

Carly's
SOUND

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Nine hundred and seventeen days. Raquel Poppy Valente ticked off another in her tally as she rolled over and faced the sun shining outside her bedroom window in New Orleans. It had become a habit now to wake up with a number in her head, followed closely by a curse. That she had woken up at all to face another lonely day with Carly gone pissed her off. It pissed her off because the loss swamped her hope so badly she wanted to roll right over and close her eyes.

Today was different, though. Today she stared at the innocuous yellow envelope on her dresser until her skin prickled. She'd had the damn thing for all of those nine hundred and seventeen days, but the idea of opening it had only started to germinate the night before. Now the envelope was almost screaming at her from across the quiet room.

With a deep breath she swung her legs over the bed and walked slowly to the dresser. She carried the envelope down to the den and sat in her boxers and T-shirt to rip it open. The videotape she pulled out had the words "For Poppy" written neatly across the front. For a long while, Poppy just held it before putting it into the machine.

The scene it opened with was sunset on Carly's Sound, a small, privately owned island near Aruba. Poppy leaned forward as Carly came into view, bald and wearing a large terry cloth robe. She sat on a porch that overlooked a beach with crystal blue water. Next to her was a cup, and when the camera panned back, Poppy could see that her legs were folded under her.

"Hi, sweetheart." Carly looked directly into the lens and smiled for what she knew would be a very attentive audience of one. "I finally got you to take a nap. You're so stubborn about leaving me alone. If you're watching, I hope it means you're ready for the next phase of your life, and I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

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“I’ll never be ready for that.” Poppy clenched her fists, fighting the urge to just sit still and listen.

Carly rubbed her chest in an attempt to ease the pain that had racked her body constantly at the end. Poppy knew the gesture well, and seeing it once more made her angry over the familiar helplessness.

“It’s a strange concept to wrap your brain around,” Carly said in a surreal but accepting tone, “the fact you’ll be dead in a matter of weeks. But I’m not that overly concerned. Don’t get me wrong. If I could, I’d change my fate, but we both know that can’t happen. My life has been short, but it’s been good, in large part because I’ve lived the last eleven years with you, baby.

“Poppy, above all else I want you to know that you’ve been the piece that’s made my life complete. I know that sounds corny, but it’s true. Now that I can see the end of my road, I’m the most proud of two things—being a mother and your wife.”

Carly stopped talking for a minute and took a sip of her tea. She pulled her robe tighter around her body as if she was trying to ward off a chill. For a brief moment a slight smile graced her face as she looked toward the surf.

“With you I never felt trapped or insignificant. Do you realize how lucky I felt every time you told me I was too beautiful to do anything else but spread my wings and fly? Besides the birth of my children it was the one gift that ever meant anything to me, because it meant you’d listened to me and had taken me seriously. You made me feel like I was worth more to you than all the things you accomplished and all the places you built. That’s not something everyone experiences in a lifetime.”

Carly stopped and pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her eyes. “You loved all of me, Poppy, and that was a gift. It made choosing between quality of life, and quantity, easy. I chose quality. I wanted to be in my right mind for all the time I had left with you. Living every moment of the time you’ve given is what helps you accept the fact there are only a few grains of sand left in your hourglass. It’s a lesson you’ve taught me well.”

The toll of having to film this message was starting to show on Carly’s face, and seeing her tire so quickly broke Poppy’s heart again. Being active and productive at both work and play had been such a

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fundamental part of Carly's personality, it had been hard for her to accept when the cancer started to defeat her strong determination.

"We've returned here to the place we began a lifetime ago, and we'll add one more memory on this beach. Ooh la la, the stories I could tell, huh, sweetheart?" Carly's lips curved into a beautiful smile.

"I want you to do a few things for me, and the first has to do with Lizzie." Elizabeth "Lizzie" Stevens was Carly's daughter, who now worked for Poppy. "If you want, you can show her this part of the tape, but please remind her how special she was to me—my little bookworm who morphed into an extraordinary young woman. Aside from you, she's the person I'm going to miss the most. Tell her that I love her, and that I'm proud of her. Tell her to take care of herself and remember all the things we talked about. I'm going to miss those long conversations we shared."

Carly's soft green eyes watered at the admission, and she stopped for a moment as if willing herself not to cry. She tilted her head back into the wind, and Poppy could tell she was trying to find the strength to finish. She had gotten so frail at the end, but her sense of humor had remained.

When the camera lens focused on the green eyes again, Poppy felt like Carly was looking right into her heart. The parting words were just for her.

"So all there's left to say is dry your eyes, my love, and shed your sadness. I love you, and don't you forget it. Thank you for listening. You always were a soft touch when it came to me, and I love you for it. I'll be seeing you in your dreams, honey."

"I wish for so much more," whispered Poppy.

"Get yourself dressed and get going. It's time to stop your moping."



As soon as she emerged from the revolving doors at the side entrance to the upscale Piquant hotel in downtown New Orleans, Poppy heard the wailing. She stared across from the closed hotel shops to the source of the noise, a red-faced, crying infant being bounced gently by a young blond woman who looked equally miserable. The two were standing in line in the hotel coffee shop, being ignored by not-so-amused customers.

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“Come on, Tallulah girl, it’s going to be okay. Mommy just needs some coffee before we fly out this morning,” the young woman said, as she tried to juggle a diaper bag, flight bag, and her baby. “God, I should’ve known better and just ordered room service.”

Unable to stand their helplessness, Poppy quickly crossed the gleaming marble floor to stand next to them and asked, “May I give you a hand?”

Knowing that most people mistrusted strangers, she fully expected the young woman to decline, but Julia Johnson expelled a breath of relief when she heard the soft velvety voice offering help. Without hesitation, she handed the flight bag and diaper bag off to the tall, dark-haired stranger, thanking her sincerely.

Once her savior was loaded down with her possessions, Julia distracted Tallulah with a soft toy. This ploy reduced the decibels enough that Julia could order. “A decaf café au lait, please, and a blueberry muffin.”

The clerk nodded, then turned her attention to the pack mule standing next to Julia. “And what do you desire, good-looking?” The clerk’s arched eyebrow looked even more pronounced because of the spike piercing it.

“A venti latte, please.” The stranger glanced toward Julia, who was trying to extract her wallet from her purse, and said, “It’s on me.”

Moving a superbly tailored jacket aside, she slid a hand into the front pocket of immaculate black pleated pants and extracted a gold money clip engraved with a flower instead of a name or initials. She peeled off a twenty and pressed it into the teenage clerk’s hand. “Here you go, kid, and keep the change. You’re good for my ego.”

Julia couldn’t help but join the clerk in really taking in her benefactor. The tall stranger was laughing softly, and something in her bearing lifted Julia out of the frustrated mood she had been in and replaced her aggravation with a slight panicky feeling. She realized that, in her distracted state, she had not only handed over the bulk of her money, which was in the flight bag, but she’d also allowed the woman to pay for her order.

“I can’t let you buy my breakfast,” Julia protested as the woman started walking.

Tallulah was restless again and emitted a couple of sharp howls. Bouncing her, Julia followed her luggage, which was still attached to

the woman who was also carrying the tray holding their coffees and Julia's muffin.

"Why not?" The woman paused at the coffee station and set down the tray.

"Why not what?" asked Julia.

"Why can't I buy you breakfast? Is there some law or religious reason why I wouldn't be able to?" The stranger uncapped their cups and started adding the appropriate ingredients to hers.

"No, it's just that I don't know you, and I don't want to impose," said Julia above the wailing going on near her right shoulder. Tallulah was trying to crawl over her body, and the cries sounded as if she was in pain. "Why can't they talk from the beginning?"

"How do you take your coffee?" The voice was close to Julia's ear, making her shiver.

"What? I'm sorry," said Julia, after the woman's snapping fingers brought her back to the coffee shop.

"How do you take your coffee?"

"Three sugars, thanks."

"They *can* talk from the beginning, ma'am. You just have to listen to what they're saying." Julia's savior shook three sugar packets, shifting the granules to one side before ripping the packets open and dumping their contents into the steaming liquid.

"Excuse me?" Julia moved the baby to her other shoulder to give her right ear a break and to get a better look at her benefactor. The bouncing and the back patting weren't working. Tallulah was only crying louder.

"The kid's got colic. She doesn't need to tell you verbally. The crying and the leg kicking are a dead giveaway. And as we all know, there's only one sure cure for colic. Care to give it a try?" She picked up the tray and pointed to the seating area.

The smile she shot Julia made her reciprocate with her own, lifting the tiredness she could feel sagging her face. "At this point I'm willing to try anything. Poor thing's been crying like this since yesterday."

Poppy put their tray down on one of the empty tables, set Julia's baggage aside, and pulled a chair out for her new friends. She sat across from Julia and held her arms out. With a little apprehension, Julia handed Tallulah over and sat back, watching expectantly.

"How old is she?" Poppy asked, aware that she was now expected

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to deliver a miracle cure and hoping she could.

“Four months,” Julia replied.

Poppy immediately felt how hot the baby was from crying and noted how her little legs were drawn close into her stomach in an effort to comfort herself. Putting one of her hands behind Tallulah’s head, Poppy faced the baby toward her and laid her in the well that her crossed legs formed. Slowly, she rubbed Tallulah’s stomach with her other hand.

With the warm, comforting hand massaging her, the baby opened small forest green eyes and focused on Poppy. Both Tallulah and her mother listened as the miracle worker started singing softly. The song was a slow lullaby Julia was unfamiliar with, but the deep, rich voice made it sound timeless, and Julia noticed some of the patrons sitting close to them stopped talking and listened to what sounded like a fairy tale woven to music. For the first time in what seemed like days, Tallulah fell sleepily silent, and Julia relaxed back in her chair and closed her eyes, feeling as drowsy and content as her baby.

Poppy ended the song gradually and moved the sleeping infant to her shoulder. She inhaled deeply to take in the essence of the innocent life she held. Seeing the shade of green of the baby’s eyes had left her temporarily shocked. It had been like finding a memory trapped in the small being she cradled. Having children had never crossed her mind, but Poppy did enjoy the feel of them in her arms, and she’d always liked to play with those who were part of her life through her friends.

Julia marveled as her tempestuous daughter lay curled on the broad shoulder, asleep for the first time in twenty-four hours. Whoever this woman was, she was a godsend, and Julia’s nervousness about having a stranger hold Tallulah had evaporated.

She leaned over the table and extended her hand in greeting. “I know I’m kinda late but I’m Julia, and that young lady you’re holding is my daughter, Tallulah.”

“Heck. Maybe I was wrong and the kid doesn’t have a stomachache. She’s just protesting getting stuck with the name Tallulah.” Poppy looked into another set of green eyes, only these didn’t look all that happy with the comment she had just made.

“For your information, Tallulah is my grandmother’s name. My grandmother who raised me from the time I was as old as the baby you now hold, so no cracks about her name.” Julia stated her case a little

more forcefully than she really meant. Poppy's reaction struck a nerve after almost everyone she knew had tried to dissuade her from saddling her daughter with the old name.

"I'm sorry, I was joking. Tallulah's a beautiful name. You just don't hear it very often these days. May she be as unique as her name, and as special as your grandmother obviously is to you. I'm pleased to meet you both. My name's Poppy." Poppy smiled again and noticed she was still holding the hand Julia had extended.

"Your name's Poppy and you're making fun of Tallulah?"

"Actually my name's Raquel Poppy, but people call me Poppy," she answered, adding an arched brow to her comment.

"But don't you think Poppy's a stranger name than Tallulah?" Julia was enjoying the teasing banter so much, the thought of having heard the unique name before was a fleeting one.

"For *your* information, Poppy is my mother's name. The mother who raised me from the time I was born. So no cracks about her name."

Whoever this woman was, Poppy found her delightful. And considering life had lost so much meaning for her in the past two and a half years that she hadn't found delight in anything or anyone, Poppy was surprised to discover it in a coffee shop in the form of a small child and her mother.

"I thought you said your name was Raquel?" Julia kept her hand where it was, enjoying the warmth of the larger one it was encased in.

"It is. I'm named after both my parents," started Poppy, before she was interrupted again.

"Your father's name is Raquel?"

"No, it's not, smart-ass. My dad's name is Raphael, and, as you already know, my mother's name is Poppy. Only no one calls her that." Poppy cocked her head to the side, making no attempt to continue, somehow knowing Julia couldn't keep quiet.

"What's she called?" Julia chimed in with her next interruption.

"If you'd sit there quietly, I'd have the opportunity to tell you. Her middle name is Isabelle, and that's what she goes by. Poppy, which is an old family name on her side of the family, got passed to me. And since my mother didn't think I could go comfortably through life with the name Raphael, she decided on Raquel as a close second. So, now that you know my whole name history, Miss Julia, is there a car seat or

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stroller I can put Miss Tallulah in so she'll be more comfortable?"

"Actually her car seat's up in the hotel room, but I'm sure I can manage if you give me my stuff back. We're heading to the airport, and we're running late."

"Then let me help you."

"I can't let you do that," said Julia.

"We've had this conversation already."

The elevator headed to the third floor where the lobby was located. Poppy was aware that Julia stole a few looks at her when it seemed she wouldn't notice. She did the same and immediately observed something important that made her decide to carry out her good deed for the day, then be on her way. A diamond engagement ring and wedding band occupied Julia's left ring finger. *About two and a half carats. At least the bastard's not cheap, and he certainly has good taste in women. Even though he's left her stranded here with no one to help her.*

From her side of the elevator, Julia noticed the wide platinum wedding band on Poppy's left hand. It was plain but seemed to suit the wearer, who with her height and good looks didn't need much adornment. They walked through the elaborately decorated lobby to take another set of elevators to the eighteenth floor to Julia and Tallulah's room. After seeing the pile of luggage, Poppy picked up the phone and called for a porter to help them. While she was on the phone, she watched Julia strap the baby into the car seat carefully so as not to wake her, then walk around the room checking to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

"Yes, Ms. Valente, someone's on the way up now. I apologize for not realizing you were in the building, ma'am."

"I'm just helping someone out. Could you also arrange for a car as well?" Poppy hung up and, when a knock came shortly after, headed toward the door to let in two porters who'd arrived to load up Julia's possessions.

Amazed at the quick response Poppy had gotten out of the hotel staff and how quiet they were being because of the sleeping infant, Julia whispered in her daughter's ear, "I don't know what her secret is, but she must be a dream to travel with. It's a shame she can't come the rest of the way with us."

Once downstairs, Poppy oversaw the porters strapping the baby's car seat into place in the black limo waiting to take them to the airport,

and they thanked her for the generous tip she had evidently given them.

While Julia was still trying to find the right words to thank her, Poppy said, "It was a pleasure meeting you and your daughter this morning. I hope you have a pleasant flight wherever you're going."

She took possession of Julia's hand to shake it in farewell, finding she liked the way it felt in hers.

For the first time since they met, Julia looked up and saw that Poppy's eyes were Caribbean blue. It was the only color she could think of to describe them. They were the same shade as the water in all those travel brochures that showed the blue-green vistas around resort locations. It was a striking combination when you put it together with the jet black hair that looked slightly curly even though it was pulled into a short ponytail.

"Thank you for all this," Julia said as she felt Poppy start to pull her hand away. Julia squeezed her fingers and tugged to not break the contact just yet. "I don't know if I would've survived the morning without you. It was a pleasure meeting you too, and thanks for your song. Can I pay you back for the coffee, or anything?"

"My treat, and you don't have to thank me for doing something I love. In a way, you and Tallulah just showed me there might be a song or two left in me. You take care of her, and yourself as well, and have fun on your trip. Maybe we'll run into each other again some time." On impulse, Poppy kissed the petite hand she had been holding before letting go and walking away.

Heading back up to the lobby of the Piquant, she allowed her mind to retrace the events of the morning and to flood with memories she'd found in the shade of Tallulah's green eyes. Memories that solidified for Poppy that no matter how much pain she was in now, given the opportunity, she wouldn't change anything about the past. The moment she'd watched Carly walk toward her that night was the turning point of her life, the moment she'd first seen the woman who had held her heart and taught her how to love. The memories were all she had left now.

Thirteen and a Half Years Earlier—The Royal Orleans Hotel

Poppy was playing the guitar in the corner of the crowded bar. A slow jazz tune that blended well with the whispered conversations

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going on around the room. This wasn't her usual gig, but there were two more semesters at Tulane and she had plans.

The groups who gathered every night at the Oak Bar in one of the French Quarter's oldest and grandest hotels never seemed to differ. They were the upper crust of what the city had to offer, most of whom liked to be seen out in places like this. To Poppy they were a group of people willing to pay eight bucks for a drink poured into the smallest glasses the hotel could procure.

Tonight was different though. Tonight in the corner opposite where she sat playing, a group of three women were on at least their fourth round, and laughing louder than anyone had in this stuffy establishment for a long time.

The brunette in the middle sat flanked by two blondes, one short and one tall. Both had their heads thrown back, laughing at something she'd just finished telling them. The other older patrons scattered throughout the bar would look their way disapprovingly every so often, but every scowl thrown in their direction only seemed to drive the volume of the laughing up a notch and the waiter over with another round.

Poppy watched as the brunette retrieved a large purse off the floor by her feet and pulled out her wallet. Removing something, she got up and strolled toward Poppy. Watching the roll of the woman's hips and the ease of her smile, Poppy forgot the next notes of the song she had been playing and just sat there with a loose grip on the neck of the guitar until the woman halted in front of her.

Leaning over slightly and holding her hands behind her back, the woman asked, "Do you happen to know any Buffett?"

"Buffett?" Poppy could feel the blush running up her face and the beginning of the nervous tick that made her leg bounce. This woman was making her sweat and she had asked her something, but a fog had settled in Poppy's brain, making her unable to answer.

"Jimmy Buffett." The woman smiled as if enjoying the effect she was having. She leaned further over and stuffed a twenty-dollar bill into the pocket of Poppy's shirt before continuing the one-sided conversation. "'Margaritaville,' 'Pensacola Run,' or anything else along those lines?"

Poppy sat there mesmerized. The heat that radiated off her ears assured her she was blushing. "Sure, I know some Buffett tunes," she replied awkwardly. "They don't let me do them in here."

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“Well, one of the patrons has made a request...um?” The woman left the question hanging.

“Poppy, my name’s Poppy.” The way Poppy answered made it sound like she was trying to convince herself it was the correct name. Before extending her hand for a more formal introduction, she wiped it on her black pants.

“Nice to meet you, Poppy. My name’s Carly Stevens, and those two wild women sitting over there with me are Sabrina Thorenson and Matlin Moore.” Carly pointed toward the table where her friends sat waving back at them.

To be polite Poppy smiled and waved back, then her eyes and attention were riveted on Carly once more.

“Now that you know who we are and we know who you are, we’d like to hear some Buffett, if you please.”

As Carly walked back to her seat, Poppy could have sworn she added some extra sway to her hips. She certainly looked like she knew Poppy’s eyes were glued to her. Hooking the guitar strap on and standing, Poppy gave the ladies their wish by performing all of the Buffett songs she had in her repertoire. She made enough tips that night from some of the other Buffett enthusiasts in the audience to pay for her next semester’s books, which she had to purchase the following day.

The college education she was working on was something Poppy’s parents, Raphael and Isabelle, wanted more than she did. They weren’t poor, but the Valente family had what her mother called “a healthy respect for the dollar.” Luckily Poppy had an excellent academic record as well as a natural musical talent, and a combination of scholarships and help from her parents had paid for the education Tulane provided for a premium price. This accomplishment was her mother’s favorite subject when she sat for a visit with her friends. Not the part where Poppy was out in bars all night making a living, but the my-kid’s-going-to-graduate-from-Tulane part.

A little bleary-eyed the next morning, Poppy went up and down the aisles of the campus bookstore. She had scheduled an extra class for the spring semester, which would allow her to take the summer off to work and finish up in the fall. After she walked across the stage in December, she would embark on the plan she had formulated two summers earlier, when she had worked on the island of Aruba.

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Caught up in a dream of swaying palm trees and thick-cushioned chaise lounges, Poppy didn't see the woman standing behind her. Only after she'd backed into her and saw her sprawled on the ground did she realize it was Carly Stevens.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't see you standing there." Poppy dropped to her knees to pick up all the stuff now on the ground. In the light of day, she found Carly's delightful smile just as enchanting as she had in the bar. And to Poppy's surprise, her own blush from the night before was back in full force.

"What a surprise bumping into you here." Carly laughed at her own joke. "Don't worry, no harm done. I may be older than you are, but I'm far from fragile."

"It's just that I'm usually not so clumsy and dumb-witted. How about I pay for all my stuff, and then I'll treat you to breakfast down the street to make it up to you?" Poppy sat on her heels waiting for Carly's reply.

"That, my dear, is the best offer I've had all morning. Lead on, oh clumsy and dumb-witted one." There was a clear teasing tone in Carly's voice as she held out her hand to be helped up.

They headed to the registers together and paid for their selections, then walked to Carly's car to drop everything off. "There's a good café about four blocks from here, Ms. Stevens. Do you mind walking?"

"If I'm going to have breakfast with you we have to be clear on two things. One, you have to call me Carly, and two, you have to tell me your last name. Or are you one of those musician types who only goes by one name?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, Carly." Relief flooded Poppy that she hadn't struck out before the game even began. "My name's Raquel Poppy Valente, but my friends all call me Poppy."

"Fine. Now take me to some food before I pass out."

They spent the morning next to each other at the counter of the Camellia Grill, one of New Orleans's oldest traditions, talking about a whole slew of topics, starting with the chili drowning Poppy's omelet and moving to the problems of current politics.

The morning ended too soon for Poppy, and she found herself reluctantly escorting Carly back to the car to retrieve her purchases. It didn't help that they had walked past four different young women

on their way back, and each one had greeted Poppy with a firm hug and a kiss and the suggestion that more was on offer. Or maybe Poppy was just imagining it must seem that way to Carly. She was sure she'd detected increasing irritation in the deep green eyes and the set of her full mouth.

The last block of their walk passed in silence and with no eye contact, and by the time they reached Carly's car, Carly seemed angry. They stood next to the BMW sedan, the ease of morning entirely gone.

Poppy shifted awkwardly. "Look, Carly, I'm not real sure what happened between the omelet and now, but if it's something I did or said, I'm sorry." New Orleans uptown women were in general a liberal, progressive bunch, Poppy realized, but there was a limit to their acceptance of different lifestyle choices. Maybe Carly's fairly palpable anger had to do with her figuring out Poppy wasn't a sorority girl. "I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable, but I can't help who I am. I'm gay and I don't hide that fact from anyone. The girls this morning were all just friends of mine, as in just friends."

"You don't owe me any explanations," Carly said. "And I have no problem with who you are, just so you know."

"Does that mean you'd like to see me again?" The words were out before Poppy could run them through the common-sense test. In a hurry, she added, "You probably have an address book full of friends, but I'd like to see you again."

"Why would you want to spend time with me, when you obviously have the pick of the litter?"

Several different emotions played across Carly's features. Poppy thought she glimpsed uncertainty, even vulnerability, but she couldn't be sure. She wondered if Carly suspected her of looking for a free ride. There was something about the woman, who was at least a foot shorter than she was, with her brown hair and green eyes, that spoke to Poppy's heart, and she didn't want to stop listening just yet. And she didn't want her to walk straight out of her life.

"I don't want anything from you, Carly," she said, leaning against the side of the black sedan. "Except maybe to be your friend. You look like you could stand another one in your life, and I can always use one."

When she heard the beep of the car's alarm system, Poppy thought she had her answer.

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“Where’re you playing tonight?” Carly asked as she opened the driver’s side door.

Poppy grinned. “A little dive in the quarter I’ve been playing for years. The tips are good and I get to play all the stuff I like, which would include, but will not be limited to, some Buffett songs. If you and your friends stop by, I promise to sing you something special.”

“I’m usually not a little dive kind of girl, but life’s too short not to try new things, so why the hell not. There’s something about you, Poppy, that makes me want to—”

“Yes, makes you want to what?” Poppy leaned into the car a little.

“You make me want to sing, Poppy, and no one before you has ever done that.”