

UNTIL BETH
By Lisa Amowitz

EXCERPT

ONE

Outside the car window, barren trees veined the pale flesh of the horizon. I fingered the Blast Mahoney button on my jacket and tried not to think about that night after the concert, and how Sam Bernstein's long slow kiss had tasted of cotton candy and popcorn. How he'd pressed the button into my palm and breathed in my ear that he believed in me. That, no matter what, my guitar and me were going places. And I'd believed him.

That was five months ago.

I'd been to every one of his favorite indie clubs, every dive bar where he'd ever used a fake ID. I'd posted flyers. Even made a Facebook page. I'd looked until there was no place left to look, but Sam Bernstein hadn't been seen since.

After Sam went missing, another teen from the Greater Linford area vanished without a trace. Five kids in five months. The town held candlelight vigils. The police searched in vain. The talk lately was that there was nothing more to be done. Everyone was starting to think Sam and the other kids were dead.

I wasn't sure what I thought anymore.

I glanced at the dashboard clock, shaking off the memory. "Crap. I'm gonna be late. Can't you drive any faster?"

Mom had made my brother Carson drive me everywhere since my VW bug went belly up. "Driving Miss Crazy," he called it.

"The roads are icy." Carson steered the car in a slow crawl down the twisty road to Linford High. "It's just a band slam, Beth."

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“Yeah. And your state championship match next week is just another game.” I tapped my boot against the car floor, knowing how much it annoyed him.

Carson’s jaw twitched. “Maybe if you put less time into your band and studied for a change, you’d have more going for you.”

“Maybe you should just shut up.” Ten months my senior, with a lacrosse scholarship to Duke under his belt, *he* never got calls home about a poor attitude.

The truth was that, lately, I’d even let my music slip. I tried to keep Sam from my thoughts, but every time the news of another disappearance hit the papers, the wound would split open. Sam had been my friend longer than he’d been my boyfriend. He was my muse, my manager, my coach, my drill sergeant, driving my skills to new heights.

His absence had ripped a hole in the heart of my music.

There was a tingling sensation inside my chest, as if my heart had a case of pins and needles, and I wondered if I was becoming immune to the anxiety med cocktail the doctors had had me on since Sam went missing.

Carson turned into the school parking lot, pulled into a spot, and cut the engine. Scowling, he rubbed at an invisible smear on his fuel gauge.

Flipping down the sun visor, I looked in the mirror and smoothed the blue-tipped strands of hair that peeked out from under my logger’s cap. The Band Slam competition was in three hours. August Rebellion’s first without Sam on keyboards.

The scarlet blur of a Linford lacrosse jacket moved between the rows of cars. Weaving around piles of soot-darkened snow, Luke Gleason zigzagged his way across the parking lot, drawing closer.

“Shit.” I jiggled the door handle. “C’mon. Open this. I’ve got to go.”

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Carson stared at me, a twisted smile on his face. “What’s with you? Give the guy a chance.”

“I don’t have time for this.” I shook my coffee cup at him. “If you don’t let me out, this latte is going all over your rug.”

Carson blanched. “Luke’s really into you, is all I’m trying to say.”

In some past life I’d had a thing for my brother’s best friend, Luke. He was Disney Channel adorable with honey-colored hair that fell in his dreamy eyes, but all Luke ever talked about was Carson and lacrosse, lacrosse and Carson, like he had some kind of man crush. Plus, his breath always smelled like bacon, except when the bacon smell was overpowered by beer fumes.

“I gathered that after he pinned me under the mistletoe at Shelly’s Christmas party and slobbered all over my dress. Maybe a little too much eggnog?” *But not enough to drown out the eau de bacon*, I almost added.

“Sometimes Luke gets kind of carried away. But he’s a good guy.” Carson paused, eyeballing me. “It’s been five months since Sam, Beth.”

The pins and needles rose to my throat. I tried and failed to swallow them down. The latte sloshed around in my stomach.

“I’m well aware of how long it’s been. Every single second.” I pantomimed tipping my cup sideways and leaned on the door handle. “Open this damn door, now, or say goodbye to the pretty rug.”

Carson’s Achilles’ heel was the fourteen-year-old BMW he’d saved up to buy. Threatening its wellbeing was the quickest way to get the temporary upper hand with my brother. Key word—temporary. But satisfying.

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Carson shrugged. The handle gave way and the door opened. The latte and I nearly tumbled into a snow bank. I righted myself and opened the back door to retrieve my guitar. “Thanks for the ride. A pleasure, as always,” I said through clenched teeth. “Can you pop open the trunk?”

Raw wind stabbed at my cheeks and shoved my guitar against my thighs. Luke sauntered over, swishing the windblown hair from his eyes with his trademark neck twitch.

“Hey. Let me help with that,” he said, reaching inside the trunk for my amp.

I grabbed it first. “It’s okay. I’m used to lugging this thing around.” As I struggled with my things, the winter-gray sky darkened and the ground lurched under my feet. I set down the guitar and amp and leaned against the car.

Luke frowned at me and scratched his head. “You okay, Beth?”

I rubbed at my temples. Zero sleep, too much coffee, and competition jitters were canceling out my meds. “Just nerves, I guess. Gotta run. I’m late for set-up. See you, Luke.”

I hefted the guitar and amp and struggled across the parking lot, cursing myself for not accepting his help.

“No prob. See you later, babe,” he called after me with a wave.

Babe. In a pig’s eye, he’d see me.

My bandmate and best friend, Shelly Brandt, scrambled toward me over the snow piles, all striped tights and spindly legs under an obscenely short plaid skirt. She reached me, flushed and breathless. “Hey! This is it! You ready?”

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Carson, who had not lifted a finger to help, was out of the car and gesturing for Luke to hurry. I exhaled, winded from hauling the heavy amp. “Yeah. All set.”

Shelly took my guitar, glancing at Luke’s and Carson’s receding figures. “You and Carson have another fight?”

“I *so* need my own car. The idiot thinks he can pimp me out to his friends.”

Shelly laughed. “You are pure evil, Collins. Luke Gleason is really cute, though. Maybe it’s time you—”

“Don’t go there, okay?” I muttered as we entered the building through the gymnasium entrance. “I think it’s because Carson’s sick of driving me everywhere. He wants to outsource.”

We pushed through the double doors to the gym. Rows of chairs had been set up to face a raised platform stage. The overhead lights were headache bright. The other band members were already there, shifting mic stands around. I shivered even though the gym was stuffy and hot. “Got any food in your bag?”

Shelly rummaged around in her bag again, this time pulling out a crushed package of crackers. She studied me as I ripped the package open, her head tilted. “You’re a lousy actress, Beth. You’re not fooling me for a second. Do you want to talk or not?”

As if on cue, Andre Serrano, our drummer and Sam’s best friend, strolled up the aisle between the chairs, followed by Brett Davis, the new keyboard player. Andre planted a kiss on Shelly’s nose. I couldn’t get myself to look Brett in the eye. “Talk about what? That I’m nervous as shit about this slam? Last year we won but we still had—”

Shelly finished for me. “We still had Sam.”

I still had Sam.

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“Beth,” Shelly placed her hand on my shoulder. My breath caught as my gaze wandered to Brett. He was slim and lithe, with a mop of brown curls. In the light’s glare he could have been—

It hit me like a punch in the stomach—a memory of Sam striding toward me last year, wavy brown hair framing his face, his dark-lashed gray eyes crinkled up in a smile.

Suddenly I couldn’t stay. I dropped the crackers and ran from the gym, combat boots clonking against the hard wood.

Outside, I gripped the rail for balance and gulped in the cold air. Music was how we met. How we related. How we loved. Sam drove me to play better and better.

With him gone the music was all bottled up, twisted inside me like a gnarled tree root. Shelly wanted me to accept that Sam was gone and move on.

Our fight that last night had been stupid. We’d argued about the band, and where our relationship was going, while in the dark of Sam’s idling car, my chest had prickled with a strange tingling sensation. Thinking back, I knew now that it had meant something. Something ominous. But I’d said nothing.

Instead, I’d gotten out of the car, slammed the door and watched Sam drive away, never to be seen again.

TWO

Andre burst through the gym doors, as bare-shouldered as always, graceful tattoos coiling up one of his muscled brown arms. Though his breath came in misty puffs, his hands were warm when he took my cold ones in his.

“Come inside, Beth,” he said, a hint of a smile in his dark eyes. “You’re gonna freeze your ass off out here.”

At Andre’s touch I felt my tension ebb, and the sob that was trapped inside my ribs dissolve. Andre, respectfully distant, was always just close enough when I needed him. I pressed my head against his chest and let him hold me.

“Not a day goes by when I don’t feel it, too,” he murmured. Andre was the only one who understood what it was like to breathe when your lungs were gone. Sam had been his best friend, the rock he could hang on to when things at home got to be too much for him. “But standing here in the cold isn’t going to bring him back. Besides, it’s time for the sound check.”

And just like that, I felt better. *Andre’s touch*, as I called it to myself, had the power to calm me. It wasn’t attraction. Andre and Shelly had been together even longer than Sam and I. It was shared pain. And somehow, Andre had the ability to take mine away. I was in too much pain to wonder what he did with his own.

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Squeezed into a black satin bustier over a cobalt tulle skirt and black fishnets, I waited in the wings backstage. I couldn't see past the glare of the lights, but judging from the crowd's roar, the whole town had shown up for the Band Slam Semi-Finals. August Rebellion was pitted against eight other bands. The winner wouldn't be chosen until the Grand Finale next week.

At last, our turn came and I tried to kick it into gear. I belted out Blast Mahoney's *Like Never*, hoping to incinerate my nerves with the screaming licks of my guitar. Shelly scorched on bass. Andre hammered the beat. We sounded good, but inside I was hollow, the keyboard chords ringing in my ears. I wanted them to be Sam's notes. And they weren't.

When it was over the crowd went nuts. Long-time Slam tradition required the audience to throw random junk at their favorite band. They flung crazy stuff at us—coins, confetti, flowers, rubber chickens. Even someone's bra and underpants landed on the stage. I figured as far as the crowd was concerned, we'd rocked the house.

When the spotlight dimmed, I glimpsed Luke and Carson standing on their chairs and pumping their fists. My chest tingled and I felt the roots of my hair, as if I was about to be struck by lightning. I had to get out of there.

Pushing past the kids who crowded the backstage, I fled to the dressing room behind the auditorium.

A boy with a halo of blond curls and mirrored sunglasses slouched against the door.

"Hi," he said, walking up to me, hand extended. "I'm Vincent Rousseau. Your bandmate Andre asked me to come to the Band Slam tonight to hear you play."

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“What? Andre didn’t tell me anyone was coming.” Shivering in my skimpy costume, I scanned the empty corridor. The next band, Wails from the Crypt, was already tuning up. My phone was in the dressing room drawer. If Vincent Rousseau planned to kidnap me, no one would hear my screams.

“What do you want?”

The boy’s surprisingly deep voice was colored by a trace of an accent. French, I decided, from the way he emphasized the second syllable in his first name—*Vin-cent*. I couldn’t help but notice how his dusky skin contrasted pleasingly with his mop of bright curls. “I’m a scout for a high school residency program for talented youth. Andre speaks very well of you.”

I twirled a strand of damp hair. “Huh? Where is this program?”

“We’re allied with many colleges nationwide.”

“Yeah? Never heard of something like that. Does it have a name?”

“HSTYP, or High Step as we call it. Your friend Andre thought you’d be a good candidate.”

“Oh, did he?” I glared at the poor guy. I was in a crummy mood and had no problem taking it out on him. “I’m not leaving Linford.”

“No matter, then,” said Vincent Rousseau, shrugging. “I am just a student at one of the local affiliates. I will leave you with my card in case you have a change of heart.” He smiled again, and despite myself, I felt my guard slip just a notch. Still, I wasn’t sure if I could trust someone who wore mirrored sunglasses indoors in the middle of winter.

“Look, I’ve got to change,” I said, taking his card. “It was nice to meet you—*Vincent*.”

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I was pretty sure I didn't mean it, but if Vincent cared, he didn't show it. He smiled, broadly and said, "It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Bethany Collins."

I shook my head and watched him go. Strange guy. But polite. And oddly hot. I was going to have to chew out Andre for his well-meaning but lame attempt to shake me from my gloom. But first I had to get out of my ridiculous get-up.

Fumbling for the dressing-room key I'd stuck inside my bustier, I pushed open the heavy door. It swung inward with surprising force.

I turned and a bouquet of flowers was thrust in my face. Behind it, Luke twitched the hair from his eyes. "You guys brought down the roof, babe."

"Luke! You scared the crap out of me."

He glanced down the hall. "Hey, sorry. Who was that guy?"

"Just a kid from some music school—uh—somewhere."

Luke's eyes were glazed and bloodshot. "Well, you shouldn't be alone. These days, you never know what kinds of creeps are lurking around."

Arms aching, my adrenaline wave finally ebbed. I was spent, too exhausted to feel much of anything. "Thanks for the flowers and your concern. The door has a lock, so I'm safe in here."

Luke let the door close gently behind him. "Good. I wouldn't want anyone to barge in here and steal you away. Don't you want to put these pretty flowers in water?"

I caught a whiff of something under the heavy perfume of the flowers. And it wasn't bacon. It was cheap beer.

Luke was plastered.

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“You looked so awesome out there, Beth. Like a rocking blue-haired angel.” Luke smiled, his gaze dropping to my bustier. “Close up you look even better.”

“Uh, thanks.” I backed into the room, a smile pasted on my face. “I’m kind of tired.”

Luke tossed aside the flowers and lumbered toward me. “Carson says you need someone to take your mind off your dead boyfriend.”

“Carson should stay the hell out of my business.” My cheeks burned. “And you should leave.”

“What’s the matter with you? It’s not like Sam Bernstein’s gonna come back from the dead and beat the crap out of me.” Luke staggered closer.

Dead. I didn’t want to hear that word. Not out of Luke’s mouth. Not in the same sentence with Sam.

“Shut up, Luke! Get out of here. Now.”

“What you need is someone who can protect you from the monsters in this town.”

Luke grabbed me and crushed me against him, his itchy wool lacrosse jacket scraping my skin.

His beer breath made my eyes tear. I shoved at him with both palms but couldn’t pry myself loose from his grip. “Let go of me. I can protect myself.”

Luke pushed me onto the couch and lunged on top of me, one hand thrust under my skirt, the other clamped over my mouth to muffle my shouts.

“Why don’t you give me a try?” he breathed in my ear.

Suffocated by his sweaty palm, I clawed and scratched but couldn’t budge his hard-muscled bulk off of me. His free hand went for the buttons of my bustier, which he

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yanked and ripped loose, exposing my strapless bra. I bit at his hand, my teeth digging into the flesh of his palm.

“Hey! What’s wrong with you? I was just—”

“Asshole!” I squirmed and managed to knee him in the groin.

Luke rolled onto the floor, holding his crotch. Scrambling to my feet, I rushed for the door and managed to get it open, but Luke lunged, grabbed me, and slammed me onto the floor. Pinning me, he dug his fingers into my breasts.

I thought I might have been sobbing. Or I might have been screaming.

The door crashed open. “Omigod! Get off her!” Shelly shrieked.

I struggled; the world dimmed. My chest burned with trapped current. Luke lifted his mouth from my neck and snarled, “Fuck off, bitch.”

“I said, get off her!” Shelly screamed. A folding metal chair made contact with the back of Luke’s skull. Luke yelled and rolled away from me, rubbing his head. Shelly stood frozen, holding the chair as a shield.

I crawled away and grabbed a can of extra-hold hairspray from the dressing table. Pointing the nozzle at Luke’s face, I could barely spit the words past the sizzling heat in my throat. “I’ll blind you if you take one step closer.”

Luke wobbled to his feet. “Isn’t it time you tried a real guy?”

Depressing the nozzle, I unleashed a toxic cloud. Luke howled, knuckles pressed to his eyes.

In the same moment, Shelly swung the chair again, cracking it across Luke’s face. He reeled and sank whimpering to his knees, blood gushing from his nose.

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The room darkened to grainy tones of black and gray. The blood on Luke's face glistened like an oil spill.

Shelly tossed me her jacket. A moment later, Carson stormed into the dressing room and yanked the dazed and bleeding Luke to an upright position. My brother's glassy-eyed gaze shifted from me to Shelly. "What the hell? You two did this to him?"

"He did this to *me!*" Shaking with fury, I glared at Carson, my finger trembling over my phone screen. "Get him out of here before I call the police! Better yet, *you* call the police and tell them your drunk best friend tried to rape your sister!"

"Beth." Carson shot a look at Shelly, who paced a few feet away like she wanted to hit him over the head with a chair, too. "Don't make a scene. He's just a little drunk, that's all. He didn't mean—"

I snorted and flopped onto the couch, disgusted. "Fuck you, Carson. Just. Fuck. You. Take him and go!"

Carson kept an eye on Shelly as he dragged the limp Luke into the hallway. I shoved my phone into my bag. A night-dark haze drifted languidly above Carson's head. My lungs burned as if I'd inhaled a roomful of acrid smoke. I wanted to tell him not to go. He was drunk too. But I was way too angry.

Only when they were both out of sight did Shelly set down the chair.

"Shit. What did I do?"

"Saved my ass, basically," I said, trying to breathe past the lingering burn in my throat.

Shelly helped me out of my torn costume and back into my own clothes, then plopped beside me on the couch and wrapped me in her arms.

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“It’s okay. It’s over.”

Andre came skidding into the room, fury in his eyes. “What the hell? I just saw Carson and Luke. Don’t tell me that asshole—he didn’t, did he?”

I shook my head. “I just want to go home, guys.” Mom was out of town. And there was no way I wanted to ride home with Carson.

“We’ll drive you,” Shelly said. “Why don’t we just hang a little until the crowd thins out?”

Sitting between my two best friends in the world, wrung out and shaken, all I could do was nod in agreement. I don’t remember how long I sat on the couch with my head nestled against Shelly’s shoulder or how they managed to get me to the car.

I slumped against the back seat of Andre’s beat-up old van as we exited the school driveway. From the corner of my eye I spied a lone figure standing at the edge of the woods across the road. When I turned my head for a better look, it was gone.

We turned off the winding road to the school and pulled onto Route 292. By the time we reached the notorious patch of Skilling Highway where the road snaked in hairpin turns, my eyes were slipping closed. I’d seen so many accidents on that stretch, I barely flinched at the red and blue alternating flashes that pulsed through the light snowfall. Smoke curled from the chassis of a car that had skidded into a ditch and flipped over. White-coated people swarmed the wreck like maggots, carefully extracting a bloody tangle of arms and legs. Tingling heat spread from my chest into my throat as I recognized the upside-down Duke Lacrosse sticker on the bumper.

“Stop the car, Andre!”

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Andre jammed on the brakes. We spilled out of the van, me scrambling across the slippery ground. A white sheet, already accumulating a crust of snow, had been draped over a motionless body on a gurney. One red-sleeved arm dangled from under the sheet. Luke wore that damn lacrosse jacket everywhere.

The snowy air dimmed and twirled into an inky pinwheel of jet-black smoke that hovered, then sank onto the sheet-covered body.

I wasn't sure how I knew. But I was more than certain.

Luke was dead.

The EMTs hoisted a body, the head braced and secured on a backboard, onto a second gurney. I cried out. The face was beyond recognition, but I knew that bloodstained Duke jersey was Carson's.

The darkness emerged from Luke's still body and lingered near Carson, negative space against the falling snow and flashing lights.

The ground fell away. My chest inflated with so much crackling pain, I felt it behind my eyes as I wished the swirling disturbance away with all my strength.

The patch of darkness, as if it had responded to my will, brushed against Carson's blood-spattered chest. Hesitating for only a moment, it rose and dissipated into the night sky.