

Pop Stars
and
Playbooks

A Love Story
THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Juliet Arden


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Since 1798

Pop Stars and Playbooks

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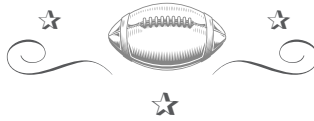
*For the girls who are learning the difference
between being wanted and being chosen*



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Chapter 1

Griffin



It's a common misconception that professional athletes are too tough for the likes of an Aria Wilder concert—or pop music in general—but Griffin Hayes, tight end on the Chicago Wardens, is the perfect rebuttal to any such claim. He could've gotten the luxury box seats the team has first dibs on, but Griffin wanted floor seats. Closer is better for seeing his celebrity crush perform for the first time.

“Want anything from concessions?” Elliott calls over the thumping bass of the opening act.

Griffin turns to look, and his best friend gestures with his thumb toward the stairs he's about to take. Elliott's girlfriend, Cassandra, hovers at his side, tapping her foot as she eyes her watch.

“But Aria's about to come on,” Griffin says.

Elliott grins. “I'll be fine if I miss a song or two.”

Griffin shrugs. “I'm good, man, but thanks.” The wa-

ter beside him is the only thing available for purchase that's approved for his in-season diet. His personal trainer would have his head if he'd ordered one of those icy beers or the bag of buttery popcorn that were both calling his name. Soon enough, at the end of the season, he'll indulge.

"Can you grab me a Diet Coke, please, hon?" Cassandra asks Elliott. "I'm going to hang with Griff. I don't want to miss her entrance."

Elliott nods once and takes off up the stairs in bounds toward the concession stand. Griffin turns back to the stage, the lights flashing, the band growing sweaty and red nearing the end of their set, and he sways gently to the music. His teammates had poked fun in the locker room earlier, calling him the third wheel to Elliott and Cassandra's date, but there's no amount of ribbing that would keep Griffin from this concert. He might have a healthy crush on Aria, but it's also nice to momentarily leave behind his role as professional football league tight end hero and the heavy pressure to perform and win. To get lost in the music born of another person's creativity. He's often wondered what it would be like to be a musician. The one conclusion he can draw is that it's worlds away from playing football—the one thing he knows. The thing at the very center of him.

Griffin has always been a football player, for so long and so intensely that he has to wonder if he came out of the womb and immediately caught a football thrown his way. In a family of overachievers it only seemed natural that he'd cling to the thing he was good at, and in all fairness, it has brought him great success.

The opening act finishes their set, and Griffin claps along

with the cheering crowd. In the quiet that follows, the lull before Aria takes the stage, Griffin can't help but wonder what else there is to him besides the sport. If he'd measure up without football. Sure, he's at the height of his career, but every athlete knows football doesn't last forever. Griffin got a hefty dose of that reality when he suffered an ACL injury five years ago. Fortunately he rehabbed the injury and returned in full strength. Well, "full strength" if he doesn't count the fact that his knee has started to act up occasionally. Without football, who is Griffin Hayes? It's something he'll have to figure out eventually.

Suddenly the lights cut to dark, the crowd erupts, and Aria's voice echoes through the arena, an alternative melody playing alongside her most famous lyrics.

*"Girl meets boy,
Boy meets girl,
Hearts flutter,
Forever love."*



The crowd screams—all 250 pounds of Griffin Hayes included—and fireworks explode across the stage in neon pink and purple. A shadowed figure in a power pose, a fist toward the sky, chest held high, lowers from the ceiling, and the crowd chants, "Aria! Aria! Aria!"

Spotlights flick to the backup dancers who rise onto the stage on hidden platforms from below just as Aria's feet meet the stage from her aerial descent, and she immediately launches into her mega hit, the one she teased, "Girl Meets Boy."

Griffin loses himself in the music, dancing and singing, clapping to the beat. His eyes never stray far from Aria's mesmerizing figure on the stage. He is entranced.

Elliott steps back to glance around Cassandra's position between them and throws him a look.

Griffin raises his palms and shoulders as if to say, "*What?*"

Elliott laughs to himself and shakes his head.

Sure, the guys in the locker room will give him a hard time when Elliott, a running back also on the Wardens, recounts the story after practice tomorrow, but Griffin doesn't mind. It won't come as a surprise to any of them. Griffin's always been the guy who turns down the celebrity party invites, the one who likes to cook for himself rather than head to the latest hot restaurant where all the other celebrity types hang out. He's the one who will stay longer to make sure every kid gets a signature from him postgame.

Revealing the depth of his true Aria Wilder fandom won't come as a surprise. Though for now, he'd like to keep his secret crush under wraps. *That* would be another level of teasing from the guys he'd rather avoid.

Griffin nods his head as Aria transitions into a lively hit about girls running the world, even mouthing a few words here and there. Cassandra beside him is dancing, arms in the air, belting out lyrics, and Elliott stands beside her with his arms crossed and body still, but moving his head almost imperceptibly. Cassandra is a model, and she and Elliott have been together for two years now. The press calls them "The Beautiful Couple"—a topic that's already been covered to a great extent in the locker room.

Next comes the opening melody for Aria Wilder's "Glass

Heart,” and the stage lights all come to center where Aria stands confidently, feet planted as she holds the microphone out and belts the notes powerfully into it, her words flowing to her adoring crowd.

Griffin is close enough to see the power in Aria’s face, to feel the impact of the lyrics and song, and it’s all he needs to release the weight of life’s expectations and worries that he carries with him. He forgets that he has a professional team who banks on him, fans who expect him to win. He forgets his worries about being enough without the game. He forgets that his knee needed extra icing after last weekend’s game.

Griffin closes his eyes and pulls his hands to his wide, muscular chest. At six foot four, he’s easily two heads taller than most of the crowd, but he lets go of his inhibitions. The breakup anthem lands with him—that familiar feeling of not being enough—and he sings along, loud and unapologetic.

He opens his eyes and Cassandra—and even Elliott—let out whoops and applause in his direction. Griffin smiles ear to ear. He lifts his hands up, even pumping them in the air gently as he sings along about heartbreak and finding true love. He sways and nods his head, not wanting the song to end—it’s such an escape to lose himself in the rhythm. He forgets that he’s not alone, that he’s surrounded by the public.

But as the beat slows, the notes returning to a final iteration of the main melody, he comes slowly back down to earth.

He smiles to himself as he lets his hands drop to his sides and opens his eyes.

To his surprise, a few concertgoers have made their way to the aisle, their phones now trained not on Aria but on him. The young women giggle conspiratorially, and all Griffin can

do is smile, wave, and shrug.

“You know what that means, dude?” Elliott drags his eyes pointedly to the women who have cut their recordings and since gathered into a clump to review whatever is on the screen.

Griffin lets out a breath and nods. “Fingers crossed it’s a big news day.”

Cassandra drops a hand on my shoulder. “Hate to break it to you, Griff, but a big burly football player like you singing your heart out to Aria Wilder can rise to the top of any news cycle nowadays.”

As the next chart topper kicks off, Griffin turns back to the stage. This time, he’s more measured in his enthusiasm, no nonsense claps or head bobs. Stuff the guys on the team would do if they were here with their girlfriends. Still, he’s no dummy. He knows it’ll only be a matter of hours—or minutes—before that footage is somewhere online.

Chapter 2

Aria



Aria's home is spread out in a wooded area she lovingly calls "the country" despite its proximity to the city. You can take the girl out of a small town, but her heart will always be country. It's a strange thing to imagine her hometown, the folks there who never would've fathomed the stardom and fame she's achieved. She set them right, it would seem.

At the bottom of her basement stairs, Aria flips on the lights to her studio. Having her own recording studio at home has been one of the best things her success has afforded her. When she bought this house several years ago, she had the top guy in the music industry design and outfit it for her.

Despite it being her—and every other musician's—dream to have this state-of-the-art equipment at her fingertips, today it falls flat. Aria crosses the room to the comfortable sofa—the spot where she brainstorms lyrics and plucks out melodies

and harmonies on her beat-up acoustic guitar. It was her very first one. She sets her coffee mug and phone onto the small table in front of the sofa and pops open the guitar case. It's not fancy, but it's consistently the source of her inspiration. As she slumps onto the sofa, the awards that line the walls loom over her—Billboard charts, Grammys, music awards for best album year after year. They're all reminders of the bind she's in.

Aria picks up her guitar and strums, tuning the strings that went unused while she traveled for events last month. She owes her record label another album, and for the first time since she started on this journey, back when she blew up as a teen, she feels hollow inside.

At first it was exciting when her songs hit the top of the charts. In fact it was better than exciting; it was exhilarating, thrilling, otherworldly. But year after year, tour after tour, eventually it started to feel like copy and paste. It was supposed to be different this time. She was supposed to get to negotiate a new contract. She was supposed to make it clear that she wanted to take a new approach—to be real and honest, raw in her songwriting.

Instead, her label hid a clause in the existing contract requiring one more “commercial album,” and despite her agent, Monroe's, fastidiousness, Aria owes them another copy-and-paste pop album or she will see them in court. For a while she considered that option—that's how strongly she feels—but ultimately Monroe talked her out of it with her reasonable points: It would result in a massive gap in her album releases; she would be burning bridges with the most connected record label; and was it really worth it over an album she could create in her sleep?

Aria strums harder on the guitar, mentally noting how pinned down she feels, and at her roughness, a string breaks. It reels back with a *boing*.

“Maybe they just don’t think I have what it takes to be anything else. Maybe I believe them,” she whispers to herself. “Maybe *this* is the only thing the fans want from me.”

The fans—her true heartbeat. If there’s one thing more important to Aria than following her own desires, it’s making the fans happy. They’re the only reason she’s come this far. She has to do things right by them.

Aria sets the guitar lovingly back in its case, making a note to replace the string once she’s gotten some work done. She closes the lid and pats it, as if tucking it in to sleep. Back when she was a kid, when she was new to the instrument, she slept beside the thing. Despite her mother’s protests, fretting that she’d roll over and break it, Aria curled up beside her guitar, and first thing every morning, she would wake, find it, and strum whatever her favorite song was that week.

Remembering her younger self, her pure passion for music, her heartfelt dedication, feels like remembering a different person entirely. Aria can’t pin down when exactly things changed. It probably happened gradually over time. That, as her fame and prominence grew, the pressure to be Aria Wilder: Pop Superstar and American Darling mounted until who she was before—a small-town girl with a heart for song—was eclipsed.

Aria whirls around, unable to look at the guitar case and swim in her thoughts any longer. She owes Worldwide Records another album, and if she’s putting something out with her name on it, she’s going to make it exceptional—perfect,

ideally.

Aria sits down at the piano and starts playing with a major chord, working out a new melody. Something new but also familiar. She remembers what the rep told her.

“We want ‘girl meets boy, boy meets girl.’ The listeners love that stuff. It needs to be easy listening, turn-the-radio-up songs. There’s no need to mess with something that’s working.”

Despite her tinkering with the piano keys, Aria’s mind wanders back to her own desires for something new. A fresh take on her own music. Not an overhaul, just a makeover. What if the folks at Worldwide are right? What if the fans don’t want anything different from her? What if she’s trapped forever in the bubble she created as a young twenty-something almost a decade ago?

After a few minutes of messing around on the piano, a familiar rumble of footsteps comes from the stairs before Bailey, beaming wide, appears at the bottom step, eyes trained directly on Aria.

“Sis.” Bailey marches across the room in long, measured strides. “You *have* to see this.”

“I’m guessing from the look on your face it’s something good?”

It comes with the territory of being a well-known pop star that all sorts of things are shared in the press and on social media about Aria. Some of those things are incredible—generous compliments from fans, their own creative work she’s inspired, teary statements about how a song brought them through a hard time. But just as often, if perhaps more frequently, less palatable stories are posted. Rumors about her being rude to waitstaff (false), rumors of her taking off with

a married actor (false), articles picking apart her physical appearance (just plain mean), or “gotcha” photos of her sneaking to the grocery store in sweats looking worse for wear (true).

Bailey squeezes in beside Aria on the piano bench, and at the touch of her little sister’s shoulder to hers, Aria feels the tightness in her unwind. Bailey always has a calming influence on her. Even if she’s the younger sister, having Bailey at her side during tours or here at the house just living life grounds and calms Aria.

“This is from last night.” Bailey holds out the phone, and Aria takes it.

She clicks the icon to turn on the sound, and immediately she knows it’s “Glass Heart” playing. She sung it for the crowd last night, but perhaps even more so she sung it for herself, for her own hurt feelings over being pigeonholed for a whole new album.

Aria dismisses the thoughts about her own heartache as the video zooms in on a big, burly guy singing along to the music. Her mouth lifts into a smile as the shot captures his face, shouting the lyrics passionately toward the stage, his fists gripped emotionally as he sways to the beat.

“You know who that is?” Bailey asks, eyes wide, her long lashes batting.

“Looks athletic. It’s already got a million views.” A wrinkle forms between Aria’s brows as she thinks it over.

“Only Griffin Hayes, tight end for the Chicago Wardens.”

Aria is still smiling as she holds the phone out for Bailey to take back. “I knew I had all sorts of fans, but a professional football player might be a first.”

Bailey nudges the phone back toward Aria. “No, you didn’t

even see the best part. He reposted. See what he said.”

Aria navigates back through the app until she finds his account. She clicks on his share of the viral video and reads the caption out loud.

“Guess the secret’s out! I’m Aria Wilder’s number one fan. Don’t we all know a little something about a glass heart?!”“ By the time Aria finishes reading, her cheeks are warm. She hands the phone back to Bailey.

“The internet has now also taken to calling him your ‘number one fan’ by the way. That’s why he mentioned it. Isn’t that so sweet?”

Since the news of the hidden clause hit, Aria’s been feeling like she’s been walking around cast in slight shadow, but seeing this athletic powerhouse of a man go all emotional and adorable over her song feels finally like stepping under the rays of the sun.

“It is. It’s super sweet.”

Across the room, Aria’s phone rattles on the coffee table. She hands Bailey’s phone back, gets up, and retrieves hers. She clicks to accept the call.

“Kelsey. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Kelsey has been Aria’s publicist since before she made it big, believing in her from the start. Back then, Kelsey had multiple singer-actor types, but once Aria’s career took off, she signed her on full time.

“Well, good afternoon to you too, Pop Superstar and America’s Darling.”

Aria tsks-tsks playfully. “Are you buttering me up?”

Kelsey laughs. “Have you seen the internet?”

“The video of the football player?”

“The football player”? Aria, this is Griffin Hayes, only the top tight end in the league. He’s absolutely killing it. Not to mention the fans adore him.”

“It was a cute video, but why does it have you calling?”

She clears her throat. “Well, I spoke to Monroe, and we both agree that we should really take advantage of the moment. Seize the organic positive press.”

Aria pauses. She’s not always the biggest fan of the PR activities that are pitched in her direction. Aria has always wanted to be genuine and personal, and sometimes the efforts leave her spinning so much she feels icky. This time—the organic moment with Griffin, accidentally caught on camera—she has fewer qualms.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, we were thinking you could invite him as a special guest to the next concert tomorrow?”

Special guests are not a new thing to Aria. There are often folks brought in by the record label, people they’re attempting to woo. Or fans who win competitions. Occasionally kids with serious illnesses fulfilling their wishes granted by Make-A-Wish.

“I guess it could be interesting to meet him.”

“Great! And I’m glad I caught you because we were thinking it would be fun if you invited him publicly. Maybe share his post, and in your caption invite him? The fans would *love* it, and I know they’re your top priority.”

Aria can’t stop the laugh that pops out. Never before has a PR activity felt fun like this. And, Aria must admit, this Griffin guy has her interest.

“You got it,” Aria says. “I’ll do it now.”

“You’re fabulous. I’ll be waiting for your post and continue to monitor.”

Aria says goodbye, hangs up, and navigates over to socials.

She opens her account, the one with several million followers, and looks up this Griffin Hayes. She clicks on his post, the one she just read out loud with Bailey.

“What’s going on?” Bailey asks from over at the piano.

“Oh, just the silly game that is being a public figure. PR stunts left and right.” She sighs, but she’s smiling at the same time.

Aria hits Share and types her caption.

“Hey @GriffinHayes, love the enthusiasm! We can always use that kind of energy on show nights. Care to be my guest of honor tomorrow? Have your people call my people.”

Aria clicks to post. Immediately the likes start pouring in, and she walks the phone over to her sister. Bailey waits, mouth slightly agape, and takes the phone. She reads and squeals.

“Oh em gee, we get to meet him!” Bailey wiggles like the excitement is bursting from her of its own accord.

Aria pulls her sister under her arm. “What can I say? Your wish is my command.”

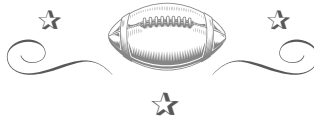
“Like with so many things.”

“Not that I had ‘Wardens tight end concert drop-in’ on my bingo card. Nothing seems to be out of bounds—pun intended—for your world anymore. What’s next, a circus collab?”

Bailey laughs as she squeezes Aria around the middle, and Aria can’t help but consider the truth in her statement. A professional football player in her orbit? There really don’t seem to be any limits to the scope of the Aria Wilder universe these days.

Chapter 3

Griffin



The day after the concert, Griffin and Elliott are the last ones in the locker room after practice. Oftentimes they stay late to get in some more reps or additional recovery activities. Today Griffin wanted to hit the ice bath, and Elliott decided to stay too. Afterward in the locker room, they change clothes and pack their bags.

“Oh, shoot.” Elliott pats around his pockets, then his bag. “I think I left my phone in the weight room. Be right back.”

Griffin nods as he drops onto the bench seat and pulls out his own phone that he’s left unchecked since before practice. It’s one of many small rituals he’s built into his life to protect his dedication to football. When the phone is stowed away, his focus is entirely on his work.

When the screen lights up, Griffin is surprised at the thousands of social media notifications that’ve come in—far more than usual.

“Ah,” Griffin whispers to himself as it dawns on him.

The Aria Wilder concert.

Of course he played along with the viral meme moment. It was all done in good fun, and almost all the comments were good-natured. As a professional athlete, he gets a significant amount of attention online already—or at least what he *thought* was a significant amount—but these responses to the concert clip are on another level. An Aria Wilder level.

He opens his email, and there is a message from his agent.

Griff—

Hey, man. All this stuff with Aria Wilder is fire for your PR spin. You see the response from Aria? We really think you should go. This is a new angle for you outside of the usual sports stuff. You know the athletes who do best in the long run diversify. Football can't be forever.

Call me when you get this.

Mike

Griffin darkens the screen and turns it face down in his lap. He bites his lip. Even if Mike thinks this is a good idea, Griffin isn't quite convinced. He's comfortable with postgame interviews, the special events the team volunteers the players for, signing for fans after the game. But a concert with a hugely talented singer? That's miles out of his comfort zone. He can't wrap his head around what good it would actually do for his career either. Hanging out with Aria Wilder, as adorable as she is, won't lead the Wardens to the Super Bowl game, and he's not anywhere close to aging out of the league yet.

Elliott walks in, his phone held out in front of him. “Dude!

You're mega-viral! And Aria Wilder—"

"Wants me to come to the concert tomorrow." Griffin says it with a glum look.

"Are you for real?" Elliott throws his hands out to the sides incredulously. "The world's biggest pop star is sending an invite your way, and you're bummed about it?"

"Since when have I ever been into these things?"

Griffin shouldn't have to say more. Elliott said almost these exact words when the team was invited to the holiday party of a reality television contestant turned online influencer, and Griffin sent his regrets. The same conversation was had when they were invited to a movie premiere. This sort of spotlight—outside of his comfort zone on the field and at the end of the postgame camera lens—aren't his thing.

"But Aria Wilder is your celebrity crush." Elliott drops his hands to his sides and narrows his eyes.

"What? How do you know that?" Griffin's eyes dart around.

"Come on, man. We've been buddies for a while now. You're not a 'night on the town' sort of guy, but you came third wheel with me and Cassandra to the concert. You wanted close seats so—and I quote—you could 'really see the contours of her face.' I'm not a rocket scientist, but I'm also not a total idiot."

Griffin sighs. "You got me there."

"So, what do you have to lose by going tomorrow?"

"Distraction from the season. Being off in the game the next day."

"Those sound like excuses to me."

"Mike wants me to do it." Griffin's leg bobs up and down nervously. "And I guess it'll just be a one-time thing. The concert itself was incredible, so I'll get to enjoy that again. Then

it'll be all said and done.”

Griffin gets to his feet, and Elliott slaps him on the back. Both men grab their gym bags and head for the exit.

“You’re right, man. Gotta take the opportunities when they float by. Who knows when you’ll get another special invite from a pop star,” Elliott says.

Likely never if Griffin is taking history into account. This is the first and only time he’s crossed into other spotlights. Other players—especially the ones who have famous girlfriends—flit in and out of other highflier circles. Take Elliott for example—he routinely attends New York Fashion Week, and has even made enough contacts that designers dress him for events.

Even the sound of that makes Griffin want to run for the hills, but a night spent watching the world’s most enchanting pop star from the wings, well out of sight? *That* he can manage.

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By the next evening, when Griffin gets to the backstage entrance at the venue, he’s glad he accepted Aria’s invite to the concert. He was excited for the first show, but this experience is like a VIP version of the last one. The fan in him is buzzing over the experience, the insights. Backstage he sees all the nuts and bolts of the world-class production that unfurls onstage. He’s observer to the frantic backstage managers, barking into their headsets, hair and makeup artists chasing after performers with brushes and sprays. The amount of tech professionals in attendance to make sure the right speaker

and smoke machine and levitating platform go off at the right time—and don't maim any performer—seems comparable to the crew assembled for the moon landing. In many ways, the inner workings of this production feel akin to putting a human on another planet.

Eventually Griffin is escorted to a nook in the wings that affords him a decent view—though admittedly lower quality than he had the other night. Not that he would complain after getting the backstage pass. But tonight he won't be able to see a single contour of Aria's face.

The music sounds different in the wings too. The speakers are set up for the people out in the audience, but Griffin watches happily, swaying a little, humming along, cautiously enjoying the music, while simultaneously keeping an eye peeled for a camera-toting member of the public ready to film him again and keep this circus going.

Griffin smiles to himself as he hears the opening notes to "Glass Heart." He's starting to feel grateful for this silly social media moment. Elliott was right that he might as well enjoy the fun chances that swim by him in life. They're once in a lifetime.

But just as Griffin is making his peace with his moment in Aria's orbit, he hears his name in the monologue Aria speaks to the crowd.

"You guys know I invited the famous Griffin Hayes tonight, right? Anyone see that online?"

The crowd goes wild. Griffin's cheeks turn hot pink.

"He might be a beast on the field, but he's a softie at heart, right?"

Lots of female cheers bubble up.

“Well, he’s here tonight, and as a thanks, I’d love to invite him onstage! Griffin? Come on out!”

Suddenly, a stage manager, a more junior one who seems less harried, arrives at Griffin’s side and clips a mic to his shirt, then hands him the electronic dock that goes with it. “You can slip that in your pocket then head out. Just a quick wave and hello!”

Griffin does as he’s told, gulps audibly, then steps hesitantly out onto the stage. A telltale heat creeps up his neck, and he prays his blushing is drowned out by the stage lights. Aria skips up to meet him, her golden curls bouncing in the stage lights. The tassels on her cowgirl boots sparkle in the stage lights. Despite the fear welling in Griffin, he can’t miss the fact that she looks sort of angelic.

“Well, if it isn’t Griffin Hayes! Everyone, let’s give him a warm welcome.”

The crowd cheers.

She lingers before him, her lips parting gently into a playful grin that feels as if it’s entirely for him. Griffin’s heart picks up, his gaze glued to her. In the moment before she lifts the mic, she winks and it practically stops his heart.

Aria turns to the crowd and talks with miraculous ease. “I didn’t have a chance to meet Griffin before the show, but I’ve been looking forward to it ever since I saw the video. So, what’s the final verdict? *Are* you my number one fan?”

She reaches out a hand to bridge the gap between them and dances her finger tips down his shoulder. A shiver runs down his arm, and Aria’s glow eclipses the crowd behind her.

Griffin holds her stare, and his smile grows. After a beat, he looks away and laughs, and it surprises him when he hears

it broadcast across the venue. “Guilty as charged.” He grips his chin, massaging it bashfully as he sneaks another close up look at her. “And thank you all for having me. You can trust me when I say backstage is not for the faint of heart.”

Aria throws her head back and laughs, and her fans join her. Griffin cannot take his eyes from her; she’s magnetic.

“Well, well, you should take a spin in my hair and makeup chair, Mr. Hayes.”

Honestly, in the middle of this moment that feels very much like being under a spell, he might be convinced.

Eventually he finds his wherewithal. “Only if you play Sunday’s game against the Panthers.”

Aria puts a finger to her cheek and taps playfully as if she’s mulling it over. “No thanks! I’ll keep the sparkles and the blisters from these killer boots.”

The crowd goes wild.

“You do it well, so I can’t imagine you wanting to change course.”

Aria fans herself playfully. “Well, thank you, I might just have to invite you to every concert to keep my spirits high.”

Griffin extends an arm to acknowledge the crowd, and when Aria slips under it and pulls him into an embrace he’s covered in warmth. She looks up and holds his eye, and Griffin’s breath catches. Stage fright, nerves of being called out unexpectedly, most likely. Definitely not the effects of this enchanting woman he’s so lucky to have become entwined with.

Aria slips out of his grips and turns back to her fans.

Griffin feels the heat of his face as his pulse picks up, and he seizes the moment to bow out.

“Thank you so much, Aria. And all of you.” He waves to the

crowd, then turns and ducks back into the wings.

He unclips the mic and hands it off to the waiting stagehand as quickly as he can manage. *One and done*, Griffin tells himself. And it wasn't all that bad—or it won't be once his flaming red cheeks cool off.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Chapter 4

Aria



Only five songs remain in the show after “Glass Heart,” but Aria is surprised by the energy that thrums through her. Every dance step has an extra bounce and every note a perfect roundness to it. Perfection is always her goal, so pulling a professional football player onstage during her down-to-the-minute planned show was a gamble she wouldn’t usually entertain. But after all the on-line chatter, the crowd would’ve been disappointed if Griffin didn’t make an appearance—onstage or on a big screen—and Aria didn’t want to let them down. Nevertheless, she’d worried about him coming out straight-faced and rigid like an athlete trained to buckle down for battle when the lights go on in the stadium. Sunday football games might be a performance, but they certainly weren’t the type she put on.

Despite a few audible gulps and the flush that filled his cheeks, Griffin had been charming when he stumbled on-

stage. The postgame interviews were probably good training for the moment—reporters tossing hardball questions his way after hours of pushing his body to the limits.

As the final song ends, a great applause erupts and Aria lets the microphone drop to her side. She beams at her fans, her chest rising and falling quickly from the exertion of dancing and singing at a rapid pace. As the cheers quiet, she lifts the microphone once more.

“Thank you, Chicago! You are always a safe bet for a good night.”

The crowd goes up in cheers.

Aria turns to the wings. “And thanks again to Griffin Hayes for being such a good sport. Good luck tomorrow. Go Wardens!”

Aria gives one final big wave as she turns and marches off the stage and into the wings. Backstage, she greets the staff and calls out, “Great job, guys! It went off without a hitch, as usual!” Aria high-fives the audio tech closest to her and gives the lead a wink. She is only as good as the team around her, and even though it’s her name in the headlines, Aria understands how many good people it takes to pull off productions of this quality. It’s one of the reasons she’s known as a generous bonus giver in the industry.

Aria ducks into her dressing room, closes the door behind her, and lets out a tired sigh.

Bailey looks up from her phone screen where she sits on a rolling desk chair in the corner. “Another great show, big sis.”

Aria drops into a chair that matches Bailey’s and starts pulling off her boots. “Thanks. I didn’t love ‘After the Storm.’ I couldn’t get the power behind it.”

“I didn’t notice a difference.” Bailey gets up to open the mini fridge. She stops at Aria’s side with a bottle of water and cracks it.

Aria groans. “Thanks. You’re a godsend.”

Bailey laughs. “I’ve got to earn my keep around here somehow.”

Aria smiles, then pulls down a hearty gulp of the icy drink. Bailey may worry about whether she’s making a contribution, but Aria doesn’t. She’s told her—at length, on many occasion—how much Bailey does for her. Bailey is the listening ear Aria needs when she’s faced with a hard decision. Bailey is the comfort person when Aria has problems in a show. Bailey is the shoulder to cry on when unkind rumors are spread online about her. What Bailey gives is far more valuable than being her personal beverage concierge.

In fact, Aria has worried more than once if *she’s* the one holding Bailey back. Being her tour buddy is an easy choice for Bailey, but if that hadn’t been an option, would she have pursued something more meaningful for herself? Is Bailey really getting what she wants out of life by living on tour or backstage? Aria worries that she’s being selfish by keeping Bailey at her side.

“You don’t have to earn your place here with me. But if the day comes when you want to spread your wings and leave me behind in the dust, I won’t be anything but happy for you.”

Bailey wraps her arms around Aria from behind and drops her chin onto her shoulder. Her hair tickles Aria’s cheek, teasing the corners of her mouth into a smile.

“I know I’m not chained here, sis. I just love it.”

Aria reaches up and squeezes her sister’s hand. “Me too,

Bails. Me too.”

Bailey releases her arms and pulls herself upright. She heads for the sofa along the far wall of the room and flops down onto it. Aria spins her rolling chair to the mirrored wall on the opposite side, and in the reflection she notes not a speck of her makeup has budged.

Aria reaches for her makeup remover and gets to work. “I’ll tell you what, the hair and makeup team are killing it. Hours of sweating my rear off onstage, and every bit of this is intact.”

“You better keep them on staff. Remember Dallas?”

Aria shudders at the memory. She was a newbie back then, a teen with big dreams and big curls and little else to show for herself, but through sheer will she’d landed a spot at an outdoor country festival. At that point, all she could afford was drugstore makeup (some of which she still swore by) and a setting spray. As it turns out, no setting spray can go toe-to-toe with the Texas summer sun, and by the time she was five minutes into her set, heavy makeup was running in ravines down her face and into her eyes, stinging them as she strummed her guitar. It was the only time she counted herself lucky to have had a short set.

“I’ll only ever do indoors in Texas now. Lesson learned.”

Aria and Bailey laugh. As Aria scrubs what feels like permanent makeup from her face, Bailey pulls out her phone and scrolls.

“Dang. People are talking about Griffin again,” Bailey says.

“I’m so relieved bringing him onstage didn’t flop.”

“Honestly, I think the crowd would’ve loved it even if he’d just stood there. But the two of you together? That was next level.”

“What do you mean, ‘the two of us together?’” Aria turns slowly to face her sister, her eyes narrowing.

“The two of you were so natural together. Like you’d known each other forever. Or like it was staged.”

“Well, it *was* staged.”

“You know what I mean—as in you’d practiced the lines. Sure, the setup was planned, but the rest was . . . just the two of you.”

Aria shrugs and whirls back to the mirror. He’d made for a fine side act, she wouldn’t argue that fact, but there also wasn’t any point in harping on it. Griffin was a blip on the Aria Wilder timeline—a nice one, but nothing that would last.

“I’d do anything for the fans. We all know that. So this little stunt is my pleasure.”

Aria just about has the makeup scrubbed off when a knock comes at the door.

“Come in!” Aria calls, then turns towards the door.

The door squeaks as it’s pushed open a crack, and Kelsey appears in the gap, her chestnut-brown eyes sparkling like they do whenever an idea strikes. “Hey! Got a second?”

“Sure thing. Come on in. I didn’t know you’d be here tonight.” Aria waves, and the door swings open into the room, Kelsey entering in jeans, boots, and a bedazzled coat. Somehow the fashion statement is nineties mom fashion, but also entirely contemporary chic at the same time.

Kelsey drops into the second rolling chair and props her elbows on her knees.

Aria swallows. She knows this stance, and it usually entails far more than the “second” of time Kelsey asked for. Aria doesn’t mind the publicity work. She enjoys the spotlight like

any other performer, but as her career and success have grown, so has the pull to make appearances and give interviews. That in combination with the fact that Aria now owes another album of a variety she'd rather not pursue, it feels like another force pulling her from what she wants so badly: to reconnect with the joy of making music, the thing that kicked off this career all those years ago.

“Okay, so we have an idea.” Kelsey grins wide, enthusiasm bubbling in every syllable.

“Okayyy.” Aria pulls out the word to make it sound like an invitation to go on.

“This Griffin Hayes thing. It’s wildfire. It hasn’t even been an hour since the concert wrapped, and the clip of you and Griffin bantering onstage has already been shared thousands of times. By the morning, there’s no question this will be another viral moment.” Kelsey reaches out and gives Aria’s knee a squeeze. She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Okay, and?” Aria asks gently. She could guess what was coming next, but she knows the song and dance, so she let Kelsey make her pitch.

“We’d love to keep this thing going. Stage a ‘friendship’ between the two of you. It’d be beneficial to you both. For him, he’s getting off-field press, and all those guys want to diversify these days. They can only play so many years before their bodies give out, but if they’ve got their hand in something else? Easy transition. For you, we’re between albums. Of course, *all* of yours are mega hits, but this will keep the fans close until the next classic Aria Wilder album hits. In this day and age, everyone has to stay relevant.”

Aria swallows the sigh she wants to release at the mention

of the next album. She slowly crosses her arms and leans back in her chair to consider this proposal. Admittedly, Aria doesn't love it. The idea of a fake friendship doesn't fit with who she is at her core: someone who wants to be genuine, to show her real self in her life and work. It's the same desire that lies at the heart of what she wants to do musically by taking a new approach. However, it's also true that the friendliness between her and Griffin itself wasn't staged. Bailey was right that although they were intentionally put together, the fun that bubbled up between them in that moment onstage was organic. Griffin Hayes might even be someone she could genuinely enjoy spending some time with.

Aria presses her lips together. "What are the specifics? I don't want this to take away from the music or the performances I have lined up."

Kelsey's head bobbles as she nods. "Oh, of course! Trust me, there's nothing we want less than to put a barrier in the way of getting *more* Aria Wilder hits! We'd keep it simple. Some shared appearances, social media, maybe a brand collab."

Aria's gaze goes across the room and finds Bailey. She sits upright, leaning in toward the conversation.

Bailey lifts her eyebrows eagerly and shrugs, as if to say, "*Why the heck not?*"

Aria lets her face relax, and it falls into a soft smile. Bailey is a reliable source of good advice, and Aria doesn't have a good reason to dig her heels in on this one.

"Okay. I'll do it. Just don't let it get out of hand."

Kelsey claps, then pumps a fist in the air. "Yes! Excellent. Now that we've got a green light from you, we'll pitch his team. I don't think we'll have problems getting a yes. I mean,

your star power way outshines his. But I'll be in touch with deets as soon as I know."

Kelsey leaps to her feet, and as she passes Aria, she squeezes her shoulder. "And killer show tonight. As usual."

"Thank you. As usual. And for everything," Aria says.

Kelsey calls a goodbye over her shoulder, then pulls the door shut gently behind her.

Bailey smiles wide. "I guess we'll be seeing more of this Griffin Hayes character after all."

An incredulous laugh pops out of Aria. "Sounds like it." She gets to her feet and starts gathering her belongings into her bag. "Let's work on getting out of here. I could murder a cheeseburger."

Bailey hops up and grabs both of their coats from the hooks. "I thought you'd never get us out of here."

