head is bowed like I'm praying, but really I'm just avoiding eye contact with Tyler.

"I don't want you back," I say, finally looking up. "That's not why I'm here."

"Okay." But his expression says he doesn't believe me.

"This is stupid, really. I had this idea that maybe we could be different somehow. But maybe that's just asking for too much."

"You haven't actually asked me for anything, Kate," he replies. There's an edge in his voice when he says my name. I wonder if he's ever repeated it, once, twice, three times, tried it out to see if it would conjure me. Tried to call me once before. Hung up as the phone rang.

A thousand Garth Brooks songs come to mind and I want him to want me. That's what I've always wanted.

There's a crowd around, which helps. People moving in the casual motion of lake waves, stirred up by the churn of a distant vessel or a nonchalant wind, the kind of lazy drift that belies its uselessness. Glancing around, I see orange and purple t-shirts and polos and sunglasses and tiger paws and plastic cups. Sunlight burns through the trees; it's early September and campus is warm and spicy with possibility. A new chapter, a fresh start, another chance to get it right.

"It's just -- there's this contest," I say.

"No."

"And it's put on by the radio station."

"No."

"And we won't have time to rehearse another drummer before."

Kasie Whitener

“No, Kate. Goddammit, no.” His glare is fierce, gone is the resignation and passive acceptance from just a moment ago. Now he’s angry.

“Tyler, please.”

“I said no. Don’t make me tell you to fuck off.”

“Hey, hey, what’s with the language? There are kids around.” Folding his hand into Tyler’s and pulling him into a bro-hug is our tailgate host, Austin. This is his family’s space; his parents have been here for years. When we were all undergraduates, we stumbled by here drunk before heading into the student gate. His dad died last spring and his mom begged off the early games claiming it was too hot. But really she probably didn’t want to come back here.

Austin’s coping. He was drunk when I arrived two hours ago and now he’s maintaining a slurry cheerfulness that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Sorry, Austin,” Tyler says. “It’s a little tense these days.”

He means that things between Tyler and me are tense. That I make him that way. At least that’s what he said when he left six weeks ago and every text message since then has been another refrain of the same chorus: *We’re over, Kate. I’m done, Kate. Fuck the band, Kate.*

And it’s not just me. He’s been hating our guitarist and bassist, too. We were on the verge of something and he walked away. So, the hatred isn’t all one direction. Some of it is from us toward him. Our guitarist, Max, left his wife and baby at home to tour this summer. Our bassist, Sam, put off graduate school to give this a go. Tyler knows what I gave up for this. For him.

“Whatsamatta, Katy-did?” Austin’s slur is annoying and I don’t feel like humoring him.

“We’re fighting.”

“What else is new?”

Kasie Whitener

Tyler rolls his eyes and Austin laughs at his own joke and I think there are a million places I'd rather be than here.

Though it's only the second game of the season, this is the big one. Our toughest opponent, SEC powerhouse Auburn, and a harbinger of what the rest of the season will bring.

I don't want you back. That's not why I came. My opening gambit was only half a lie. The contest is only an excuse and Tyler knows it. It's a gateway drug, the thing that will show him we can win, that there's a reason to keep fighting for the dream we used to share.

We used to be inseparable. We were two corners of the square with Max and Sam our reciprocal points. We earned opening spots with some of the biggest bands touring the region. We were a go-to for The Handlebar when their headliner didn't have an opener. We toured every weekend to Knoxville, Columbia, Raleigh, and Roanoke. We even did Atlanta and Orlando. Max drove a minivan, hauled the amps and drum kit and we pitched in for gas and took turns hitting up old high school friends for couch space.

Tyler and I maxed out our credit cards paying for studio time and 100 copies of a CD we could give to promoters and agents and send off to Spin and Rolling Stone. Tyler and I shared boxes of macaroni and cheese and traded lyrics. We smoked each other's cigarettes and stole kisses in the dark hallways of crowded, dirty clubs. Max got married and Sam got a day job and we kept pushing to break through but ended up just breaking. We just broke.

"You going into the game?" Austin asks.

Tyler shakes his head.

I shake mine, too.

Austin stumbles away. "Too bad," he calls back to us. "Gonna be a helluva show."

Kasie Whitener

I think he's a waste of a ticket. We're still two hours until kickoff. I feel sorry for the person who sits next to him and in front of him. I watch as he throws his arm around his sister, his co-host for their parents' tailgate. Her smile hasn't reached her eyes all day, either.

"So why are you here?" Tyler asks.

I haven't seen him in weeks and I've hated all the terse text messages and the non-replies and the days without even a "read" indication on my screen. At least when I saw "read" I knew he'd bothered to look. As much as I've hated how much he hates me, he's still so fucking cool. He's still the guy I always wanted to make music with and sometimes more than that.

We met on the first day of class in our freshman year. He was wearing a Dave Matthews Band t-shirt and I bragged I'd seen them twice on tour that summer. I'm not some stoner hippie chick that follows Phish around but for Dave I could be a gypsy, sleep in cars and sell plasma for a ticket. Tyler had one-upped me with the number of shows he'd seen. Had followed them to Red Rocks. Had been there for the recording of the live album. *Holy shit. Really?* Our Dave devotion started us. Music sustained us. Until it didn't.

"Max quit. Sam, too. We're done."

Tyler doesn't look surprised.

"There's this one thing. This contest. They said they'll do it. And then we're done."

He shakes his head, a length of brown hair falling over the sunglasses that shield his eyes. A laugh, a chortle really, escapes him. A snort.

"You don't believe me?"

"Because it's never true. It's always one more thing with you. An endless chase for the next big break, the next magic show that will..." His voice trails off and he shakes his head, lifts the red Solo cup in his hand and drinks deeply from it.

Kasie Whitener

“Will what?” I demand. “Go ahead. Say it.”

“Just forget it, Kate. I meant it in July. I meant what I said.”

Which part? I want to ask. I’m afraid to ask.

“Take off those stupid glasses,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “I’m sick of watching myself beg you.”

“That makes two of us.”

A part of me knows I deserve it. I deserve his anger. I deserve his rejection. Part of me knows the endless string of what ifs was always my idea. It was the churn of it, having to continually be hopeful and push the others to try, try, try that wore me out, too. When I was the only one who believed in the dream, begging the others to believe, to give it all they had for one more show, wore me out.

In Indiana, two months ago and five hundred miles from home, after the gig ended and the bar paid us and we didn’t have even enough money for gas to come home, Tyler quit the band even though he didn’t have anywhere else to go. Then Sam suggested robbing a bank to get a better payout. Max said he was sick of being broke. We all were. Tyler accused me of lying about the payout just to convince them to drive all the way up there. I admitted the contract was for a share of the door. It wasn’t the first time I’d made a gig seem more lucrative than it was. It wasn’t the first time we were stranded. Like before, Max used the joint account he shared with his wife to put gas in the minivan. We drove through the night back to Charlotte. We’d been bailed out. Again. But we were still broke. Leaving Indiana, Tyler gave up. Finally.

I let him. I accepted it. I thought I could keep Sam and Max and just get another drummer. Get another Tyler.

Kasie Whitener

“You want to do this at a tailgate?” He removes his glasses and I can see those beautiful blue eyes and I want to stare into them, deeply, like he used to let me.

“I’m writing,” I would say, and he would laugh.

“About my eyes?”

“About everything I see in them.”

Except now, in this familiar place, this home we shared, surrounded by our friends and the rituals of Game Day, I don’t like what I see in his eyes. The energy and momentum of this place is in a single direction: back to the championship. Be the best. Best is the Standard. Be the last ones standing. Win them all and then win the one that matters most. This place is saturated with ambition. A drive to win, an unwillingness to accept the possibility that we won’t. It’s contagious, that obsession with being number one. We are all caught up in it like palm trees in a hurricane, bending nearly in half with the gales, our roots holding us tight to the place we’re planted. For better or worse.

“I don’t want to do this at the tailgate,” I say. “I wanted to do this at home. Our home. But you left.”

“Don’t, Kate.”

“What are my choices? I have to meet you where you are, that’s what people say.”

“They don’t mean literally.”

“They don’t?” I cross my arms over my chest, sarcasm twisting my sneer. Our friends have been trying to fix us since we broke. They advise and suggest and debate and I’m usually the one expected to change, expected to bend.

“No. Fuck. Kate, they mean meet me where I am professionally, emotionally, financially. Try to understand what you’ve done to me. Help me help you by helping yourself.”

Kasie Whitener

“What does that mean?”

“At the tailgate. At the mother fucking tailgate she wants to talk about this.” He’s rolling his eyes, pouring out what’s left in his cup. Kicking mulch under his feet. When he’s frustrated with me it sounds like he’s singing. I think there are notes behind his words. I think we’ll write the next Tragic Kingdom with our fighting. He thinks I’m crazy.

“I thought I loved you,” I say.

“I thought you did, too.”

“So, I did this for you. I did everything for you.”

“No, Kate. It’s all been for you. Always has been. Always will be.”

On stage I feel like a blooming rose. My petals unfurl into the light, my stem stretches up over the crowd, my thorns burn with the notes of the music. On stage I feel like I’m wanted. Like I’m admired. Like I’m surprising and delighting everyone all at once. I look back and see Tyler behind the kit, feel the thud of the bass drum, and I know he’s mine and this stage is ours and what we have is what everyone else wants but doesn’t have the courage to seize.

On stage I feel like we are mated. Matched. Perfect for one another.

Out here in the sunlight, in the shadow of the stadium, with the car radio playing someone else’s song and the TV’s broadcasting satellite images from all over the country, thousands of other tailgates, millions of other fans, I feel like nothing special. Like no one notices. Like no one cares. Not even Tyler.

“It was a mistake to ask,” I say. “I should just find another way.”

“You mean find another band.”

“That’s not what I said.”

Kasie Whitener

“It’s what you meant.” His voice is bitter and I think he has a right to be angry with me for begging and for driving our band so hard it fell apart but he does not have a right to be mad at me for playing with someone else.

“I can move on,” I say. “I’m allowed to keep singing. I’m allowed to keep performing.”

“You do you, Kate.”

“Fuck you, Tyler.”

“Not again, Kate.” He looks up at me then, stares into my eyes and says, “Never again.”

There it is. I want him to want me. I made him. I did everything I could to keep him right there. I never let him have me. Until Indiana failed and I had failed and there was no other way to convince him to stay. I’d ridden home thinking up a way to make him believe in me, in us, for a little bit longer. I’d helped unload Sam’s gear, then carried the drum kit up the stairs to the apartment Tyler and I shared. I showered and walked into his room. He lay across the bed, the one he’d slept in since we graduated college and moved into the not-quite-converted-to-lofts warehouse in the artists’ district of Greenville. Roommates for a year, on the road with the band, best friends we told everyone. Max’s wedding and we danced. Christmas Eve, too broke to go home, and we’d shared a bottle of cheap wine and some macaroni. We wrote songs and waited tables. Traveled weekends for the band. Everything was for the band.

After Indiana failed, I sat on his bed in my underwear. I knew he wanted me. He’d been wanting me. I let him have me. We lay together naked, that final place we’d reached had been so tender, so sweet. He kissed my shoulder, wrapped himself around me, held me. It wasn’t enough.

The marching band stomps by, the drumline echoing a cadence we all know. Tyler watches them, nostalgia on his face. I watch him, wishing I had done things differently. Knowing it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

Kasie Whitener

“I heard Ashlyn moved in,” he says.

“I needed help with the rent.”

“She doesn’t mind band practice?”

“We practice while she’s at work.”

“And Max said you picked up the two remaining members of Wild Riot.”

I scoff. “Yeah. What a dumb fucking name for a band.”

“No shit. As if a riot could be anything but wild.”

“Redundant,” I agree.

For a moment, just a moment, we’re in the same place. Asheville, North Carolina, two years ago, watching a band with a stupid fucking name play first in a festival we had the middle time slot in.

“They’re pretty good,” I had said.

“Kid’s got pipes,” Tyler agreed.

“Doubt they get signed.”

“No fucking way anyone signs them with that dumb ass name.”

“The oh-nee-ders,” I said, referencing our favorite movie.

“No, it’s the One-ders. Like the number one,” Tyler said, holding up a single finger. We had laughed then, sharing our own form of snobbery. I had finished a pale ale in a bottle. Tyler had looked around to see if we knew anyone in the crowd. But we hadn’t.

Someone shouts, “C-L-E-M in cadence count!” and a dozen people start chanting, “1-2-3-4! 1-2-3-4!” They spell Clemson and Tigers and shout “Fight!” and “Woo!” moving toward the stadium and picking up voices as they pass, the cheer lingering in their wake.

Austin is pumping his fist before finishing another cup of beer.

Kasie Whitener

The two members of Wild Riot I lured into my new project replace Sam and Max. There is still no Tyler.

“You knew Sam and Max were out before I asked you and you let me lie.”

“Because I knew you would. It’s what you do, Kate.”

“Only because I want you to help me.”

“You lie to get what you want. It’s always been that way. It just took me a while to realize you lie to everyone.”

“You’re different.”

“Stop fucking lying, Kate. Find another drummer, build another band, chase the record contract. You have the songs. You have the talent.”

My breath catches, almost like I might cry, but really, I’m just surprised at the compliment.

“God knows you have the ambition.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” I can’t help it that my voice sounds petulant. Something inside of me rejects Tyler’s assessment of my ambition. My whole life I knew I was built for something bigger. Bigger than these bar crowds in small southern towns. Bigger than game day tailgates and hair bows and hangovers. I’m Super Bowl national anthem big. I’m cover of the *Rolling Stone* big. I’m a place in music history big. Tyler once said I was overdose-on-the-tour-bus big. But that’s not me.

“Think we’ll win tonight?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Red-shirt freshman quarterback. Favored to win, but not by much.”

“Think it matters?”

Kasie Whitener

He looks at me, his expression unreadable, as if he's wondering whether or not I'm kidding. Of course, it matters. It's just the beginning but it sets the tone for everything. Like the first time we ever took the stage together. Like the first song we ever recorded. Like the first time we made love.

"It all matters, Kate."

There's that edge again, on the sharp syllable of my name. Kate Murphy, lead singer of Almost Roses. But not even he knows who I *will* be. Kate Murphy, Grammy award-winning lead vocalist for Saturday's Missing Pages. Kate fucking Murphy, holy shit I can't believe I'm meeting you in person, songwriter and vocalist for Athens Attic. Kate without Tyler Murphy. Kate doing it on her own Murphy. Kate learned a little something on the way about trusting sexy drummers Murphy. Kate let you down because you weren't thinking big enough Murphy.

"When's the contest?" Tyler asks. "And where?"

"Three weeks. Nashville."

He stares at me. Tyler Cross. Tyler got sick of putting up with Kate's crazy ambition Cross. Tyler plays drums in a church band Cross. Tyler teaches kids snare in Columbia, South Carolina Cross. Tyler was Kate's first big mistake Cross.

"You gonna have gas money to get there?" he asks.

"Thinking of starting a Kickstarter campaign."

Tyler laughs. I think of him laughing naked in my arms, kissing me, holding me, wanting me. I think of him laughing behind the drums, spotlights blazing, monitors buzzing. I think of him laughing in the back seat of the minivan, magazine rolled up so he could swat me with it.

"I can't do it without you," I say, and I hope it's too quiet for him to hear. But it's not.

He turns to me, faces me, just a breath away from me.

Kasie Whitener

“If that was true,” he says. “I’d do it.”

Hope blooms in me.

“But it’s not.” He tosses the cup he’s been holding into the trash beside me. Drops his sunglasses back over his eyes and says, “Goodbye, Kate.”

I watch him walk away. Think that’s the last I’ll ever see of him. Keep myself from chasing after him, from calling out to him.

“You knew it would end badly,” a slurry Austin says, stepping between me and the tapped keg, angling his solo cup to fill it again. “Big game today.”

I nod, still watching Tyler disappear into the crowd.

“Think this new guy’s got the chops?”

“He redshirted,” I say, “Backed up a champion. He should be fine.”

“Champions find a way to win,” Austin says and finally I look away from Tyler’s retreat and make eye contact with an old friend. “My dad used to say that: Champions find a way to win.” He smiles, lifts the cup to his lips, and takes a long drink.

“I guess we’ll see,” I say, ignoring the tears that hover on the rims of his eyes.

What I love about this place is the audacity of ambition. It’s in the hills: infinite possibility and hope. It feels like home.

“So, you’ve got a new band?” Austin fills another cup and hands it to me.

“Yeah,” I say.

“What’s it called?”

“No More Cross.” I smirk.