

Background character Info

Melody Sinclair (aka “Melody James”) – Age 18 from Nashville Tennessee

Just a few years ago, Melody James was a rising country music star, signed at 15 after a song she wrote in her bedroom went viral. She released a debut album, opened for big acts, and toured with her guitar and heart on her sleeve. But the industry got ugly fast—pressure, fake friends, overworked and overexposed. After a breakdown on tour at 17, she vanished from the spotlight, deleting her socials and breaking her contract. Now, she goes by her middle name, Melody Sinclair, living quietly in New York under the radar. She dyed her hair darker, stopped singing in public, and tells people she’s just “taking a gap year.” She hides out at Wren & Page, where no one recognizes her. She sketches, reads, and volunteers behind the counter. Her guitar stays zipped in a case under her bed, untouched—but not forgotten.

Malachi Reyes – Age 20 from Tuscaloosa Alabama

A music lover and part-time producer at a small studio downtown. He’s not famous, but he’s passionate and talented. He’s obsessed with raw voices and lyrics that feel honest. Grew up listening to a mix of rap, soul, and, weirdly, country—especially Melody James, who disappeared without a trace. When he meets Melody Sinclair at Wren & Page, he’s drawn to her immediately—her quiet fire, the way she hums under her breath, her taste in books, the way she seems familiar but different. They start slow—coffee, late-night bookstore shifts, wandering record shops. Melody won’t talk about music, and Malachi doesn’t push. One night, he hears her singing softly behind a closed door, and something clicks. The voice. The lyrics. The emotion. He realizes: she’s Melody James.

Elora Reyes – Age 16 from Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Malachi’s younger sister and biggest supporter. She’s sharp, sensitive, and has a quiet wisdom that often surprises people. Born with synesthesia, Ellie sees music as colors—something Malachi always admired and protected. Though they tease each other

like most siblings, she's the one person who sees straight through his moods. She visits him in New York often, staying for long weekends or school breaks. Ellie is naturally drawn to Melody Sinclair—her gentleness, the softness she tries to hide, and the way her eyes seem to carry old music. She doesn't recognize her as the famous Melody James right away, but she feels something. Ellie plays piano and writes her own lyrics in secret journals, but she's never shared them—until she does with Melody. She's the emotional mirror Malachi doesn't know Melody needs. Favorite thing to say: "Some songs know more about you than you know about yourself."

Juniper "June" Calhoun – Age 19 from Montpelier, Vermont

Melody's best friend in New York and coworker at Wren & Page. June is all oversized cardigans, chipped nail polish, and long nights spent painting or writing in the margins of poetry books. She doesn't push Melody to share her past—she just leaves space for her to feel safe. She's the kind of friend who shows up with tea and playlists and understands that some silences are sacred. June was the first person Melody trusted after she disappeared from Nashville. She's intuitive, emotionally grounded, and fiercely loyal. While she doesn't know the full truth about Melody's identity, she senses that something big is being buried. June represents the "normal" life Melody is trying to build—but also the quiet ache of truth waiting to be told. Favorite thing to say: "You don't have to explain your silence. Just let me sit in it with you."

Sage Montgomery – Age 21 from Austin, Texas

Melody's former tour stylist and personal assistant during her country music rise. Sage wasn't just paid to make Melody look good—she was like a big sister, a shield from the harshness of the industry. She knew when Melody needed a hug instead of a hairbrush, or when she was pretending to be okay. After Melody disappeared at 17, Sage felt betrayed—but more than that, she was worried. She tried to find her. Now, two years later, Sage shows up in New York unexpectedly. She's not angry, just... haunted. She brings with her memories, rumors, and one warning: someone else is close to finding Melody too. She's the ghost of Melody's old world

Levi Carter – Age 20 from Atlanta, Georgia

Malachi's best friend and collaborator at the local music studio. He's a sound engineer, a hype man, and a chaotic-good presence in Malachi's life. Where Malachi is serious and emotionally deep, Levi is loud, wild, and heart-first. He doesn't care about fame—he cares

about real sound, and about making sure his people are okay. He's the first to suspect something's up with Melody Sinclair—especially when Malachi starts acting weird around her. He doesn't recognize her at first, but once he hears her voice, he's stunned. And torn: does he push Malachi to record her, or protect her secret?

Prologue

Homecoming Queen by Kelsea ballerina

The Night She Ran

Two Years Ago — Somewhere Outside Nashville, Tennessee

The air was thick with the scent of warm asphalt and honeysuckle. Melody James gripped the steering wheel tighter than necessary, her knuckles white against the pale blue dashboard of her beat-up Honda. The clock on the dash flickered 2:14 a.m. in soft green digits. Her guitar was buckled into the passenger seat like a child. Her phone sat face-down in the cupholder, buzzing silently against a paper coffee cup she hadn't touched in hours. She hadn't told anyone. Not her manager. Not her mother. Not even Sage, the only person on the tour who might have actually cared. She had left her hotel key on the nightstand, her sparkly boots by the door, and the Melody James who smiled on stage three hours earlier behind like a ghost. She was gone. Headlights glared in her rearview mirror for a moment, then vanished as she turned off the highway and onto a back road she barely remembered. Trees blurred past her window. Her GPS said the gas station where she'd switched SIM cards was still six miles behind. The burner phone in the glove box buzzed once—an unknown number. She didn't check it. Her ears still rang faintly with applause, though the concert had ended hours ago. Or maybe it was the echo of the last fight with her mother backstage. The one where she finally snapped and shouted, "This isn't a life, it's a schedule!" She had written her first song at twelve in her bedroom, on that old out-of-tune guitar her grandpa gave her. She had signed her record deal at fifteen in boots too big and a dress too short. She'd toured thirty-seven states by seventeen. She had smiled until her cheeks hurt, worn rhinestones until her skin itched, and hugged thousands of strangers who knew her lyrics but not her name. And then she broke. It didn't happen on stage. It happened in a hotel bathroom in Denver, when she looked in the mirror and didn't recognize herself. No makeup, no cameras, no backup vocals. Just her, trembling, with eyeliner smudged under her eyes like bruises and fingers shaking too hard to play guitar. That's when she'd made the decision. Not to die. Just to disappear. A truck barreled past her in the opposite lane, making her flinch. Her heart pounded louder than the radio, which she hadn't turned on in days. Not since she'd smashed her iPhone against the sidewalk outside the tour bus, erased her socials, deleted her Spotify artist profile. The girl on those charts wasn't her anymore. She pulled over near a gas station somewhere past Clarksville. The kind of place that looked closed even when it wasn't. Neon signs flickered, moths

danced, and the air was humid with late-summer grief. Melody got out, stretched, and glanced at her reflection in the car window. Her hair was still blonde and long then. Her eyes are too tired for her age. She looked like she'd just left a party she never wanted to attend. Inside, she bought scissors, a box of dark brown hair dye, a travel toothbrush, and a pack of gum. When the cashier asked for a name on the receipt, she paused, then whispered, "Melody... Sinclair." It was her real middle name. Her father's last name. A name not yet tangled in headlines. She paid cash. She walked out and didn't look back.

Later, in a diner booth at dawn, she cut off four inches of hair in the bathroom sink, changed her shirt, and left her boots in a donation bin out back. She posted a single note to a locked fan page before deleting it entirely:

"I'm sorry. I need quiet. Please let me go."

And just like that—Melody James was gone.

Chapter 1

Melody

The Archer by Taylor swift

One Year Later — Brooklyn, New York

The radiator in apartment 5A hissed like it was angry at the world. Melody Sinclair rolled over and tugged her blanket up to her chin, the gray flannel worn thin from a hundred too-cold mornings. The sky outside the window was still pale and pink, soft light spilling across the hardwood floor of the tiny studio. Somewhere in the hallway, a dog barked. The neighbors across the way were already shouting in Spanish. It was Tuesday. Which meant morning shift at Wren & Page, the cozy bookstore down on Mercer Street. Which meant peppermint tea in a paper cup, alphabetizing the poetry shelf, and pretending not to notice when regulars stared a second too long at her face. No one ever said it out loud, but sometimes she could feel it—the almost-recognition. She slid out of bed and crossed to the mirror near the closet. Her hair was dark now—a soft chestnut that fell in waves past her shoulders. She still kept it long, but it framed her face differently, messier, less polished. She looked like any other nineteen-year-old trying to disappear into New York’s crowded sidewalks. But some days—like today—the mirror made her flinch. Not because she missed the spotlight. But because part of her still feared it. She hadn’t sung in public in nearly a year. Her guitar stayed zipped in its case beneath her bed, untouched like a secret she wasn’t ready to speak aloud. Music still lived in her chest, humming under her skin like a ghost, but she refused to let it out. She wasn’t Melody James anymore. Not here. She was Melody Sinclair, bookstore clerk, college-aged maybe, taking a “gap year,” depending on who asked. She wore thrifted sweaters and holey socks and read more books in a week than she had in three years on tour. She drank black coffee now. She never listened to the radio. She grabbed her keys, slung her canvas tote over her shoulder, and locked the door behind her. Wren & Page was the kind of bookstore that felt like it belonged in a poem. All creaky floors and dusty sunlight, with walls lined in shelves too tall to reach without a stool. There was a bell over the door that jingled softly, and a stack of handwritten “staff picks” cards Melody updated once a week. It didn’t matter that the same people walked in every day. She liked the ritual of it. This morning, the front display was still half-empty. June, her best friend and fellow bookworm, was balancing on the counter, trying to wrestle a new string of twinkle lights into place. “You’re late,” June called, grinning without turning around. Melody smiled faintly. “The M train hates me.” “Everything hates you before coffee. Help me before I fall and die.” Melody dropped her bag and steadied the step stool while June

finished taping the lights. When she finally climbed down, her paint-stained fingers brushed Melody's sleeve. "Okay, so—don't kill me," June said, "but there's a new guy starting today. Saturday shifts, mostly studio work, but he's cool. Manager's cousin or something." Melody raised an eyebrow. "Cool as in dependable, or cool as in talks too much and makes playlists about his feelings?" "Yes." They both laughed. The bell over the door jingled. Speak of the devil. He stepped inside like he didn't notice the way the light caught the dust in the air. Tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a soft gray hoodie with headphones looped around his neck. A worn notebook stuck out of his backpack. He looked like music, somehow—not polished, but real. And something in Melody's chest shifted. He caught her gaze briefly, just a flicker—and then looked away like he hadn't just seen someone who used to be famous. June muttered, "That's Malachi. Malachi Reyes. Don't worry, he's harmless. All vibes, no pressure." But Melody felt pressure. Not from him—from the way the air changed. Because there was something about him that didn't feel ordinary. The rest of the shift passed in fragments. Malachi worked quietly, helping with inventory in the back. He asked if he could put on music but kept the volume low. When Melody passed the storeroom later, she paused. What he was playing wasn't a hit. It was some stripped-down acoustic track, raw and beautiful. The kind of thing you'd only find if you cared about lyrics first. She stood outside the door for longer than she meant to, her fingers twitching. Something about his playlist felt like home. And that scared her. That night, Melody walked the long way home, down quiet blocks lined with fairy lights and windows glowing with soft lives that weren't hers. She stopped at a corner coffee shop and watched the steam curl up from her cup. Someone across the street was playing guitar out of their window, a loose, off-key rendition of something familiar. She couldn't help it—her lips parted. And for the first time in months, she sang. Barely a whisper. A half-forgotten chorus that never made it onto any of her records. A song only she knew. She didn't know that across town, Malachi Reyes was lying on his bed, headphones on, scrolling through old YouTube clips of Melody James. Trying to remember why her voice felt like something he'd lost.

Chapter 2

Malachi

Leave me again by Kelsea Ballerini

Malachi Reyes didn't believe in fate. He believed in work—hours spent dragging raw vocals into clean takes, nights tweaking reverb until it felt like memory, not math. He believed in sound. In stories you couldn't tell out loud, but could press into a melody so tight it'd bruise. He didn't believe in fate... But the girl at the bookstore made him question it. She'd been standing there like she didn't know light fell differently around her. Dark hair falling over one shoulder, hands tucked into her sleeves, eyes full of quiet. Not shy. Not scared. Just... guarded. Like maybe the world had tried to gut her and she wasn't ready to bleed again. He knew that look. He'd worn it once. He first met her on a Wednesday. He knew because that was the day his headphones snapped in half. "You're late," the manager had told him, which technically wasn't true. He'd been outside for ten minutes, psyching himself up to walk into a job that didn't pay enough but gave him something to do between gigs. "You'll be working in the back mostly. We don't get a lot of traffic during the week. Just shelf books, take inventory, help with shipments." Easy enough. Until he saw her. She didn't say much, just nodded in his direction like she hoped he wouldn't speak to her. So he didn't. But he noticed things. The way she tilted her head when certain songs came on. The way she always had a pencil tucked behind her ear, like she'd rather sketch the world than talk to it. The way her fingers tapped out a rhythm on the spine of a poetry book when she thought no one was watching. Something about her felt like a memory you couldn't quite place. He didn't know her name yet—but the way she held silence like it was sacred? Yeah. He knew that kind of silence. That night, he went home and opened his old YouTube playlists. Not the ones filled with crisp studio mixes or feature collaborations—he didn't care about those anymore. He went to the forgotten folder. The one labeled "Uncut Voices." It was full of live acoustic performances. Home recordings. Tiny artists who hadn't made it big, but had something raw. Something real. And at the top of that list, still bookmarked from years ago, was a video titled: Melody James – Bedroom Sessions (Age 15) He clicked. The girl on the screen had long blonde hair, a pink guitar, and eyes too big for her face. She looked young—sweet, open, a little nervous. But when she sang? It shut the world up. The first line of her song was barely more than a whisper, but it hurt. Like maybe she'd written it with splinters in her throat. "If I tell you I'm fine, will you stop asking?" He remembered listening to that line for the first time at sixteen, sitting in the back of his high

school math class, earbuds hidden in his sleeve. That voice had cracked something open in him. He spent the next year following her rise—one viral video turned record deal, then a debut album, then tour headlines. She burned bright. And then one day... she vanished. Deleted everything. Stopped releasing music. No goodbye, no statement. Just gone. It had been almost two years. People said she cracked under the pressure. Some blamed her team. Others thought she died. But Malachi hadn't stopped wondering. Because voices like that don't just disappear. He clicked play again. Let the voice fill the room. But halfway through the second verse, he froze. Because something about her tone—about the texture of it—was the same thing he'd felt earlier at the bookstore. Not identical. Not polished. But something deeper. Like a twin flame buried under different weather. He sat up, heart thudding. It couldn't be. Right? He replayed the song. Then closed his eyes and tried to remember the girl with the dark hair and the quiet eyes. The way she walked. The way she hummed under her breath when she thought he wasn't listening. And for one terrifying second, the voices overlapped. Different names. Same ache. He didn't sleep much that night. Instead, he pulled out his notebook—the one he kept lyrics in, even when he swore he was too busy to write.

Chapter 3

Melody

Sand in my boots by Morgan Wallen

There was something sacred about the bookstore before it opened. No soft jazz through the speakers yet. No baristas calling out lattes. Just the hush of old pages and the faint scratch of a broom somewhere in the back. That was Melody's favorite time—before the world woke up and remembered how to look at her. She crouched behind the front counter, organizing returns and pretending she wasn't thinking about him. Malachi. The way he leaned across the counter like the air didn't weigh anything between them. The way he listened—not just with his ears but with that quiet gravity in his eyes, like she was saying more than she meant to. She was starting to hum again, and that terrified her. Because humming led to singing, and singing led to remembering. And Melody had built her whole new life around forgetting. She shook her head, standing and shelving a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* like it had personally offended her. Maybe it had. Maybe Holden reminded her too much of Nashville boys who played sweet until they didn't.

June came in just before ten, balancing two iced coffees and a cinnamon roll half-wrapped in a napkin. "I come bearing fuel," she announced, sliding one coffee toward Melody like a peace offering. Melody gave a soft laugh. "I never said I was mad." June gave her a look. "You were humming at closing last night. That's how I know something's up." Melody froze for half a second. Then she blinked down at the coffee like it had betrayed her. "Maybe I just had a song stuck in my head." June didn't say anything. She just took a bite of the cinnamon roll and chewed slowly. "I had a weird dream," Melody added, voice quieter. "I was on stage again, but it was like... everything was in reverse. Like, the lights were going out instead of on. The crowd was walking away instead of toward me. And I was singing backwards. Words that didn't mean anything." June tilted her head. "Sounds like your brain's trying to tell you something." "Yeah. That I should never have sung in the first place."

The door chimed, and just like that, Melody's chest tightened. She didn't have to look to know who it was. She knew the sound of Malachi's walk now. Knew the rhythm of his footsteps. The way he always lingered near the poetry shelf like it held some secret just for him. Melody ducked into the staff section with a crate of used hardcovers. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk to him. It was that she did. Too much. Because Malachi made music

feel safe again. And that was the most dangerous thing of all. She didn't come back out until he was gone.

June didn't say anything—just handed her the rest of the cinnamon roll and moved on to the romance table. Melody took a bite. Too sweet. Too soft. But she didn't spit it out. She sat down on the stool behind the counter and pressed her hand over her chest, like she could hold the silence in place. She couldn't. From the staff hallway, the faint sound of humming returned.

Hers.

Again.

Chapter 4

Malachi

What ifs by Kane Brown

He couldn't stop thinking about her. Which was annoying, because he'd come to the bookstore to not think. About unfinished mixes, about deadlines, about the quiet ache in his chest he couldn't explain. And instead—Melody. Always Melody. He watched her the way he watched soundwaves on a screen. Careful. Curious. Like if he paid close enough attention, he'd catch the crackle under the calm. There was something pulsing beneath her quiet. Something stitched together from silence and softness and sorrow. The way she touched the books like they were delicate. The way she looked away when she smiled, like the full weight of joy might make her crumble. She was music, he just knew it. And not the pop stuff he was usually forced to edit. She was stripped-down guitar strings and late-night lyrics scrawled in corners of notebooks. She was a voice with dust on it. A melody hiding in plain sight. He leaned against the back shelf of Wren & Page, pretending to browse poetry, but mostly just watching the space between them. She ducked into the back again, clutching a crate like it was armor. He sighed. Levi would've laughed and called him pathetic. Probably threw a book at him and told him to ask her out already. But Malachi didn't want to ask her out. Not yet. He wanted to know why she was humming one minute and vanishing the next. Why she clutched silence like a secret. Why did she look at pianos like they'd betrayed her. He wanted to know who broke her. And why he wanted to be the one to put the pieces back. Later, as he left the shop, he passed June restocking the counter. "She's not fragile, you know," June said without looking up. He blinked. "What?" "Melody. She's not fragile. People think silence means breakable, but sometimes it just means someone's rebuilding." Malachi looked back toward the hallway where Melody had disappeared. "She reminds me of something," he said slowly. "Something I can't place."

"Maybe it's not something," June replied, eyes finally lifting to meet his. "Maybe it's someone."

That night, Malachi couldn't sleep. He sat in his apartment with headphones on and no music playing. Just static. His fingers hovered over the keyboard of a half-written song. The lyrics were sharp, but the voice in his head was softer than his own. He thought of her again. Her voice behind a door once, humming something small and broken. He hit play on the audio he'd recorded that night, the one where he'd stood outside the staff hallway like a creep. He listened. And listened again. That voice. That voice. And suddenly—he knew. His

stomach dropped. He scrambled for his phone, pulled up an old Melody James acoustic session on YouTube. Not the polished stuff. The raw one, from years ago. One mic. One stool. One girl who looked like she hadn't learned how to lie yet. He played it. Then played the recording from his phone again. Then the video. Then the recording. It was her. Melody Sinclair was Melody James.

And he wasn't sure whether to be amazed... or afraid of what it meant.

Chapter 5

Melody

Begin Again (Taylors Version)

She could feel it. The shift. It was subtle—just the flicker of something behind someone’s eyes, the way a breeze changes direction before a storm. But she’d felt it before. In green rooms, on buses, in boardrooms with men twice her age talking about “the next single.” That moment when someone figured her out. Now, she was feeling it again. And it was coming from Malachi.

He hadn’t said anything. He hadn’t looked at her differently. Not really. But something in the air between them had gone heavy. And she was nothing if not trained to notice invisible weight.

She stood at the back counter of Wren & Page, restocking bookmarks and pretending her hands weren’t shaking. Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe it was in her head. Maybe she was just tired and overthinking and— The door creaked. She didn’t need to look up to know who it was.

Malachi always walked with purpose, but not arrogance. Like he had something to say but wanted to get it right. She heard the rustle of his jacket as he approached, the soft tap of his boots on old floorboards. “Hey,” he said gently. She looked up. Smiled small. “Hey.”

He held out a cup of coffee. “I figured you wouldn’t have had lunch yet.” He always did this. Brought her things like it was nothing. Coffee. A granola bar. A page torn from a notebook with a quote she’d once mentioned liking. It made her nervous. Nervous in a warm way. “Thanks,” she said, taking the cup and wrapping her fingers around it too tightly. He didn’t leave. He just stood there. Watching her. Like he was listening to something no one else could hear. Her stomach flipped. Don’t panic. Don’t run. But she knew this moment. It was the moment before someone said her name wrong. Not “Melody Sinclair.” The other name. The name that belonged to the girl on stage, not the girl in hiding. So she spoke first. “You look like you want to ask something,” she said, eyes locked on the rim of her cup. He was quiet for a second. Then: “Why’d you stop singing?” Her breath caught. Not what he asked. How he asked it. Soft. Like he knew. Like he wasn’t guessing anymore. Melody set the coffee down. Slowly. Carefully. Like if she moved too fast, the truth would spill out between them. “I didn’t stop,” she said finally. “I just... quit being loud about it.” He nodded once.

Then again, slower. “I heard you the other night. In the hallway.” The air crackled. Melody looked up, heart thudding. “And?” she asked. “And I knew that voice,” he said. “I’ve known it since I was sixteen. Since a girl in boots and a flannel broke my heart through a speaker.” Silence. He didn’t say her name. But he didn’t have to. She stepped back instinctively. Her whole body folding in on itself. “I’m not her anymore,” she whispered. “I know,” he said. And it wasn’t accusing. It wasn’t even surprising. Just honest. And somehow, that was worse. She didn’t speak the rest of her shift. Malachi didn’t leave. He stayed. Not hovering. Just... existing near her. Like maybe if he was quiet long enough, she’d believe he didn’t want anything from her.

And maybe—just maybe—she almost believed it.

Chapter 6

Malachi

Peter Pan by Kelsea ballerini

She didn't run. That's the part he couldn't get over. He told her—without saying the words—that he knew. And she didn't scream or storm off or throw her coffee at him. She just stood there, spine rigid like a wire pulled too tight, eyes full of something ancient. And she said, "I'm not her anymore." Malachi had replayed those words in his head a hundred times on the walk home. He understood what she meant. Not just about the stage name. About all of it—the glittering life, the headlines, the forced smiles and cameras, the loneliness that got louder the more lights they shined on you. He'd seen it before. Not with her, but with others. Local artists. Big dreamers. People who cracked under a weight no one else could see. But it was different with her. Because it was Melody James. Because her voice had been the first one he ever cared about. Because when she disappeared, it had felt—quietly, irrationally—like he lost someone he never even met. And now she was here. Pouring coffee. Avoiding stages. Singing softly to herself in doorways. He should be mad. He wasn't. Levi's voice blared through the headphones. "Yo, Malachi, are you still with me?" Malachi blinked. He was sitting in the studio booth, eyes locked on the waveform of a song they'd been working on for days. He had no idea how long he'd been zoning out. "Yeah," he muttered. "Just thinking." Levi spun in the engineer's chair and raised a brow. "About the girl you're definitely not writing three whole verses about?" Malachi didn't answer. "You wanna tell me why every lyric you've written since last week sounds like heartbreak in flannel?" Still no answer. Levi rolled his eyes. "Look, I know I clown a lot, but real talk—what's going on? You're not usually the type to mope." Malachi leaned forward, hands threading through his hair. "I think I know who she is." Levi stilled. "Melody?" "Yeah." "Melody Melody?" He nodded once. Levi let out a long, low whistle. "I thought she dropped off the earth." "She did. Or tried to." They sat in silence for a beat. Then Levi said, softer than usual, "So what are you gonna do?" Malachi shrugged. "I don't know. I think she trusts me. Barely. But if I push, she'll bolt."

"You wanna tell people?" Levi said softly

"No." Malachi said

"Wanna record her?" Levi said suddenly

“Not unless she wants to be.” Malachi said sternly

Levi looked at him like he was seeing him for the first time. “Wow, you really like her.”

Malachi didn’t say yes. He didn’t have to. That night, he walked past Wren & Page on his way home. Lights still on. Her shadow moves behind the curtains. He paused for a second on the sidewalk. Didn’t go in. Didn’t knock. Just listened. Faint, almost invisible—but there. A voice. Her voice. Singing again. And this time, he didn’t press the record button . He just listened. And let her be.

Chapter 7

Melody

Chasin' You by Morgan Wallen

There was something different in the way he looked at her now. Not suspicious. Not unkind. Just... like he knew something she didn't want him to. Melody had felt it the moment he walked in. That shift. The pause. The silence between question and answer, like a thread being pulled loose. Malachi didn't say anything, and neither did she. But the truth sat between them like an unopened letter. And Melody didn't know how long she had before it got read out loud. She shelved books in the poetry section that morning, though most of her fingers trembled too much to alphabetize properly. June noticed. Of course she did. June always noticed the things Melody didn't say. "You okay?" she asked, gently nudging Melody's arm with her elbow. Melody nodded, too quickly. "Fine." "Your 'fine' sounds like it's made of paper." Melody gave a small smile. "Then maybe don't set it on fire." June didn't laugh. She just stayed close, sorting books beside her in the silence, the good kind, the kind that held space instead of crowding it. "I think he knows," Melody said finally. June didn't have to ask who. Malachi. "Did he say anything?" "No. But he looked at me like..." Melody paused, staring down at the spine of a worn Mary Oliver collection. "Like he saw right through the name tag." June reached over and gently squeezed her wrist. "Do you want him to know?" "I don't know what I want." June's eyes didn't flinch. "That's allowed." The day passed slowly. Melody went through the motions—ringing up paperbacks, recommending tearjerkers, pretending she hadn't once stood under stadium lights with a guitar in her hands and an ache in her throat. She missed music. That was the worst part. Not the fame, not the chaos, not the exhaustion. Just the music. The way it used to feel before everyone else got their hands on it. She missed writing songs that weren't meant to sell. She missed singing like it didn't matter who listened. She missed being a girl with a voice and nothing to prove. That night, she found herself on the rooftop again. Same blanket. Same breeze. The stars were faint, but still there, buried beneath city light. She pulled her notebook out of her tote bag. The same leather one she'd had for years—lyrics on coffee-stained pages, some crossed out, some unfinished, all of them hers. She turned to a clean page.

Stared. Wrote.

[Song Draft: Untitled]

If I told you the truth, would it sound like a song?

Would you hum it back to me, or say I've got it all wrong?

Would you see me as broken, or just breaking free?

'Cause the girl you think you know...

I am still learning how to be me.

"Is that yours?" Melody jumped. Malachi stood at the edge of the rooftop door, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets, face unreadable. She closed the notebook slowly. "Yeah." He didn't move closer. Just nodded, like he understood that too much light would scare her off. "I won't tell," he said. Something broke in her chest—small and quiet, like a note held too long. "Why not?" "Because I know what it's like to be more than what people expect from you." Melody stared at him. "You really did figure it out, didn't you?" "I think I knew before you said a word." She exhaled shakily. "And you don't care?" "I care. Just not in the way you're afraid of."

The breeze picked up. Her notebook fluttered. A page turned. He nodded toward it. "That line... 'the girl you think you know'—that's good." Melody gave a tiny, crooked smile. "Thanks." He took one step forward. Then another. Then sat down beside her without asking. They didn't speak again that night. But when she handed him one earbud, and he took it without a word, she knew something had shifted. Not just the air. The silence. It wasn't empty anymore.

Chapter 8

Malachi

One Mississippi by Kane Brown

Malachi didn't sleep much that night. After sitting beside her on the rooftop—after hearing her voice, her real voice, not humming or teasing but honest—something inside him wouldn't turn off. He didn't even bother putting on music when he got back to his apartment. That was a first. Usually, when the world was too loud, he fought back with sound. Layers of it. Lo-fi, old country, beat loops—anything to drown out the static of what-ifs and almos. But tonight, the only thing looping was her. The way she looked at him when he said he wouldn't tell. Like it scared her more than if he had. He knew now—really knew—what he'd been suspecting for weeks. Melody Sinclair was Melody James. The girl on the album cover he'd kept under his bed when he was seventeen. The girl whose voice once felt like a secret language he didn't know he was fluent in. She was real. And she was hurting. And all he wanted was to help her carry it. The next day at the studio, he couldn't focus. Levi noticed, of course. Levi always noticed. "Bro," Levi said, slapping down a takeout container onto the control panel, "you've replayed that same vocal loop five times." Malachi blinked. "I have?" Levi raised a brow. "You good?" Malachi shrugged. "I'm thinking." "You're always thinking. That's the problem." Malachi leaned back in his chair, eyes still on the waveform across the screen. "What if someone had a voice like... I don't know. Like something you'd forgotten you needed until you heard it again?" Levi froze mid-chew. "This is about her, isn't it?" Malachi didn't answer. Levi leaned forward, all traces of goofiness gone. "Melody Sinclair?" Malachi still didn't answer. Levi swore under his breath. "You knew." "She didn't tell me," Malachi said quickly. "I just... figured it out." Levi stood. Paced. Ran a hand over his buzzed head like he was trying to scrub the news out. "Okay. Okay. So now what?"

"I don't know."

"Do you tell someone?"

“No.”

Levi looked at him like he'd lost it. “Mal, do you realize what this means? The girl who vanished, the one who broke her contract, disappeared like a ghost—she's here. She's been here.”

“I'm not telling anyone,” Malachi said, sharper this time.

Levi held up his hands. “Alright. But you gotta admit, this is huge.”

“It's not about that.”

“Then what is it about?”

Malachi hesitated.

Then, quieter: “It's about protecting someone who doesn't want to be found.” Levi sank back into the chair across from him, letting that settle between them. After a long moment, he sighed. “You like her, don't you?” Malachi didn't reply. He didn't have to. That night, Malachi waited outside Wren & Page. He hadn't meant to. His feet just carried him there, like a song he couldn't skip. Melody came out a little after closing, bundled in her oversized coat, hair tucked into a beanie, tote bag slung over one shoulder. When she saw him, she didn't flinch. She just walked up slowly and said, “You didn't tell.” He shook his head. “Not my story.” They stood on the sidewalk, the city buzzing around them, both quiet. “I used to think music was the only thing I was good at,” she said suddenly. Malachi's voice was soft. “It still is.” “But it broke me,” she whispered. “I think it broke the version of you the world made up. Not the real one.” She looked at him then, really looked—like she was trying to figure out if she could believe that. “I don't want to be famous,” she said. “You don't have to be.” “I don't want to perform.” “You don't have to.” “I just want to feel like I'm allowed to exist without being someone.” Malachi smiled, not the cocky kind, but the quiet, real kind. “You're allowed,” he said. Melody stepped closer, just a little. Close enough that he could see the flecks of green in her brown eyes. Close enough that their breath curled into the same cloud between them. And for the first time in a long time, Malachi didn't feel like he had to write about this feeling. Because it was already writing itself.

Chapter 9

Eliora Reyes. June Calhoun. Sage Montgomery. Levi Carter.

All Too Well (10 minute version)(Taylor's Version)

ELIORA REYES

The first time Eliora saw Melody and Malachi together, really saw them, it was late on a Thursday. The kind of night New York wore like a lullaby—soft wind, streetlights glowing like candles, music spilling out from a window two floors up. She was visiting for fall break, curled up in a beanbag chair in the back corner of Wren & Page, scribbling lyrics in her journal and sipping a warm cider Malachi made her promise not to spill on the poetry section. She noticed it first on Melody's shoulders. The way they slowly started to unclench. Like something had shifted in her wiring. Like some part of her had been holding its breath for a very long time and was finally, quietly, exhaling. Malachi had that effect on people. He never rushed. Never pulled. He just... stayed. She watched Melody hand him a slip of paper. A lyric sheet. Her fingers trembled. He held it like it was a gift. And Eliora thought: That's what love looks like. Not fireworks. A steady flame.

JUNE CALHOUN

She found the notebook under Melody's pillow. It wasn't snooping. She was changing the pillowcases, and the spiral corner stuck out just enough to catch her eye. She shouldn't have opened it. But she did. And what she found inside didn't feel like a betrayal. It felt like a prayer. Lyrics. Verses scribbled and crossed out. Doodles in the margins. A half-written bridge about broken glass and found voices. A chorus that made June cry, right there in Melody's room, still holding the fresh linen. It wasn't that she finally knew who Melody really was. It was that she finally understood who she'd always been. Not a girl running away from music. A girl trying to find her way back to it—on her own terms. June didn't bring it up that night. She just poured two mugs of chamomile tea, turned on the

string lights, and said, “If you ever want to sing, I’ll sit right here and listen.” Melody didn’t sing. But she smiled. And June knew—someday, she would.

SAGE MONTGOMERY

Sage had seen a hundred versions of Melody James. The shy fifteen-year-old scribbling songs on diner napkins. A sixteen-year-old doing press interviews with eyes too wide and shoulders too stiff. The seventeen-year-old sobbing in a hotel bathtub in Kansas City, whispering I don’t think I can do this anymore. And now—this version. Darker hair. Softer voice. Quiet like an unanswered question. They hadn’t talked about the past. Not yet. But Sage watched her closely. She saw how she leaned into Malachi when she laughed. How she tucked her lyrics back into her notebook like they were precious. How she still touched the scar on her left wrist when she got nervous. Melody hadn’t lost herself. She’d just buried herself under too many names. Now, with him—she was starting to dig herself out. Sage didn’t say much. She just texted her after their last coffee. “You’re braver now than you’ve ever been. And you’ve always been brave.” Melody didn’t reply. But she heard it. And that was enough.

LEVI CARTER

He knew from the second he heard her voice. Not even the whole song. Just a note. He’d been in the back of the studio, sorting cables and muttering to himself about coffee when Malachi hit play. And suddenly, there it was. Raw. Honest. Like wind through a church window. “Dude,” he’d whispered, spinning in his chair. “Who is that?” Malachi just stared at the console. Didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. Levi wasn’t dumb or naive. And he wasn’t heartless. He’d wanted to run to her. Ask her everything. Beg her to record more. Be the guy who got her back out there. But one look at Malachi told him this wasn’t about music. Not anymore. This was about someone trying to heal. So he kept her secret. Even when the studio head asked questions. Even when a TikTok clip from an open mic night sounded way too familiar. He kept her name off every track. Because Malachi loved her. And Levi? He loved Malachi like a brother. So he’d wait. He’d wait until Melody said the words herself. And when she did? He’d be the first to hit the record button .

Chapter 10

Melody & Malachi

Miss me more by Kelsea ballerina

Melody

There was something about October in Brooklyn that always made Melody feel like the world was turning over in its sleep. The air had a bite to it, like it was whispering wake up, and the trees—those stubborn, burning trees—let go of things without needing permission. It was both haunting and beautiful. Like music that only played once. Wren & Page smelled like cinnamon and old paper. The heat wasn't working properly, so she kept her scarf wrapped around her neck as she stocked the new poetry arrivals. Her fingers were cold, but her mind was racing. The notebook under her bed was full now. Pages stacked with verses, unfinished bridges, and chords she hadn't dared to play. And that was the problem. She wanted to play them. She wanted to sing again. She hated herself for it. Her heart did this now—ached at the thought of music, pulsed at the memory of her voice rising in a dressing room or a green room or a hotel bathroom at 2 a.m. But now? She sang alone. Quiet. Under her breath. With the door closed. And once—just once—Malachi had heard. He hadn't said anything right away. He'd just waited, outside the staff room, coffee in hand, with this expression on his face that wrecked her. Like she'd just become real to him in a brand-new way. That was three days ago. Since then, everything has been... different. He hadn't pushed. He never did. But she knew. He knew. And somehow, that made it worse. She finished shelving the last of the books and retreated to the corner table by the window. Her favorite spot. Her quiet sanctuary. She opened her sketchpad, not to draw—but to think. She couldn't stop replaying it. Her voice. His face. The silence that followed.

Malachi

Malachi had heard a lot of voices. Some are polished. Some gritty. Some that needed a little tuning, and some that needed a miracle. But hers? It was the kind that made silence

hurt. He hadn't meant to listen. He'd walked in to ask if she wanted Thai food after her shift, only to hear the soft notes threading out from the crack under the door. Just a verse. Maybe half a chorus. But it was enough. And he knew. He didn't say anything that night. Just handed her the takeout, let her pretend she hadn't been singing, and spent the rest of the night talking about everything except music. But now? Now it followed him. Everywhere. In the studio, when he tried to edit other tracks. On the train, when he rewound her voice in his mind like a sacred reel of tape. At night, when he closed his eyes and thought about the way she'd hugged her knees to her chest while humming a song she hadn't finished yet. He wasn't just in love with the girl who used to be Melody James. He was in love with the girl who was still her, even if she didn't know it.

Back to Melody

The bell over the shop door jingled. She didn't have to look up. She knew it was him. She felt it in her chest first. That invisible thread pulling tighter. He always brought this strange calm with him, like a song slowing to its final note. He walked over without saying anything. Just slid into the seat across from her. "You okay?" he asked, voice low. She nodded. "I think so." He pulled something out of his jacket pocket and placed it gently between them. A USB drive. "What's this?" she asked. "Just... some stuff. Beats. Loops. A few unfinished tracks. I thought maybe..." He hesitated. "Maybe you'd want to write. Or not. No pressure." Her fingers hovered over it. It looked small. Harmless. But she knew what it meant. He was asking her to try. Not to record. Not to perform. Just... to remember who she was. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You think I can still do it?" "I think you never stopped." She stared at him for a long moment, then slipped the USB into her bag. And for the first time in years, her chest didn't feel like a locked room. It felt like a stage, waiting in the dark, just before the lights came up.

Chapter 11

Malachi

More Than My Hometown by Morgan Wallen

The studio was quieter than usual. No buzzing instruments. No open mics. Just the low hum of Levi chewing on a sour straw while scrolling through TikTok, boots propped up on the cluttered desk like this whole place wasn't built out of sweat and broken dreams. Malachi paced the length of the room, earbuds draped around his neck, Melody's voice still caught in the echo of his chest. He shouldn't have recorded it. But he had. Late that night, two weeks ago—just after she'd left the shop with ink-stained hands and tired eyes, whisper-singing under her breath. He hadn't meant to capture it. It just... happened. A reflex. She never knew. She couldn't. "Yo," Levi said suddenly, pulling one earbud free. "That snippet you showed me the other night. The one with the girl?" He tossed a pen at Malachi. "Play it again. It's been in my head all week. You mix it?" Malachi hesitated. "Nah. It's rough. Not for anyone to hear." Levi rolled his eyes. "Bro, half your best work starts rough. I'm not gonna leak it or anything. Just play it." Malachi's fingers hovered over the file. "C'mon, man. I need something real today. All I've been hearing is overprocessed trash and fake heartbreak." He gave in. Half a second. One click. The studio filled with her voice—raw, aching, private. Malachi stared at the waveforms on the screen, her breath tracing them like a pulse. Levi stilled. No jokes. No wild comments. Just silence. Then: "Holy—wait." Levi leaned forward. "That's not just some girl." Malachi's heart stuttered. "That's her. That's—Melody freaking James." Malachi yanked the aux cord like it might kill the sound. "Don't—" But it was too late. Levi's phone buzzed. He reached for it, but Malachi saw it happen in real time: the audio clip had been uploaded. To the shared cloud folder. To the wrong drive. "Oh no." Malachi's stomach dropped. "Tell me you didn't—" "I didn't mean to! My hand—my phone— I was screen-recording and AirDropping something else. I didn't even think—" He shoved past Levi, hands flying over the keyboard. But the file was already syncing. Already out. And the filename? "Untitled—MelodyJ." They hadn't even tried to hide it.

Melody

She knew the second she opened her phone. It wasn't just the notifications—it was the feeling. Like a ripple in the stillness she'd built. Her phone vibrated on the countertop at Wren & Page, where she'd just made tea, the mug still steaming beside her sketchbook. The first text was from Sage. "Mel, I need to talk to you. Right now." Then June. "Whatever's

going on, I'm here. Okay?" Melody's breath caught. Then she saw it. The link. The upload. Her voice. That song. Unfinished. Vulnerable. Never meant to leave her notebook, let alone touch the internet. The lyrics she'd written when she couldn't sleep—about losing herself, about wanting to be invisible. Someone had recorded it. Someone had shared it. There was only one person who ever heard her sing that way. Her hands shook as she grabbed her coat.

Malachi

He didn't even get the door all the way open before she was there. "Mal—" Her palm slammed flat against his chest. "You recorded me?" His voice caught. "Melody, I didn't— I wasn't—" "You recorded me?" Her voice cracked, softer now, like it physically hurt to say it. "And then you leaked it?" "No. No, I swear it wasn't like that. I just— It was a mistake." She stared at him like he was a stranger. "A mistake," she repeated. "Right. Like what? Your hand slipped and the entire world accidentally found out I exist again?" "Levi asked me to play something. I wasn't thinking. It wasn't— I wasn't trying to hurt you." "But you did." Her voice was barely above a whisper now. "You don't understand what you've done." "I know I messed up. I'll fix it." "You can't fix it, Malachi." Her voice broke. "Because it was never just about a song. It was about trust." He felt the ground go out from under him. "Melody, please..."

She turned

. She didn't slam the door.

She just... left.

And that was worse. So much worse...

Chapter 12

Melody & Malachi

Used to Love You Sober by Kane Brown

Melody

The world doesn't end with a bang. It ends with a sound you swore no one else would ever hear. And it ends in silence. Melody doesn't scream. She doesn't throw anything, even when she wants to. She doesn't cry until much later—alone in the back room at Wren & Page, with the door locked and the light off and her knees pulled up to her chest. But the moment she finds out, all she can do is stare. The studio clip—barely a minute long—is already making the rounds on TikTok. A blurry video, posted under a throwaway account, captioned “She sounds like her... but better.” It has over 120,000 views. She knows that voice. Of course she does. It's hers. The room tips sideways. June says her name, but it sounds like it's coming from underwater. Melody closes the laptop gently, like it might explode. Her breath is caught somewhere in her throat, brittle and sharp. She doesn't need to ask who leaked it. The song was from a voice memo. Private. Raw. Something she hummed, then sang for Malachi. Just once. Just to him. And now it's everywhere. She doesn't remember walking out of the bookstore. She only remembers the wind on her face and the ache in her chest and how her hands won't stop shaking.

Malachi

Levi's voice is a thousand miles away. “Bro,” he says again. “I didn't mean—look, I thought it was saved to your drive, not the cloud.” Malachi stares at the studio monitor like it betrayed him. One clumsy flick of his wrist. One wrong folder. One careless second. That's all it took. He replays the moment in his head, over and over—how they were messing around in the booth, talking about new artists, sharing rough cuts. Levi asked what he was working on. He said, “Nothing serious, just this one acoustic thing.” Hit play. I walked away to grab coffee. The rest is a blur. He didn't realize the file was auto-synced. Didn't know Levi saved it to reference the mic levels. Didn't know anyone else could hear it. Until it was too late. Until the internet started asking, “Did Melody James come back?” He drives to the bookstore in a haze, heart pounding like it's trying to climb out of his chest. She's not there. June won't tell him where she went. Her jaw is tight. Her eyes are sharp. “You don't get to talk to her right now,” she says. “You don't get to fix it with words.”

Melody

She doesn't go home. She walks until her feet ache, until her hoodie is soaked with rain and her phone buzzes so many times she finally powers it off. When she does speak, it's not to Malachi. It's to Sage. Because Sage knows what this means. The contracts. The old label. The people who swore they owned pieces of her voice. "They'll come looking," Sage says quietly, brushing wet strands of hair from Melody's face. "They'll think you're back." "I'm not," Melody says. "I never wanted to be." But the song is out. The song is out, and there's no taking it back.

Malachi

He finds her on the steps of the library two nights later. It's dark, and cold, and her eyes are red from crying—but he recognizes her instantly. She doesn't look up when he sits beside her. Doesn't move. Doesn't speak. "I'm sorry," he says. Her voice is quiet, sharp as a splinter. "You don't get to be sorry." "I know." "You were the only one I trusted. And you—you handed me over." He flinches. "It was a mistake. I swear." "Doesn't matter," she says. "The world has my voice again." "Mel..." She finally turns to him, and it hurts to look at her—like staring at sunlight after too many nights in the dark. "You said you liked songs that felt honest," she whispers. "But you stole mine."

Chapter 13

Melody & Malachi

Dear John (Taylor's Version)

MELODY

She didn't show up for the morning shift. That was the first sign. June had tried to cover it with a casual shrug—"She's probably just tired"—but her eyes said otherwise. And when Malachi walked in later that afternoon, hoping for a miracle, hoping for a moment, he found no trace of Melody Sinclair. No paper cup waiting behind the counter. No boots by the back wall. No quiet hum weaving through the shelves. Only air. And Melody? She was three blocks away, wrapped in the safety of a scarf and silence. She had read the headlines. Heard the whispers. Seen the clip—grainy and watermarked—of her voice bleeding from speakers that weren't hers. It wasn't even the full song. Just the chorus. Raw. Bare. Just enough to open the scar. It was the melody she'd written the night she almost left for good. The one no one knew about. Not even her label back then. And now it was out there. On the internet. Without her permission. Without her armor. And worst of all? It had his name in the metadata. She hadn't called. Hadn't screamed. Hadn't thrown anything. She just vanished. Shoved the guitar back under the bed like it was a weapon. Deleted the voice notes from her phone. And when June asked if she was okay, Melody just smiled too tightly and said, "I'm tired of being someone people find." She didn't cry. She just stopped.

MALACHI

He knocked again. Three times. Soft. Hesitant. He knew she was inside. June had said as much. He could feel her presence through the door—like static in the air before a storm. "Melody," he whispered. "Please." No answer. "I didn't mean to," he said, voice rough, forehead pressed to the wood. "Levi—he asked about the mix. I opened it, but I didn't realize the Bluetooth—my hand slipped, and then it was in the shared file. It wasn't even supposed to—" He broke off, guilt crushing his ribs. It wasn't enough. Not this time. Inside, Melody stood frozen by the wall, every part of her bracing. She heard every word. But none of it mattered. Not now. Not when her voice was out there again. Not when she'd trusted someone—again—and it had all fallen apart. She took a step back. And another. And another. Until her back hit the bedroom door, and the breath caught in her throat. He didn't mean to. They never meant to. That didn't stop the breaking.

MALACHI

She didn't show up the next day either. Or the next. He called. Nothing. Texted. Nothing. Dropped by. June wouldn't open the door. He left a note in her locker at Wren & Page, folded three times and written in the margins of a receipt. It said: You once said some songs know more about you than you know about yourself. I think this one knew me too. And I'm sorry I let it speak without you. No response. Not even a look. It was like she'd hit pause on him—muted his presence entirely. And the thing that scared him most? Maybe he deserved it.

MELODY

She dreamed of Tennessee that night. The back porch. The cracked strings on her old guitar. The way her mama used to say, "You don't gotta sing for anyone who doesn't see your heart." Only now the memory felt like a lie. Because she had shown Malachi her heart. Quietly. Slowly. A piece at a time. And he'd handed it to the world. Even if by accident. Even if he meant well. He'd still done it. And some betrayals didn't need malice to hurt. They just needed carelessness.

MALACHI

He walked past Wren & Page on the fourth day and saw her inside. She was shelving new arrivals, hood pulled low, eyes on the floor. She didn't look up when he passed. Didn't flinch. Didn't pause. It would've been easier if she screamed at him. If she cursed. If she broke the stupid mason jar mug he always left behind the counter. But Melody Sinclair didn't rage. She vanished while standing right in front of you. And in that moment, Malachi realized what he had truly broken. It wasn't the song. It was the silence. The sacred one she had trusted him with. And now, it is gone.

Chapter 14

Melody & Malachi

HEARTFIRST by Kelsea Ballerina

Melody

It started with the door. Not in a dramatic, cinematic way. Just... the creak of it opening. Slowly. Softly. Like it wasn't sure if it was welcome. Melody didn't look up. She was shelving a stack of used poetry books in the back of Wren & Page, her fingers moving on autopilot while her head replayed everything—over and over and over again. The song. The leak. Malachi's face. His voice, explaining. Begging. Lying. Or maybe not lying, but not protecting her either. The ache in her chest had dulled from sharp glass to something more like bruised skin—still tender, but not enough to make her flinch every time she breathed. She heard his voice before she saw him. “Hey.” One word. Not much. But her heart twisted like it still remembered how he used to say it when she walked into the shop late, or when she spilled her tea, or when she said something she didn't realize was funny until he laughed. She didn't answer. She didn't have the energy for another scene. Not today. She kept her back to him, sliding a tattered copy of *The Sun and Her Flowers* into its place on the shelf. “I—I didn't come to talk about the song,” he said, voice rough. She didn't turn. But her fingers paused on the next book. “I mean, I know that's probably all you think I care about. But that's not true.” Silence. “I just wanted to see if you were okay.” Still nothing. He waited. One beat. Two. Then the door creaked again. This time closing. Melody let out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

Malachi

He shouldn't have come. Levi told him to give her space. That she wasn't ready. That he'd already done enough damage. But Malachi couldn't sleep anymore. He couldn't eat much. Couldn't even sit in the studio without thinking of her. Of what they had. Of how fast it slipped away. Of how stupid he'd been. It really was an accident. A stupid one. A moment of carelessness that unraveled everything. He hadn't meant to let it play. He hadn't even realized Levi had his AirDrop on. But it happened. And the internet did what it always does—spread it like wildfire. The clip was only twenty seconds long. But it was her. Raw, aching, beautiful. Too much. And now she is gone. Not physically—she was still at Wren & Page, still behind the register or lost in the aisles with her hair tucked under a beanie and her lips pressed tight like they might say something if she wasn't careful. But she was gone. From him. And he had no idea how to get her back.

Melody

Three days later, she found a note tucked inside her copy of *Letters to a Young Poet*. The same one she always reread when the world felt too loud. It was folded neatly, slipped between pages 46 and 47. In Malachi's handwriting. "You don't have to forgive me. But I needed you to know—I never wanted to hurt you. I should've protected your music better. I'll regret that forever. But I miss talking to you. Just talking. If you ever want to again... I'll be around. - M." She didn't cry. Not really. But something in her chest softened. Just a little.

Malachi

He showed up the next afternoon. Not to talk. Not even to look at her, really. Just to buy a book and leave quietly. It was an excuse. But still. When he reached the counter, she was there. She scanned his book in silence. Then, without looking up, she said, "You owe me a coffee." He blinked. "What?" She finally met his eyes. Hers were still guarded, but something was there. Not forgiveness. Not yet. But something. "You said, back when we

met—you'd bring me coffee sometime. You never did." A pause. His lips twitched. "I'll go now." She didn't smile. But she didn't stop him either.

Chapter 15

Melody & Malachi

Thought You Should Know by Morgan Wallen

MELODY

Wren & Page smelled like old cedar and fresh coffee the morning after everything shifted. Not entirely changed—but not untouched either. Like the first crack in winter ice, invisible unless you're listening close. I wiped down the counter, deliberately avoiding the back corner where Malachi usually sat. My hands were steady, but inside, everything felt like a question I didn't know how to answer. I still hadn't forgiven him. Not really. Not fully. But I smiled yesterday. I had let him hand me that mug of peppermint tea. I had let my fingers brush his. And I hadn't walked away. "Hey," June said from behind a stack of new arrivals. She eyed me, then the quiet corner. "You okay?" "I'm fine." She raised an eyebrow. "That's your lying voice." I gave her a look but didn't argue. Because she was right. I wasn't fine. I was floating. Or sinking. Or something in between. Not because Malachi had fixed it. But because—for the first time—I didn't feel like I had to run. Maybe pain didn't have to mean distance. Maybe.

MALACHI

She looked at me. Not for long. Not like before. But her eyes found mine. That was something. It had been a week since the song leaked. Six days since we stopped talking. Four since she refused to even look at me. And now—this. This small, aching truce. I didn't deserve it. Not even close. But I wanted to earn it. I wanted to crawl my way back into

whatever space she still had for me, even if I had to do it inch by inch, word by word. Levi walked into the shop halfway through the morning, slinging a messenger bag over his shoulder and giving me a silent, pointed look. I'd asked him not to mention anything. Not even the studio's response to the leak. "Not here," I muttered under my breath as I restocked the poetry shelf. He followed me anyway. "They want to know if she'll sign." "She won't." "They don't even care who she is anymore, man. Just the voice. The song. That's it. They said—" "No." I turned, sharp, jaw locked. "Not now." Behind me, Melody's steps paused. I didn't even have to see her to feel it—her retreat. I wanted to slam my head into the nearest bookshelf. Levi raised both hands in surrender. "Got it. I'll text you later." He was gone before I could stop him. Before I could explain. Again.

MELODY

I heard my name that night when I wasn't supposed to. Down the hall. Whispered from behind the studio doors. "She's not ready," Malachi said. His voice was lower, steadier. "If you care about her, you won't push." I froze. "You're the one who leaked her stuff—" Levi's voice. "I know. You think I don't know that?" A pause. Then Malachi's voice again, barely above a whisper: "She trusted me. And I broke it. I don't want her to sing again because of guilt. I want her to sing again because she wants to." Silence. Then footsteps. The sound of the hallway door clicking shut. I didn't move for a long time. Because maybe he got it. Maybe he really did.

MALACHI

I didn't know she heard me. But the next day, a folded piece of paper was tucked under the edge of my favorite mug at the register. Her handwriting—small and neat and familiar. I never hated you. I just hated how much it hurt. I stared at the words so long I forgot how to breathe. Then I looked up. And she was watching me from across the store. She didn't smile. But she didn't look away either.

Chapter 16

Melody & Malachi

Lose It by Kane Brown

MELODY

It started with the rain. The kind that crept in through old windowpanes and drummed soft against the bookstore's roof like fingers tapping a quiet apology. Wren & Page was near-empty. The kind of stillness that made you think — or feel — too much. I was shelving returns, trying to pretend the ache in my chest wasn't permanent now. That I didn't hear his voice in every silence. I hadn't spoken to him in days. Weeks, maybe. I'd perfected the art of avoiding: different shifts, unread texts, the way I'd slip into the back room if I even felt the sound of his laugh coming near. But the ache hadn't gone anywhere. If anything, it got heavier. Tonight, though, I didn't duck away when he walked in out of the storm. His hoodie was soaked. His curls dripped. His eyes — when they met mine — were gentler than I remembered. Like he'd stopped carrying anger and started carrying guilt instead. We stared. No words. Just years of music and heartbreak and almost standing between us in the doorway. Then he said, "Mel." I hated how much I still loved the way he said my name. Soft. Like he was afraid it might break. "I never meant to hurt you," he said, voice shaking. "I swear, it was an accident. Levi and I were talking, and the song was just—open on my desktop. I wasn't even thinking. And then it was out there." I crossed my arms. "And now everyone's listening to a piece of me I never gave." His face broke at that. "I know. I know. And I'd do anything to take it back." The silence sat between us like a ghost.

"I didn't trust anybody," I whispered. "And then I trusted you." "I know." "You knew what that song meant to me." "I did." I swallowed. "Then why weren't you more careful?" His shoulders sagged. "Because I forgot you weren't just someone I admired. You were someone I loved." The word made my stomach twist. "Don't." "I mean it, Mel. I didn't fall in love with Melody James. I fell in love with you. With the girl who alphabetizes poetry books and sketches her feelings instead of saying them out loud. The one who sings under her breath when she thinks no one's listening. The one who saved me without meaning to." I blinked fast. "You don't get to say that." "Why not?" "Because if you love me, you should've protected me." "I'm trying now." He stepped closer. I didn't move away this time. "I miss you," he said. "Every second. Every day. I miss your voice and your silence and your eyes when you look at me like maybe the world isn't as loud as it feels." I didn't mean to cry. The tears just fell — soft, surprised, almost angry. "I miss you too," I whispered. He reached for my hand. Hesitated. Let it hover like he was asking. I let him take it. And for the first time in what felt like forever, I didn't pull away.

MALACHI

She was still Melody Sinclair. Still Melody James. Still the girl who wrecked me and put me back together with a look. She didn't scream at me. She didn't yell. She didn't shove me away. She just let the walls fall — quietly, like they'd grown tired of holding back. Her hand in mine felt like home. "I want to fix this," I told her. Her voice cracked. "You can't." "But maybe... maybe we can write something new." She looked up at me, eyes dark and wet and so damn brave. "Not if it costs me everything again." I squeezed her fingers. "Then we do it your way. Your pace. No songs. No pressure. Just us." She didn't say yes. But she didn't say no. And when she leaned into my chest and let me hold her — really hold her — I knew we weren't broken anymore. Just bruised. And maybe a little less alone.

Chapter 17

Melody & Malachi at the same time

New Years Day by Taylor Swift

The morning sun filtered through the high windows of Wren & Page, casting a gentle glow across the rows of bookshelves. Melody stood behind the counter, the familiar scent of paper and ink wrapping around her like a comfort she hadn't felt in a long time. She traced the edge of a worn book cover with a fingertip, the rough texture grounding her. Her fingers moved almost without thinking, organizing books, shelving new arrivals. It was the kind of quiet work that soothed a racing mind, like a slow melody drifting through a noisy room. From across the store, Malachi watched her. His gaze was soft, hesitant — like he was afraid to disturb the fragile peace they'd found in these past weeks. After everything that happened, after the leak and the silence, the distance between them had begun to shrink. It wasn't a fix, not yet, but a beginning. He tapped his pen against the cover of his notebook. The words inside were still jumbled, but they were there. Pieces of songs, thoughts, emotions he couldn't quite put into sentences yet. But he had hope — the kind that crept up slowly, the way dawn arrives before you see the sun. "Hey," he said, voice low and careful. Melody looked up, startled for a moment, but then her lips curved into a small smile. "Hey." The moment stretched between them, comfortable and unforced. They hadn't rushed to speak, hadn't needed to. Sometimes silence said everything. Later, they settled on the battered couch in the back room, surrounded by piles of books and the warm hum of the city outside. Melody pulled out her sketchpad, flipping to a blank page. She began to

draw, lines flowing like a song—sunlight slipping through cracks in clouds, fragile but persistent. Malachi opened his notebook and scribbled a few lines beneath a half-finished chorus: “In the spaces between silence, the light slips in...” Their eyes met. Neither said anything more. It was enough. As the afternoon faded into evening, the bookstore filled with the soft glow of lamps, the quiet companionship between them a gentle reminder that sometimes, healing begins not with grand gestures but with the smallest moments — a shared look, a whispered melody, a light that finds its way through the cracks.

Chapter 18

Melody & Malachi at the same time

Legends by Kelsea Ballerini

The afternoon sun spilled through the studio's wide windows, casting long shadows across the mixing board and tangled cables scattered on the floor. It was Malachi's domain — a messy, chaotic space filled with sounds waiting to be shaped into songs. Today, it felt like something else: a place of possibility. Malachi stood near the console, nervously tapping his fingers against a stack of vinyl records. He glanced at the door as it creaked open and saw Melody step inside, clutching her guitar case like it was both a shield and a lifeline. Her eyes flickered with a mixture of hesitation and determination. The months away from music had left her rusty — a tremble in her fingers, a quietness in her voice — but the spark was still there. "Hey," he said, voice soft. "I'm glad you came." She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I've been working on some new beats," he continued, gesturing toward the computer. "Nothing fancy. Just... sounds I think you might like." They moved closer, the hum of the machines filling the space between them. Melody set down her guitar case and unzipped it carefully, revealing the worn acoustic guitar she hadn't played in months. Her fingers hovered over the strings, uncertain at first, then slowly found a chord. The sound was rough — a little off — but beautiful in its honesty. Malachi smiled. "That's perfect." She breathed out a shaky laugh. "Don't expect too much." But as the day stretched on, notes grew clearer, chords steadier, and a new song began to take shape —

one neither of them knew the ending to yet. The music was fragile, broken, and real. Just like them.

Chapter 19

Melody & Malachi at the same time

Whiskey Glasses by Morgan Wallen

The morning air was crisp, carrying the distant hum of city life outside the Wren & Page windows. Inside, the warmth of the bookstore wrapped around them like a cocoon — safe, quiet, but tinged with the memories that refused to fade. Melody ran her fingers over the spine of a poetry book but her mind was elsewhere — drifting to Nashville, to the label offices where contracts had been signed and broken, to the harsh words and empty promises that had pushed her away. Sage’s warning echoed in her mind: “Be careful who you trust, Mel. The past has a way of catching up.” The past wasn’t just a ghost. It was a storm looming on the horizon. Malachi’s phone buzzed. Levi’s name flashed on the screen. He hesitated before answering. “Hey,” Levi said, voice low. “The studio’s buzzing about the leak. They want to know if she’s ready to come back, if she’ll sign. There’s a chance this could blow up — good or bad.” Malachi’s jaw tightened. “She’s not ready.” “Maybe she never will be.” The words stung. Later, Malachi found Melody in the quiet corner of the bookstore, reading a worn letter he’d found tucked between pages of a book she’d borrowed long ago — a letter from her mother, full of love and encouragement, and a reminder that sometimes, the hardest roads led to the most beautiful places. She looked up when he approached. “They’re coming for me,” she said quietly. “We’ll face it together,” he promised. Because

even echoes of the past couldn't drown out the music they were writing now — one note at a time.

Chapter 20

Melody & Malachi at the same time

Heaven by Kane Brown

The crisp air of early fall wrapped around them like a whispered secret, cool and alive with the promise of change. Leaves, painted in fiery reds and burnt oranges, crunched softly beneath their footsteps as Melody and Malachi walked side by side down the narrow cobblestone streets of their neighborhood. The city thrummed gently around them — distant car horns, the murmur of late-night diners, the soft footsteps of strangers passing by — but inside their little bubble, time moved slower, gentler. Melody's hand was tucked into the crook of Malachi's elbow, her fingers curling around his with a familiar comfort. The worn leather strap of her guitar case swung lightly against her leg, the instrument inside heavier now—not just physically, but with all the memories, fears, and hope it carried. After so long, she had dared to pull it out again, to cradle it in her arms, to coax music back into her voice. Malachi glanced down at her, catching the soft curve of her smile and the sparkle in her eyes—the kind that had returned slowly, like sunlight after a long winter. His heart thudded with a mix of relief and something deeper: gratitude, awe, love. “Are you cold?” he asked softly. She shook her head, her breath misting in the cool

night. “No. I’m... warm. More than I thought I’d ever feel again.” They stopped beneath an old streetlamp, the golden light pooling around them like a spotlight on their shared moment. Leaves drifted lazily from the branches above, swirling in the gentle breeze. Melody looked up at the sky, tracing the first stars beginning to appear. “I was scared for so long, you know,” she said, voice low, almost afraid it might shatter the quiet. “Scared that I’d lose this — lose us — before it even started.” Malachi lifted her hand, pressing his palm against hers. “I was scared, too. Scared that I’d ruin everything again.” Her eyes searched for his vulnerability, meeting hope. “Do you think we can really make it? This time?” He smiled, slow and certain. “I don’t know what forever looks like. But I know that this—” He squeezed her hand gently. “This is real. And I’m here. Every step.” Melody let out a shaky breath, her chest tightening with emotion. “I want to believe that. I want to believe in us.” “Then believe,” he whispered. “Because I’m not going anywhere.” They stood like that for a long moment, the city around them fading until it was just the two of them — two broken souls who had found their way back to each other, writing a new song from the pieces. The days that followed unfolded with the quiet beauty of a slow melody, each one a note in their evolving symphony. Mornings began with the scent of fresh coffee brewing in Malachi’s small apartment, sunlight streaming through half-open blinds and casting patterns on the worn hardwood floor. Melody would hum softly as she stirred her tea, the notes tentative but growing stronger, a tentative soundtrack to their fragile peace. In the afternoons, they retreated to Wren & Page, their sanctuary amid the noise of the city. They spent hours lost in books, sharing stolen glances and half-smiles over pages filled with poetry and stories that spoke to the heart. Melody’s fingers brushed over book spines, occasionally pausing to jot down lines in her own journal—a mix of sketches, thoughts, and lyrics slowly coming back to life. Music returned like a tide. One afternoon, after months of silence, Melody pulled her guitar from its case. Her fingers trembled as they found the strings, uncertain but eager. Malachi sat beside her, his eyes gentle encouragement. The first chord was rough—offbeat, raw—but it was hers. They worked slowly, shaping sounds

that carried fragments of their story—pain and hope, silence and song. Between whispered chords and soft laughter, the barriers between them melted away. The music was imperfect but honest—the kind that heals. Yet, even in the warmth of their newfound closeness, shadows lingered. Old fears crept in during quiet moments—whispers of doubt, remnants of past wounds. Malachi wrestled with the guilt that still clung to him—the weight of the leak, the damage it caused. Melody battled the ghosts of the industry she fled, the memories of exploitation and broken promises. One evening, after a long day in the studio, they sat together on the fire escape of Malachi’s apartment, city lights sparkling below like a constellation of dreams. “I’m still scared,” Melody admitted, her voice barely above the hum of the night. “Scared the past will catch me. That I’ll lose this again.” Malachi wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “We can’t erase the past, but we can decide what it means. Together.” Her head rested against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart—a rhythm steady enough to believe in. “I want to try,” she whispered. “And I’ll be here, every step.” The quiet song between them wasn’t always easy. It was made of small moments: mornings waking up tangled in sheets, the scent of rain on pavement, whispered conversations in the dark. It was apologies said softly, forgiveness earned slowly. It was laughter in the kitchen, fingers entwined while cooking late-night meals, and the gentle understanding of two people learning how to love again. One crisp autumn night, under a sky painted with stars, they stood on the rooftop of Malachi’s building, the city sprawling beneath them like a living map of their journey. Melody cradled her guitar, fingers tracing the familiar curves as she strummed a soft melody—a song written from their shared history, every note a thread weaving them closer. Malachi joined her voice with his own, the harmony a tender promise. No need for grand gestures or declarations—the music spoke for them. When the last note faded into the cool night air, Malachi looked at her with a smile that held every hope and fear they’d faced. “Whatever comes next,” he said, voice steady, “we face it together.” Melody smiled back, heart full. “This song—it’s ours.” As the city breathed around them, the quiet song between Melody and Malachi became the

loudest thing in the world—a testament to love’s power to heal, to forgive, and to begin again. And in that moment, beneath the endless sky, they knew they had found something worth holding onto: a melody that would never fade.

Epilogue: Four Years Later

Melody & Malachi at the same time

The Good Ones by Gabby Barret

The air smelled like spring—fresh and full of possibility—as sunlight poured through the large windows of the cozy music venue. The hum of voices filled the room, soft and warm, carrying the anticipation of something real. Tonight was different. Tonight was a celebration not just of music, but of everything that had brought Melody and Malachi here. Four years had passed since Melody Sinclair disappeared from the spotlight. Since she’d hidden behind a new name, a new life, and a fear that her own voice might never return. But those years had been more than just silence—they had been growth, healing, and rediscovery. Now, she stood backstage, the familiar weight of her guitar resting against her hip, the worn leather strap soft beneath her fingers. The girl who once felt broken and lost was gone. In her place stood someone who had carved her own path—a songwriter with a voice that was raw, honest, and hers. Malachi appeared beside her, carrying his signature notebook filled with scribbles of lyrics and melodies. His eyes met hers, shining with pride and a tenderness that had only grown deeper with time. “You ready?” he asked, voice low but steady. Melody nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. “More than ever.” They stepped out together into the soft glow of the stage lights, greeted by a sea of faces — some new, some familiar, but all eager to listen. The first chord she played was steady, sure—a slow, melodic wave that rolled through the room like a shared secret. Malachi’s fingers danced across the keyboard, weaving layers of sound around her voice. The music was

alive, a living thing forged from years of laughter, tears, and quiet moments. Between songs, they exchanged glances — unspoken conversations filled with gratitude and love. The past was never far, but it no longer held them captive. Instead, it was the foundation of something stronger. After the last note faded, the crowd erupted in applause. Melody took a breath, the kind that filled her lungs with courage and hope. She looked at Malachi, who squeezed her hand gently. Backstage, away from the lights and noise, they sat together on a worn couch. Outside, the city buzzed on, but inside their bubble, time felt endless. Melody rested her head on Malachi's shoulder. "We made it." He smiled, fingers tracing lazy circles on her arm. "We did. And this is just the beginning." Years of silence, secrets, and struggle had led them here—to a place of peace and music that was truly theirs. The kind of song that never fades.

This Isn't The End Of The Song. Just The Quiet Part Before The Next Verse.

The Soundtrack To Paper and Chords

Prologue - Homecoming Queen? by Kelsea Ballerini

Chapter 1 - Archer by Taylor Swift

Chapter 2 - Leave Me Again by Kelsea Ballerini

Chapter 3 - Sand in My Boots by Morgan

Chapter 4 - What Ifs by Kane Brown

Chapter 5 - Begin Again by Taylor Swift

Chapter 6 - Peter Pan by Kelsea Ballerini

Chapter 7 - Chasin' You by Morgan Wallen

Chapter 8 - One Mississippi by Kane Brown

Chapter 9 - All Too Well (10 minute version) (Taylor's version) by Taylor Swift

Chapter 10 - Miss Me More by Kelsea

Chapter 11 - More Than My Hometown by Morgan Wallen

Chapter 12 - Used to Love You Sober by Kane Brown

Chapter 13 - Dear John by Taylor Swift

Chapter 14 - HEARTFIRST by Kelsea Ballerini

Chapter 15 - Thought You Should Know By Morgan Wallen

Chapter 16 - Lose It by Kane Brown

Chapter 17 - New Years Day by Taylor Swift

Chapter 18 - Legends by Kelsea Ballerini

Chapter 19 - Whiskey Glasses by Morgan Wallen

Chapter 20 - Heaven by Kane Brown

Epilogue - The Good Ones by Gabby Barret

Ballerini