

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

*Maybe
I'm the One*

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Chapter 1

Boardwalk Hall Arena, Atlantic City

July

Audrey stood in the wings, listening to Erik Bentley finish the last chorus of his song. The audience responded with whistles and applause. He had the crowd on their feet, which boded well for Audrey. Erik had been touring with her for the past five months on this US leg. He was a charismatic up-and-coming performer who knew how to work the audience, and booking him had been sheer genius on the part of her manager.

Gianna, her spiky blue-haired wardrobe assistant, attached the train of Audrey's dress quickly and efficiently as the calls from the crowd became a chant. "*Audrey! Audrey!*"

She glanced at her eight-year-old daughter beside her, and Hayden looked up with a smile. She gave Audrey a thumbs up, her usual encouragement for her mom to go out on stage and bring down the house. Audrey grinned and hugged Hayden against her side. This date was one of the last on her six-month tour. They'd sold out venues all over the country, but everyone was ready for some well-deserved down time.

Her make-up artist, Tam blended shimmery highlights on Audrey's cheekbones and under the arch of her brows, then added a last dab of color to her bottom lip. She handed Audrey an open bottle of water with a straw. Willow adjusted Audrey's already perfect pale-gold waves over her shoulder.

"I think my hair's fine," Audrey told her stylist.

"Hair with its own Twitter feed has to be better than *fine*," Willow said with a quirk of her brow. She was in her thirties, with straight dark hair to her shoulders and brown-framed glasses.

Audrey rolled her eyes and stood patiently. She took a lot of ribbing about that blasted Twitter fan account.

Absently, she noted her two bodyguards who accompanied her on tour, one on each side of the stage. Erik's song ended and the crowd applauded. He took a bow and swept an arm toward the band to thank them.

There was the usual synchronized change of instrumentalists and equipment as Audrey's guys took their positions. She glanced down at the chunky beaded bodice of her dress while Gianna fine-tuned the layers of pink and gold ruffles on the train. Audrey loved this outfit. The top sparkled under the lights and her pointed-toed cowboy boots were comfortable and easy to walk in on stage. She was confident and excited about tonight's show. Years of hard work and sacrifice paid off every time she got to play to a sell-out crowd.

Her introduction came over the sound system, and a welcome tremor of nerves shot through her belly. A little adrenaline was always good for her performance. She exchanged a glance and a wave with Hayden and swept out onto the enormous stage.

The crowd cheered and phones were raised to snap photos. She waved to the fans filling the auditorium. "Hey, Atlantic City! It's exciting to be back here. Isn't Erik fantastic? Give him some love." She clapped along with the audience. "It's been so great having him with us on this tour. The Boardwalk is always one of our favorite places to play, and so many fans come out. I appreciate you, and I'm excited about this evenin'. Are ya'll ready for some more fun?"

The crowd roared, and the band played the first measures of Audrey's newest release, which had been in the top ten on the charts for the past three months. She took the microphone from its stand and smiled out across the ocean of upturned faces in the darkened arena.

"One two three four, don't try callin' me no more. Five six seven eight, I'm not your fool; I'm settin' it straight."

A cheer rose from the audience; fans clapped and sang along. *"Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, don't need you I'm doin' well."* It was a great crowd, responsive and loud. Audrey reached the chorus: *"I'm not cryin' in the rain, and I'm not singing about the pain. But mister, I can't count on you."*

Audrey performed several of the songs from her new album before doing a costume change and getting a much-needed drink of water. Gianna fastened a dozen turquoise

bracelets on Audrey's wrist and part way up her arm, then carefully arranged her necklace under her hair. She helped her into her turquoise boots while Willow adjusted the curls over her shoulders.

"Did Hayden and Everly take their seats out front?" Audrey asked Tam. Everly was their nanny and kept the girl at her side every moment.

"They were still here a minute ago." Tam dabbed gloss on Audrey's lips. "I think Hayden wanted to stay backstage a while longer. You know how she likes to be in the thick of things." She eyed Audrey's makeup and put the cap on the lip gloss. "What a fantastic crowd."

"I do love Atlantic City." Audrey spotted Hayden and Everly seated on a giant stack of equipment cases off stage right and smiled. Her daughter returned the smile and blew her a kiss.

Audrey swept back onto the stage in a body-hugging floral print dress that left her shoulders bare. After another song, she sprinkled her tried and true standby hits into the set. Fans loved those the best, and even though she'd sung them hundreds of times, it never got old knowing how well-received they were.

Audrey was halfway through *This Song* when a clanging metallic sound that was out of place caught her attention. She'd been performing for enough years to know there were occasional equipment failures and sound problems, and if she kept singing, the technicians would handle the issues before anyone knew what had happened. Behind her, the female backup singers stopped singing so, smile in place, Audrey glanced over her shoulder. The three young women had turned to observe whatever was happening off stage to their right. Shouts came from backstage.

"If your instruments are working, keep playing," she said to the band members nearest her.

Audrey followed their gazes and caught sight of the entire row of massive overhead lights listing to the left. In the wings, stage hands and musicians scrambled out of the way.

"Have to love a live concert, right?" Audrey said into the mic. "Please stay calm and in your seats while we figure out what's happening." Praying Hayden and Everly had

taken their reserved seats out front, she placed her mic in the stand and took a few steps toward the band members. Her bodyguard, DeShawn, shadowed her.

As though in slow motion, the scaffolding that held an enormous row of lights plunged downward in a resounding clash of metal and broken glass, hitting stacks of black equipment cases. Exclamations and gasps flittered through the crowd as well as coming from the stage crew. Audrey's heart stopped and she stood with a hand splayed over her chest, panic rising in her breast. Where was her daughter?

Stage hands ran toward the pile of metal and gear. A couple of musicians on stage kept playing, but the song was a bust.

It wasn't easy to move quickly in the form-fitting dress, but she shot toward the place where Hayden had last been. Because of the tangle of steel framing and the crush of men moving away pieces, she couldn't get close.

A shrieking wail rose above the confusion, immediately recognizable as her daughter's. A shard of fear stabbed her.

"Hayden!" Panicked, she pushed her way through the throng of people. The scaffolding had fallen directly over the spot where her daughter and Everly had been seated on those black cases.

The stack of trunks had landed in a tumble, and her daughter lay in the debris of shattered lights and paint-chipped scaffolding heaped in a pile like pickup sticks.

"Hayden!"

Several feet from where her child lay, Everly pushed herself to a sitting position and swept her shoulder-length dark hair out of her face. She appeared dazed, but her dark gaze immediately searched her surroundings and landed on her young charge.

Workers sorted through too slowly, moving items away. DeShawn took Audrey's hand and assisted her over a piece of scaffold.

A helper shoved a trunk out of the way and helped Hayden to a sitting position. A rivulet of bright-red blood trickled from her forehead down her temple into her fair hair.

Audrey's heart hammered and she lunged over a pile of rubble.

Her daughter touched her forehead and looked at her fingers. Her eyes widened in fright, and her gaze darted from person to person.

"I'm here, Hayden!" Audrey called.

Her daughter's desperate gaze landed on Everly, and on hands and knees she scrambled to her nanny, flinging herself into her arms and sobbing.

Everly held her and smoothed her hair, uncaring of the blood that stained the front of her pink jacket.

At the sight of the two of them, a jab of pain thrust into Audrey's chest, adding another emotion to the fear already well-established. Hayden had immediately searched out Everly and turned to her for reassurance. Audrey hated the feelings carving a cavernous ache in her chest. Everly was like an extension of their little family; envy had no place.

Traversing the nearest rubble, Audrey knelt before the two of them. She met Everly's eyes, then reached to touch her child's head and reassure herself Hayden was all right. Her frightened daughter turned and gave her a weak smile. Blood still trickled from a cut on her forehead.

One of the stage hands tore off his shirt and handed it to Audrey to press against the wound.

"It's okay, baby." She glanced aside, spotting her manager hurrying toward them. "Where's the medical staff?"

"They're coming," Sidney Oliver assured her.

"What the hell happened?" Audrey asked.

"It all happened so fast," one of the crew answered. "But it looks like the scaffolding simply buckled. Maybe the bolts weren't fastened tight enough or there was a weak weld or something."

"We won't know until we sort through all this," Sidney said. "Right now, all that matters is that Hayden and Everly are all right."

Two medics arrived. One took the young girl's vitals and looked at her head. "That's going to need stitches, Miss Knox. And we'll want to make sure she doesn't have a concussion."

"What about Everly?" Audrey asked the other medic. "They were sitting together when this happened, and I don't know if they fell or the scaffolding hit them or what. Did anyone see what happened?"

Several crew members shook their heads.

“Do you hurt anywhere?” the EMT asked the nanny.

From her sitting position, Everly extended her arm and then her legs. “My arm hurts.”

The uniformed young man tested that she could move and bend it. “You look fine, but to be safe we’ll take you to get checked over. You both probably have contusions.”

“Is my head hurt bad, Mama?” Hayden asked.

“You have a little cut and some bruises, darlin’,” Audrey told her. “You’re going to be fine. I promise.”

Someone pushed a small bag of ice wrapped in a towel into Audrey’s hand.

“The rig’s ready to take you to the hospital.” Cadence White was Audrey’s publicist. “We’ll play this down and bring Erik back out to do another set.”

“She gave the audience half a show,” Sidney said to Cadence. “I don’t think we’re obligated to issue free tickets or a partial refund.”

Cadence pursed her lips in thought. “In the spirit of good will, and thinking like Audrey, maybe she can do an additional show. If we check the stadium’s availability, she might be able to do it before we leave town.”

The two of them looked to Audrey.

“Handle it however you see fit while I go with my daughter,” she told them. She wanted only to have Hayden checked over for injuries. They’d figure out the concert later.

Zane West, her lead guitarist, helped Audrey back to her feet and picked up Hayden. The girl wrapped her narrow arms around his neck. She appeared small and frightened in his hold, and she glanced apprehensively at all the people surrounding them, then toward the stage. The remaining band members were playing one of Audrey’s songs. Hayden’s horror was evident.

Imagining her confusion and what she must be thinking, Audrey’s eyes stung. “Don’t you worry about anything, sweetie. You and Everly are all that’s important.”

She felt sick about her daughter having been in direct line with a stage malfunction. It was a Thursday evening. Other children were at home doing homework with their families and their pets nearby. She dragged her daughter all over the country, ate in hotel rooms, traveled in a bus and offered band members as the kid’s best friends.

It wasn't the first time she'd had cause to question the wisdom and security of their lifestyle. Her other choice had been to leave Hayden in their Nashville house with Everly and the tutor while she traveled, but Audrey had never been willing to do that.

The EMTs accompanied them down the corridor, Zane carrying Hayden, Cadence with her arm wrapped around Everly. Stadium security escorted them out a side delivery door and into a waiting emergency vehicle.

A couple of hours later, Audrey sat in a hospital room while her daughter slept. Everly slouched on another chair with a blanket over her and Sidney stood gazing out the window at the lights of the city.

"Were you able to arrange something with the stadium?" Audrey asked.

"They have Sunday afternoon available if you're willing to stay in Atlantic City a couple more days," he replied. "Tonight's show was a sellout. I think fans would understand, but Cadence and I figured you'd want to give them the whole performance."

She nodded. "I do. Where do we go next?"

"Houston next week and then Tulsa. The last two dates on the tour."

"Let's stay here through Sunday then. After these bookings, I'm taking a hiatus from concert performances."

"Audrey, this could have happened at any time to anyone. It was an accident."

"I know that, but I need a break. Hayden and I need some time."

"You have the *Country Magazine* photo shoot scheduled at your Nashville home in late August and the Christmas television special filming early September."

"And I'll do both of those. I'll do everything that's already booked, but from here on out don't schedule any dates. Simply going light for a while like we planned isn't going to be enough."

She walked silently to the side of the bed where Hayden lay sleeping, her lashes against her pale cheeks. "I want to provide some normalcy for her," Audrey said softly. For both of them. Her daughter turning to her nanny in her state of panic still stung like salt in a thousand cuts. "She doesn't get to make friends or be in Girl Scouts or 4-H because she's always being tutored on the road or hanging out in a recording studio. We're together, but we're not *together*. I can't remember the last time I cooked for her. I

feel like if I leave her home, I'll miss out on her life, but because I bring her with me, she doesn't get a life. Not a real kid's life. There's always someplace to be, something to do."

Sydney raised his gaze to Audrey's. His kids were older, but he'd been on the road for many years as well. He gave an understanding nod. "We can free up some time for you. You deserve it."

Relieved, she nodded. "I'm scheduled for the Rockwell County Fair for two weekends in September."

"You specifically asked for that engagement."

"I did. That's my hometown. And after Colorado, I don't want any dates." Her child was eight already, but there was still time to reestablish their relationship before her teen years. This time right now was imperative.

"You could stay with your mom through the holidays," he suggested.

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you for making it work, Sydney. Hayden and I need some quality time together."

Perhaps this had been the wakeup call she'd needed to breathe and take stock of her life, figure out what she was doing and where she wanted to go from here. She'd sacrificed to get to this point, and she still worked hard every day and night. She didn't want to miss her daughter's growing up years, all the formative moments. She wanted to give her a taste of normal life—whatever that was.

It was time to go home.

[END OF EXCERPT]

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