



MEAGHAN SMITH  
HOW TO HAVE A HEART

# **How To Have A Heart**

(In 25 Not So Easy Steps)

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## Step 1- Start

The air is silent, which is always the most unnerving part. Mere feet in front of me hundreds of people are anticipating. Hundreds of open eyes. Hundreds of listening ears. Hundreds of beating hearts. They meld together to become one huge creature.

My heart thunders in response. This is the most unnatural thing for me, to be on stage in front of you. I am afraid. I close my eyes.

I'm so small. You're so vast. I'm underwater and a huge, beautiful, and terrifying sea creature hovers in front of me, all eyes staring, all ears eager, all hearts covered. I can't tell yet if you will reject me or embrace me. I want you to like me, to love me if you can. I open my mouth and inhale.

Then I push my voice forward. It bursts out, hundreds of ribbons of sound uncoiling from my throat. The ribbons reach out and dance their way toward your ears. If I'm successful the tears under my eyes will catch your eyes. My ribbons of sound will reach your ears. My songs will reach your hearts.

I give you all I have. And then I wait for your response.

I wrote my last album, *The Cricket's Orchestra*, alone in my bedroom. I worked 9 to 5 at an animation studio, where I spent my days drawing storyboards for children's television shows. And after a long day's work contributing to someone else's creative vision and ambition, all I wanted to do was create my own dream of becoming a full-time singer. I'd come home after work and make songs up for fun. I had no thought of fans, audience, record label executives, no concern for radio—none of that. I just made up some songs I wanted to hear. When I had enough songs written, I decided to turn them into a record. So, so simple.

But this time, several years after recording and releasing *The Cricket's Orchestra*, after touring on this continent and beyond, after winning a JUNO Award for Best New Artist, I have amazing fans whose ears I happen to care deeply about. I have an audience. Record label executives are listening intently, too. All those ears were on my mind as I set out to create my new album.

And so I wrote a few new songs, recorded them on my laptop, and sent them off to my A&R guy. A&R stands for artist and repertoire. A&R people are the liaison between the artist and the rest of the departments at a

record label. They are usually not creative types, but are more business-minded and as a result can sometimes be at odds with artists and others who lean creative.

In response to the new songs I sent, I got emails back from my A&R guy that said:

"Nice try!"

or

"Good one!"

or

"This is pretty."

My A&R guy liked hard core pop/rock. He didn't get me at all as an artist. He just couldn't quite figure out what I was doing. But he wanted to hear more songs. So I wrote more songs. And got more replies like:

"Okay..."

and

"Can you make it a bit more...edgy?"

So, I wrote more songs. With more...edge? And got emails like:

"Still not there yet."

and

"Maybe you just need to sing differently."

I thought of the moments on stage. The ribbons of sound. My voice into your ears and the connection I wanted to make with you. And I started to question myself. I began to doubt my instincts. Every time my heart beat in excited response to a song I had written and I would ignore it. Maybe it didn't know what it was talking about. Maybe I needed more edge? Maybe I needed to sing differently? Maybe I didn't know what I was doing.

And then something in me started to die. As soon as I would sit down to write a new song I'd cry. Like an allergic reaction, my throat tightened up and nothing came to me. Fear started to gnaw at the back of my mind. I pushed it away, tamped it down with trashy TV shows or something

equally mind-numbing. I tried not to notice that I was starting to feel like maybe I couldn't be a musician anymore.

I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to find the balance between what my label wanted to hear and what I wanted to create. I was afraid that I'd say something stupid or offensive in a song. Or it would be too revealing, or not revealing enough. I wanted to say important things, I wanted to say things that meant something to me, but would my audience relate? Would you still want to hear my thoughts and stories? I wanted to avoid clichés but still say exactly what I meant. But why was every song I was writing sounding like every other song I had written? Why couldn't I just be as honest and fearless as I wanted to be? Why couldn't I be different, but still myself? I was sick of my own songs and my own writing and myself and it was awful. And more than that, it was terrifying to imagine that I had lost my ability to write any songs, let alone good ones. I wanted to write. But I couldn't.

My manager and record label suggested I try co-writing.

Co-writing is one of the weirdest, most uncomfortable things I've ever had to do. (Certain doctor's appointments are the only thing I can think of that make me feel a little more uncomfortable than co-writing...*ahem.*) Essentially, you have a couple of hours to go into a room with a total stranger, open your heart up, pour all of your guts out through it, and hope you come up with an absolutely brilliant hit song. This approach was counterintuitive to my song-writing process on every level.

I never set aside time to write songs, they just whoosh down on me from somewhere in the universe and I have to scramble to catch them before they escape. It's never planned. Sometimes it takes a half hour to catch a song, sometimes it takes days. Oh, the torture, the agony, the humiliation of trying to pry my most inner feelings out into the open in front of a complete stranger. Add to that the pressure of knowing that many ears would be listening, and worrying about the less than awesome feedback my A&R guy would have for me, more often than not I ended up a mumbling pile of nerves unable to pry myself open even a sliver. It was impossible to catch a song under these circumstances. And these people I was lucky enough to be in a room with were so talented. They were supportive, creative, open, wonderful people. The issue was always me. I participated in no fewer than fifty co-writing sessions, none of which turned out a single song that would end up on my album.

Now I was really at the end of my songwriting rope. I couldn't write songs alone, I couldn't write songs with other people. I couldn't write songs. I was telling this to another A&R rep Kelly who works at Warner Music one day as she drove me from one meeting to another in Toronto.

"You should talk to Ron Lopata," she said.

"Who's that?" I asked

"Ron Lopata. He's your new A&R guy."

My previous one line email A&R guy had moved on to greener pastures. But before him, I had endured five others. My history with A&R guys is not a bright one. Not because I'm hard to work with, I swear. But because A&R guys often quit, or get fired, or drop you as an artist, or decide to go to another label two weeks after they sign you, or quit the music business altogether and open a bar on an island in the Pacific Ocean without telling you, or they just don't get your music, or they just don't like you. And, as they are supposed to be the liaison between artist and label, you can see how this could be problematic for an artist who sometimes really struggles creatively and. Now I had to start all over again with yet another A&R guy who wouldn't get me. I disliked him before I even met him. What did A&R guys even know about songwriting? Nothing.

I rolled my eyes. Kelly noticed.

"No, for real, he's great. He's actually a musician."

Oh great. An A&R guy who thinks he's a musician and will probably think he can tell me exactly what my songs need.

"Really?" I said, unenthused.

Kelly smiled. "Just give him a chance. You never know."

But I knew. Or at least I thought I did.

## Step 2 - Meet

The first time I was supposed to meet my new A&R guy, Ron Lopata, was at a lunch meeting in Toronto. Everyone from the label had gathered at a nice restaurant to talk about my ideas for the new album and the direction in which I wanted to go. We had greeted each other warmly and were seated at a large table. But there was one empty chair.

"Are we still waiting on one?" the waitress asked.

"Yes," said Steve, the head of the label. "Ron's not here yet. He's still at a video shoot with another artist. But he should be here soon." Steve looked at me. "Trust me Meaghan, he's great. You'll love him."

My heart sank. I had flown all the way from Halifax, Nova Scotia, (which is three provinces left of Toronto, Ontario if you're not familiar with the Canadian landscape). All Ron had to do was drive from one part of town to another. And he was late! Not only was I predisposed to dislike the poor fellow because he was an A&R guy, but now I also disliked him because he was late. He obviously cared as much about meeting me as I did about meeting him. But at least I was on time.

I had press scheduled for later that afternoon and had to leave the restaurant at exactly 1:45 pm in order to be on time for my interviews. We decided to carry on with our lunch meeting.

I have to make this next point very clear. I absolutely adore the people who work at Warner Music. Through all of my songwriting turmoil and A&R ups and downs, these key people have stuck with me. The president of the label, the head of marketing, label representatives, press and promotions people had all worked hard with me on promoting my last album. They made sure I knew that they believed in me, which only made me want to work harder for them and write better songs so as not to let them down. I believe they care deeply about my music and I know they have faith in me as an artist. So I couldn't for the life of me figure out why they thought this Ron Lopata guy would be so great for me. Didn't they know that A&R guys were the worst?

"So, what are your thoughts on your new album, Meaghan," Steve asked after we had ordered.

"Well, basically I'd like my new album to be a big, huge step forward from the last one." I told everyone. "I already know that I can make an album

like The Cricket's Orchestra. I already know I can write those kinds of songs. I really want to challenge myself with this new album. I want to write songs that will still be true to me, but will have the potential to reach a broader audience. I want to write stronger choruses and more honest lyrics. I'd like the production to be more modern. I want to get out of my comfort zone." Even as I described my vision for my new sound, my new album felt like it was a million miles away. And that excited me.

"This all sounds great," Steve said. "We're really excited to hear about your ideas."

We talked in more detail about the goals and dreams I had for my next project. My label was with me all the way. They wanted the same things I wanted. I was actually beginning to feel hopeful about music again. If only I could crack my song-writing barrier.

"Well Ron's definitely the guy to help you get there," Steve was saying. "Oh, here he is now."

I looked up as a guy sat down across the table from me. He had a friendly face, kind of a goofy smile, and really weird hair. It was all twisted, sort of like dreadlocks but not quite as gnarly. He wasn't wearing a power suit the way some A&R guys do to intimidate you into believing they know what's best for you. He also wasn't wearing elaborately ripped jeans and some totally obscure band t-shirt the way some other A&R guys do who are trying really hard to fit in with the artist. He was wearing plain black jeans, a wind-breaker and sneakers. He didn't look like any A&R guy I had ever met.

"Hi," he said a little out of breath. "Sorry I'm late. I was at a video shoot with another artist. Kind of went overtime. How are you?"

"Great." I looked at my phone to check the time. 1:45 pm on the dot. I had to leave. "Hey, thanks for showing up." I said with maybe more than a hint of sarcasm. I gathered my coat and bag and said my good-byes to everyone.

Kelly drove me to my first interview. I sat in the passenger's seat and stewed silently about how late Ron had been.

"It sucks that Ron missed our meeting," she said. "He's just got a lot on his plate right now, starting this new A&R job and working with all these new artists. He works really hard for his artists."

"Well, maybe he'll have one less artist to work hard for," I said. "Kelly, I don't think I can work with him. He obviously doesn't care about what I'm doing."

"Just give him a chance," she said. "I honestly think you two could work really well together."

I was so not convinced.

I flew back home to Halifax after wrapping up all my business in Toronto and no sooner had I stepped in the door, but the phone rang. It was Steve.

"Meaghan, Ron's really sorry that he didn't get a proper chance to hang out with you. We would love to fly you back to Toronto and let you guys spend an afternoon together to talk. Musician to musician."

Musician to musician? Who did this guy think he was fooling? "I don't know, Steve," I said. "Can't I just do this album without an A&R guy?" I could feel beads of cold sweat sneaking down my spine. .

"Just give him one afternoon," Steve said. "If you're still not convinced after that, we'll figure something else out for you."

The following week Mingo (my husband) and I were back on a plane to Toronto and before I knew it, we were walking into Keen, a music production company where Ron had his own studio space.

"I'm here to see Ron Lopata," I told the receptionist.

"Cool," he said. "He's not here yet. Just have a seat over there."

Mingo and I took our seats in the reception area. Five minutes passed. Then fifteen minutes. I felt my legs itching to stand up and walk out of that studio. It was almost a relief. I could confidently tell the head of the label that I had done my part. I had flown half way across the country again, but his A&R joker hadn't even shown up, and I guess I was going to have to do the record without an A&R guy! Woohoo! A little ray of hope shone through the moody lighting in the studio. Maybe I could do my album without anyone hovering over me or my songs. I began to pray that he wouldn't show up.

Mingo looked at me, reading my mind. "Let's just give him another couple of minutes, okay?"

"I'll wait exactly ten more minutes." I said. "Then we're going for lunch and flying back home."

I didn't take my eyes off my phone for nine minutes. "Well, that's it." I said happily, standing to leave. "We've been waiting for exactly twenty-nine

minutes. Let's go," and just as I stepped toward the exit, Ron busted through the door, short of breath, his crazy hair flying in every direction.

"Sorry guys! Monday morning, you know? I had to take my kids to school. My little girl didn't want to go today. And then traffic—"

"Look, if it's a bad time, we can just get going," I said.

"No, no, not at all," Ron said. "Come on into my studio."

My heart sank.

Mingo and I followed Ron into one of the tiniest, messiest, most cramped and cluttered rooms I had ever seen in my entire life. Keyboards lined every wall, stacked on top of one another. A few guitars were scattered here and there. Piles of books, papers, sheet music, and CDs teetered precariously on any available surface. Strange records and various musical awards (including a bunch of JUNOs, and a Smooth Jazz Award) cluttered the walls. It didn't resemble anything remotely close to the other A&R-guy-offices I had been in. Ron sat down in front of a computer desk that was overgrown with wires and cords. There were two chairs crammed into the far corners of the room. Mingo and I took those seats.

"So," said Ron.

"So," said me.

"Why don't you tell me a bit about how things have been going." Ron sat back, ready to listen. So I did. I told him about how I had lost my ability to write songs, and how I didn't know if I could make another album. And then I told him exactly what I thought of A&R guys.

"A&R guys are the worst," he agreed. It was the most un-A&R-ish thing I had ever heard an A&R guy say. "I'll let you in on a little secret," he said.

Mingo and I leaned in.

He lowered his voice and said, as though he were an informant delivering a Top Secret to a spy, "I'm not really an A&R guy."

### Step 3 - Feel

"What do you mean you're not really an A&R guy?" I glanced at Mingo. I saw my own surprise mirrored on his face.

"I'm a musician," Ron said. "I studied classical jazz in school. Well, actually I was going to be a doctor."

My mind was being blown with every word he said. An A&R guy who studied classical jazz? An A&R guy who was going to be a doctor?

"My dad passed away when I was younger," he went on. "I really wanted to help heal people when I grew up. I worked hard in school and got straight A's. But when I got to medical school and had to deal with blood and guts and stuff, well I just couldn't handle it. So I quit medical school. I figured I'd try to heal people another way. With music."

A lump began to form in my throat as he told me about his passion for music and what he had given up to pursue it. Suddenly it all made sense. The way he often lost track of time, his total lack of business suits, the clutter and chaos of his studio space, the keyboards and other musical paraphernalia, it all pointed to the fact that he was indeed an actual musician. I was gob-stopped. I realized that I had nurtured a prejudiced attitude against A&R guys over the years. I had judged him unfairly. He really was a musician as well as an A&R guy. And one with a heart, no less.

He went on to tell Mingo and I about studying music in school, the many bands he had been part of, the tours he had been on, the artists he had helped get started, and the A&R guys he had dealt with himself. He was passionate about developing young artists and helping them find their own unique sound. He had studied jazz music, he loved pop music, he had played rock music, he knew classical music. He had listened to The Cricket's Orchestra, and could hear in his head the progression I had described.

Slowly, my shell began to crack. Maybe, I thought, just maybe he will actually help me make the music I'm hearing in my head become a reality. But I still wasn't completely convinced.

"So, do you guys want to try writing a song?" he asked, like it was no big deal. Panic punched me hard in the heart. Suddenly this had turned into another co-writing session. But this time Mingo was there. And I had already been through so many painful co-writing sessions. What was one more?

"Sure," I heard myself say.

Mingo grabbed a guitar and we went into a larger room. A glossy, black grand piano waited in a shaft of light pouring through a huge window that framed a view of the city below. Ron sat at the piano bench and Mingo stood beside him. I set my laptop on top of the piano at the far end, bracing myself to feel the usual sting of song-writing failure.

Ron touched the keys. The piano was just out of tune enough to sound like it had been through some stuff, but had come out the other end alright. It was perfect.

"What are you feeling?" Ron asked.

What was I feeling? I was feeling afraid to write songs. And I was feeling surprised that he had wanted to be a doctor but had turned into a musician and then became an A&R guy. And I felt ashamed of my unfair judgment of him. And I was feeling amazed that he somehow knew that this was the only question I asked myself every single time I had ever written a song that had meant anything to me, but somehow along my song-writing journey, I had stopped asking myself. What was I feeling?

"Regretful," I said.

He closed his eyes and played some minor-sounding chords. Slow, brooding, but not too sad. Mingo picked up on what he was doing and played along on the guitar, steering the direction of the music when Ron wasn't sure. Somehow each knew the chords the other was going to play. And somehow I knew too. And then the song came to me. Images of an inky night. Muted starlight. A bright moon. A mouth I never should have kissed. Everything too beautiful to be true in the cold silver light. Waking up the next morning, regretful of my actions of the night before.

It was dying to be born. It wrote itself. I just stood there and recorded it as Mingo and Ron played it on their instruments, and it fell from my lips. I called it 'The Moon Makes A Fool Of Me.'

Thirty minutes later, we had the kinks worked out, we had a demo recorded, and I had written the first song I actually cared about in years.

"See," Ron said. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No," I said, still in shock. "Actually—I really like this song!"

"It's a good song," Mingo said.

"I think so too," Ron agreed. "Do you guys wanna stick around Toronto for a while and try writing another one?"

I looked at Mingo. He blinked slowly and nodded once. That always means yes.

"Yeah," I smiled. "Let's try to write another one."

In my heart, a teeny tiny spark glowed timidly as Mingo and I booked into a hotel. I had one song in the bag! Yes, I had written it with my husband and my A&R guy, of all people. Yes, it had taken two years of painful failed attempts. Yes, I had been on the brink of quitting just minutes before we had written it. But it was an admission from an honest place in my soul. A photograph from a moment in my life, depicted with sounds. It was kind of beautiful. And it was one whole song.

Now I just needed to write a full album's worth of whole songs.

#### Step 4 - Go

I sat in my usual chair next to Mingo in Ron's cramped, cluttered, disorganized, keyboard-infested studio, writing songs. Ron sat at a keyboard and plunked out chord after sweet chord while Mingo sat next to him, strumming his guitar and adding to the pool of musical ideas. I looked up from my laptop where I had quickly typed out a few lyric ideas.

"That sounds really cool," I said.

"What about going to the G minor in the chorus?" Mingo asked. Ron played the change in response.

Ron played the change in response. "Yeah, I like that better," I said. The tips of my fingers spat out a few more lyric ideas on my keyboard.

We had written a couple songs over the course of a few weeks, and had some solid starts on a few more. Songwriting had been going really well, and I had no idea why. All I knew was the combination of Ron's piano, Mingo's guitar, and my lyrics were making some pretty sweet songs.

"We should start figuring out who's going to produce your new songs." Ron said.

I stopped typing. Of course, I knew that in order to put out an album my songs had to be produced. But I was so focused on getting them written that I had forgotten to think any further than that.

"Do you have any ideas for people you'd like to work with?" he asked.

I thought back through all the albums I had been hooked on recently. There were a few producers I had in mind based on the music I had been listening to, and then of course there was my dream list that would probably never be a reality, either because they were too expensive, or too busy, or would just never get back to me.

"I guess I have a few ideas," I answered.

"I want you guys to compile a list of possibilities. I don't care how outrageous you think your chances are. Just make a list of people you'd like to work with and we'll go over it the next time we work together."

Mingo and I mused about our favourite current albums and talked about producer ideas as we walked the five kilometres or so of Toronto city sidewalks back to our hotel. By the time we reached our suite we had a list of about ten producers we thought could be perfect.

Ron looked over our list at our next songwriting session. "These are some pretty great ideas," he said. "Let's start reaching out to some of them."

Over the next few weeks responses from possible producers began trickling in. One of my most hopeful options was a song-writing/production team in Amsterdam. The two of them had recently developed an artist who sang quirky, vintage yet current sounding songs with a cheeky, playful vibe. Their work seemed to reflect the type of album I was hoping to make. And as luck would have it, one member of the duo was in Toronto on business.

Paul, our potential collaborator met with Ron, Mingo, and me, in Ron's studio a few days later and we all seemed to connect on a lot of creative levels. Arrangements were made for Mingo and me to go to Amsterdam to continue writing new songs, produce those as well as the songs we had written with Ron, and—we hoped—come back in a few weeks, maybe a month, with a fully produced, finished, shiny, new album. And all in the beautifully beguiling city of Amsterdam. I couldn't believe how quickly and perfectly everything was finally coming together. What an amazing experience this was going to be.

But the night before we were scheduled to leave, I realized that a subtle, small, cold feeling of doubt had nestled itself in my heart.

"I'm not sure we should be going to Amsterdam," I found myself telling Mingo as I stood in front of my open, half-packed suitcase.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just have this weird feeling. Maybe I'm just—nervous or something." But I knew it wasn't nervousness. I am all too familiar with the feeling of being nervous. The butterflies I get before I go on stage, the pins and needles that prick my soul till I feel my voice filling an auditorium. Then everything disappears (including me). No, this was different. It was not excitement. It was foreboding.

"Well, if you feel really strongly about it, maybe we should talk to Ron," Mingo said.

It was kind of late—10pm—but this feeling was not going anywhere. And we were supposed to be crossing the Atlantic in about six hours.

"Hello?" Ron answered after a few rings.

"Hey," I said. "Sorry I'm calling so late."

"That's okay," he said. "Is everything cool?"

"Not really," I said. "Ron, I just have this weird feeling. Like we shouldn't be going to Amsterdam tomorrow. I don't know why."

"Well, are you just nervous?"

"I wondered that too," I said. "But I think it's more than that. I don't really know these guys very well. And isn't this a really expensive trip?" I dug through my heart, searching for an explanation for this sudden apprehension. Shouldn't I be totally excited? I finally had a solid chance to finish this record that had been hanging over my head for so long. With a talented writer and producer team. In Amsterdam.

Ron laughed. "You have to be one of the only artists I've ever met who is worried about the money your label is going to spend on sending you to Amsterdam. It's absolutely important to be budget-conscious," he said, "but I don't think you should pass up an opportunity to work with one of your top picks for producers because you're worried about money."

"What if they don't like my songs? What if I have an off day? What if..." I stammered through more half-formed worries.

"Here's what I think," he said when I had finished. "You guys should just go. Just try it out. Give these guys a shot. Best case scenario, you totally click and you have a finished record in like, a month, tops. Worst case scenario, you try it out, it doesn't work so you take a couple of days and hang out in Amsterdam. Then you come home."

"Okay," I said. "But if it doesn't work, we'll come right home. We can't afford to just hang out in Amsterdam. We have a record to make!"

Ron laughed.

I packed my doubts in my suitcase and brought them with me on the plane. "Whatever happens," Mingo said to me as we landed amidst a patchwork of emerald fields, "we're going to get there. We're going to make an amazing album." I closed my eyes and imagined holding the finished product in my hands.

I opened my eyes. The sun kissed the horizon as it rose, and we stepped out of the airport into cool, sweet, morning freshness. Unbelievably blue skies

framed a train station overflowing with commuters. Lush greenery was bursting into the Amsterdam spring air. And suddenly the reason for my apprehension dawned on me.

It all seemed way too good to be true.

## Step 5 - Confront

Tucked behind a large warehouse unit in Amsterdam sits a strange little building. There is nothing striking about it. It looks nothing like the cramped fairytale buildings in Old Amsterdam that crowd along the wandering canal like never-ending, slightly crooked, happy teeth. But it was the studio at which we were going to work with the producers I'd set my heart on.

Mingo knocked on the door. I did an inventory of my feelings. My heart bubbled up and did a flip. Yep. The trepidation was still there.

The door was pulled open and a tall, handsome Dutch man appeared. He had a soft voice and floppy, dirty-blonde hair.

"Please, come in," he said with a slight accent that made me like him instantly. "I'm James."

We shook hands, introduced ourselves, and followed him past a common area. Other producers, he explained, also worked in this space. Each had their own room where they built tracks that were shared on an internal music library.

We followed him past a few doors, along a little hallway, and into his studio. White walls framed clean hardwood floors. At the far end of the room sat a sleek computer flanked by two huge speakers. One oversized, white chair that looked a little like an ice-cream bowl large enough to seat two people was the only other piece of furniture in the room. It was the opposite of Ron's space in every way.

"So, you are having some ideas for your new music?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I really like the work you guys do. I'd love to try getting something down today."

"For sure," he said and booted up his computer.

The door to his studio opened and his writing/producing partner we had met back in Toronto entered. Paul had curly greying hair, and smiled at me through sweet, sad brown eyes.

"Hey guys," he said warmly. "We're really excited that you are here."

"Yeah, we are too," said Mingo, shaking his hand. Paul hugged me hello. Maybe this would turn out alright after all. We had come all this way. I was spending a good portion of my album budget to be here. I had to give it my best shot.

We got to work. James pieced together a drum loop on his computer while Mingo strummed some chords and Paul and I worked on lyrics. But as an hour passed, and then a couple more, I began to have a sinking feeling that was reminiscent of my earlier co-writing days. The songs were being blocked. I couldn't access them. Something was not right.

I tried to clear my head and push through, but a fog of frustration settled around my unwritten songs. Paul had lots of lyrical ideas and was sending them to me via messenger. He sat cross-legged on the floor, spouting endless streams of words. I couldn't keep up with the speed at which he was writing verses and choruses. And as I sifted through his words on my computer screen, I began to realize something very important about myself.

I didn't want anybody else to write my lyrics. I wanted to write them myself. I cannot write, record, perform, and believe in a song for the rest of my life if it isn't completely honest and exactly, word for word, precisely what I mean. Paul's words were not mine and the speed at which they were coming at me was stifling my own lyrics. His voice was choking out mine. Maybe if he would slow down a little and let me contribute some ideas, my songs would come to me. I decided to give it till the end of the day.

After a few more hours of sinking further and further into writer's block muck, I asked if we could listen to a couple of the tracks they had in the studio's collective track library, hoping it would spark some ideas and we could finally get somewhere. A few weeks earlier when the trip had first been agreed upon, I had asked that they start piecing together some musical concepts for my songs, or at least a few beats.

"We actually haven't really had any spare time to work anything up specifically," James explained as he accessed the library on his computer screen. "We have been really busy with our other project, but the other engineers and producers that work here as well have been making some finished tracks we could check out."

He opened the first one. It struck me instantly. The beat had an awesome vibe with sampled strings cutting in and out. It was essentially a finished song that included drums, bass, instrumentation, and everything else you'd expect to hear in a song, except for lyrics.

"This one is cool," I said, excited about the beat and the sampled strings.

"We already wrote lyrics over this one for our other project," Paul said.

"Oh." I tried to mask the disappointment in my voice. Maybe there were other ones that were just as cool-sounding.

James skipped through a few more lyric-less songs. Again, I heard an intriguing beat that had an echoing piano rising above. "What's this one?" I asked. "I like this one a lot."

"We already wrote on this one too," Paul said, smiling awkwardly.

I was confused. Why would they play tracks they had already written into a song for someone else in front of me? They must be looking in the wrong library.

But after the ninth track that piqued my interest but was already written, Paul said nervously, "James, stop playing her the ones we've already written on."

"I forget which ones we've written," James chuckled, scrolling through the other producer's track ideas. "We've basically written on all the good ones."

And that's when I realized what was going on. They were offering me their discarded tracks, the ones that hadn't made it on their other project, the very project that had inspired me to contact them in the first place. I had flown all the way across the Atlantic Ocean on my label's dime, had left a perfectly productive songwriting situation with Ron and Mingo, to be offered their B Sides.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, wishing away the dark cloud that had descended on my heart.

"Maybe we should just keep working on new ideas," Paul said, casting an awkward glance my way.

I stood up suddenly. Mingo looked at me and I looked back at him. I knew he could see the frustration in my eyes.

"I think we're just going to go for a little break outside," he said, in a nonchalant way. "You know, get some air."

"Cool. Let's take a few," said Paul, reaching for his cell phone to check his messages.

"This isn't working," I exhaled as Mingo and I stepped outside into the brisk air. "I can't hear myself think above Paul's lyric ideas. I mean, they're great for someone else maybe. But they aren't at all what I would say."

"I know," Mingo said. "And they don't seem to have anything worked up for your songs specifically. They're just giving us the left-overs from their last project."

"What should we do?"

"I don't want you to hate songwriting again," Mingo said. We stood for a moment in silence. "Let's go back in and tell them we're done for the day," he suggested. "We've been at it for six hours. We'll go get something to eat and figure it out tonight."

He squeezed my hand as we went back into James' studio. I squeezed back, thankful beyond words that he was with me.

"Hey guys," I said to James and Paul as we walked back into the room. "I think we're going to call it a day."

"Okay," said James.

"Cool," said Paul. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Mingo and I walked back to our hotel crestfallen, our stomachs growling. Ron called as Mingo and I were sitting down to eat.

"So, how'd it go?" he asked.

"Well," I started and paused. There was no other way to describe the day we had just had. "It kinda sucked," I said.

"What? Why?" he asked.

I explained what had happened that day. How I couldn't hear myself think with Paul's lyrics bouncing around in my head. And how they had offered us the tracks that weren't good enough to make it on to their other project.

"That sucks," he said. "Well, do you want to try again tomorrow? Or do you just want to call it?"

I thought for a moment. "I just can't believe we came all the way out here for nothing."

"Why don't you email them tonight," he said. "Ask James if you can meet with him in the morning, from like ten o'clock till twelve. Just you and him. You have lots of musical ideas, why don't you guys build a track together? It might even be fun. Maybe get some lyric ideas down. Then ask Paul to come in at one o'clock. He can hear what you've worked on and add to it. That way you can get a basic start and direction for the song. He can hear where you're going and help you finish it."

It sounded like a good idea. "I'll give it a try," I said.

"Call me tomorrow night and let me know how it goes," Ron said.

I hung up and emailed Paul and James, suggesting the plan Ron had come up with. Within the hour I heard back from both. They were fine with it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Mingo asked, as he dropped me off the next morning at ten o'clock sharp.

"I think I just need to be in there by myself with James," I said.

"Okay," he smiled. "I'm gonna go walk around and try to find a guitar shop." It's his favourite thing to do every time we go to a new city.

James was waiting for me in his studio.

"Hello," he said. "I'm just working on a drum loop here. What do you think?"

It was cool. Funky, a little cheeky, and full of spunk. I could absolutely imagine a song overtop of it. We worked on the track for the next few hours. James programmed a bass sound, some strings and keyboard parts, while I constructed a lyrical idea. It wasn't the most astonishing song I had ever written. But it wasn't the worst. And before I knew it, I had some basic lyrics worked out.

"Want to lay down a rough vocal?" James asked after I had sung my idea to him.

I stepped up to the mic and sang it through once.

"Sounds good," James said. He was putting the mic away when I heard a little knock at the door. Mingo had come back and was excited to hear what we had come up with. James hit play and a smile grew on Mingo's face within the first few notes. I knew he was proud of me, and he thought the song had potential.

Suddenly, about half way through the play back Paul burst through the door.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Oh, hey Paul," I said smiling, excited to share the start of our new song with him. "We're just got this rough track started—"

"Can I see you outside James? Right now," he interrupted me. His face was flushed.

I glanced at Mingo. He shrugged.

James followed Paul out into the common area where some of the other producers had gathered for lunch. I could hear the dull murmur of their voices and clanking of dishes as they heated their food in the microwave. Maybe something had come up with their other project that needed immediate attention. I hoped it wasn't anything too serious.

But then the air changed. The voices of the other producers faded away to silence while one angrily rose above the rest.

"What the hell does she think she's doing?" Paul was yelling. "Coming all the way here, trying to break up our writing team? I've been with you for years James, she can't just come in and take that away from me!"

A mumbled response.

"I come in here and you've got a fully finished track up and running without me!" he yelled. "She thinks she's somebody? She's nobody! If she assumes she can just fly in here and steal my writing team away from me, she's got another thing coming!" Something banged on the table. A fist?

Wait. Was he yelling...about...me??

Adrenaline surged through my veins. I could feel my hands begin to shake. I looked at Mingo, astonished. His eyes were as wide as mine. And Paul was still yelling unkind, unfair, untrue things about me as we sat silently in the next room, hearing every angry word.

I wanted to storm into that common room and throw every horrible thing he was hollering about me back in his face. Wasn't I the victim here? Wasn't I the one who couldn't hear myself think with his incessant, unrelatable lyrics flying at me in a constant stream? Hadn't I been tricked into flying all the way to Amsterdam, spending a huge chunk of my album budget, only to be offered their throw-away tracks? Wasn't I the vulnerable

one? On his turf, a total stranger to the other producers he was currently bad mouthing me in front of? Wasn't I the one with the most to lose?

Mingo laid his hand on my arm as I stood and made a move toward the storm in the kitchen.

"This isn't about you," he said quietly, beneath Paul's continuing yelling. "It can't be. It's totally illogical. Something else must be wrong."

"I don't care," I hissed. "Can you believe what he's saying?"

"No," Mingo replied softly. "I can't. That's what I mean. It's so ridiculous, he must be upset about something else."

The same way Ron isn't really an A&R guy, Mingo isn't really a human. He's actually an angel. And right at that moment, his words brought back something my mom had quoted to me on more than one occasion when I needed reminding: Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

I felt my face soften. My heart rate slowed a little. Maybe Mingo was right. It didn't excuse Paul's actions, but it did calm me enough to collect myself.

I took a deep breath and walked slowly into the raging common room, ready to face the music.

## Step 6 - Leave

"What's going on, Paul?" I asked, trying to muster every ounce of bravery I had as I stepped into the strained common area. . But my voice gave me away immediately. Small. Timid. Afraid.

He spun around to face me. His face was red with anger. A smog of tension hung over the room of producers, strangers to me, all of them except James. They stood silent and motionless. Paul's eyes flashed at me as the other producers looked from me to him, and back to me again. James's eyes were the only ones studying the floor.

"I'm just trying to figure out what's really going on here." Paul spoke these words a little softer than the ones he had just spat out, moments before I entered the kitchen.

I took a step towards him slowly. "Well, why don't you tell me about it," I said. "Is there somewhere we could go to talk?" I was desperate to get away from his audience. Thankfully, they took the hint and began to fade away into their own spaces behind closed doors. James slinked back into his studio.

"I just don't understand what you're doing here if you don't want to write with me," Paul said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I replied, trying to keep my voice calm. "I sent you and James that email last night suggesting that I start a song with him in the morning, and then you come in and write with us in the afternoon." I went on softly, tiptoeing on eggshells. I didn't want to set him off again, so I kept my voice low. "You both replied that you were okay with it," I said, gently.

"I know." He ran an exasperated hand through his hair. "I just didn't expect to come in and hear a fully finished song."

"It's not finished," I said, as soothingly as I could. "We were just laying down a rough vocal."

"Well it sounded pretty finished to me!" His voice was climbing again.

How could I prove to him that he was dead wrong about me? In every way. I was not the conniving little villain he had just made me out be in front of their entire studio staff. I had no intention of splitting up a writing team. I

wanted Paul's advice on my lyrics, but only after I had a handle on them and figured out what I needed to say. I wanted to hear his ideas for melodies, he had written such beautiful ones for his other artist. I wanted to learn from him. I had hoped that when he came in that afternoon, he would be excited about the song James and I had begun, and that he would be inspired to improve upon it. I had hoped we would be friends.

But in the split second I considered trying to convince him of the purity in my intentions, I knew something was different. My heart was closed, and he was on the outside. Sometimes it just does that, an automatic shut-down in response to the venom of negativity. I no longer felt creatively safe with Paul. I didn't feel comfortable in his presence. Even if I wanted to, I would never be able to pry open my heart enough to write songs with him again. But I didn't have to. I had Mingo. I had Ron. I knew how good co-writing was supposed to feel now, and this wasn't it.

I was no longer angry at him, and no longer afraid. Now I just had to untangle this mess enough to leave professionally, with my dignity intact, and give him back his.

We talked for an hour. He told me he had been victimized by the music industry. He had written with successful artists in the past and had been cut out at the last minute, having contributed major ideas in his mind, but not getting any of the credit in the end. Every day he felt that sting. He had been so close to the stars he could taste the dust floating off them, but before he had been able to actually touch them, he had been pulled back down to the hard, cold ground. He wanted fame, he told me, his voice breaking with desperation. He wanted chart-toppers. He wanted admiration and everything that came with it, and he was willing to do anything to get it. He feared I was another young hot-shot there to use him and then throw him away. Yes, he had been hurt badly, but he had carefully nursed his battle scars and had gotten them tattooed onto his soul long after they could have faded. He had kept them alive and they impaired his vision so much so that he couldn't see my intentions, my music, my heart, me.

Eventually during that hour, he realized that he had been wrong about me. I saw the regret in his eyes, and heard it lurking in his voice, but his pride had been hurt. He didn't say sorry for his explosion. He didn't apologize for trashing me in front of their entire studio staff. He showed no remorse for misjudging me or for unleashing his unkindness on me. Instead, he said he hoped we could put this all behind us and continue working that afternoon.

I sat in silence, not sure how to tell him that would never happen. And just when I need it most, I felt Mingo's gentle touch on my back.

"Everything okay?" he said, to both of us.

"Everything will be," I said.

"Let's go for a little walk," Mingo suggested. We left Paul putting some coffee on in the kitchen and stepped outside. Delicious, crisp, bright sunshine was such a contrast to the bleak common room. I blinked but welcomed its beams into my face, grateful to be away from Paul's darkness.

"So?" Mingo asked.

I told him about Paul's sad story and how I felt deeply for him, but knew I wouldn't continue writing songs with him. Mingo nodded as I spoke.

"I knew it was over," he said. "There's no way you could ever write with him now." We walked in silence.

"So, do you want to fly back home?" I asked, not really sure where we were supposed to go from here.

"I don't know," Mingo said. "That song you and James started today sounded pretty cool. Do you think you'd want him to produce some of the songs we wrote with Ron?"

It was the only remaining hope in a sea of broken possibilities our trip to Amsterdam had turned out to be. "We have absolutely nothing to lose," I said. "But I really don't feel comfortable with all the other producers now."

"Can you live with that for the sake of maybe making some cool songs and getting at least something done for our album?" Mingo asked.

"I'll try," I said, desperate to pull myself even one inch closer to my finished album.

When we returned to the studio, Paul had stepped out for some food and we found James sitting alone in his room.

"So," he asked, a little too cheerfully, "ready to get back to it?"

"Not really," Mingo said.

"No?" he asked.

The awkward pause of someone pretending a huge yelling episode hadn't just occurred prevailed till I finally said, "I'm pretty sure it's not going to work out with Paul."

"Oh. Well I'm really sad to hear that," James said.

"Um...Were you here today" I asked, "when he freaked out about the song we started together?"

James nodded and raised his eyebrows. "He shouldn't have done that," he spoke carefully. "You know, he's got a lot of personal stuff going on at the moment. But he's so happy to be working with you. He knows he screwed up. He'll be devastated if you don't continue writing with him."

"I'm sorry, I really am," I said, hoping he would hear the sincerity in my voice. "I wish him all the best, and really hope that he can pull through the stuff he's going through. But writing with him just won't work anymore." And it was true. My heart, which has a mind of its own, would have nothing to do with it. And if my heart wasn't present at a songwriting session, neither was I.

James looked down, obviously disappointed. "I like the song we wrote today."

"I do too," I said. "How would you feel about producing some of the songs we wrote with Ron?"

"Oh, I would like that very much," he said. "If Paul can help us."

I began to have a not-so-sneaking suspicion that Paul had left so that James would have a chance to convince me to forget what had just happened.

"I'm really not comfortable with Paul anymore," I said, hoping my voice sounded final. "But perhaps you and me and Mingo could keep working together, just the three of us."

James thought in silence for a moment.

"How do you feel about the song we wrote today?" I asked suddenly, surprising myself with the question. He had already said he liked the song. But my heart whispered there was more I needed to know about James.

"Feel about it?" he asked. "Oh, I don't feel things."

I blinked. Then after a moment, I said, "What do you mean you don't feel things?"

"Every time I use my feelings, in my music, in my life, they're wrong. I ignore them always."

James didn't feel things? He ignored his feelings? Especially when making music?

I was astonished. Feeling is the only thing that inspires me to create. Ever. Art, music, love. It's all about feeling. Nothing else matters. His approach to creating music was so cold. Empty, manufactured, and sterile. Shivers of repulsion went up my spine.

How had I not heard it in his music? The music that had inspired me to reach out to him and Paul in the first place. But then it wasn't his voice I was listening to. It was another artist's voice, and perhaps that was the heart of the project. And I had known. My mind hadn't known back then about Paul's frightening nature, or the emptiness of James's music. But my heart, which always knows, had warned me. Had I known who they really were, I would never have spent my label's money and our time.

The corner of Mingo's mouth was slightly turned up, as though he was trying not to smile. I understood. He couldn't believe the ludicrous confession James had just dropped on us.

Mingo stood. "There's really nothing else to say then."

"Really?" James said, taken aback. "I really hope you guys will change your minds. I think we can make some really great music,"

"I don't think we can," I said. I stood, too.

Paul opened the door and surveyed the scene he had returned to. "Are you guys ready to get back to work?" he asked, hopefully.

"No," I said. "I wish both of you guys all the best. But this just isn't a good match." I meant it.

"I hope you'll reconsider," Paul said. But then his voice turned and he said in a frustrated tone, "I booked time off for this. I've now lost out on weeks of other opportunities because of you."

Mingo took my hand and we moved past James and Paul toward the door. "Good luck with your new project," I said. "You already know I'm a big fan of the new tracks." The ones that you played for me, but then didn't let me write on because you had already used them, I felt like adding, but didn't.

We left the studio behind us, and ventured back out into the bright beauty of a spring day.

"Is it supposed to be this difficult?" I asked Mingo as we lay on our backs in the hotel bed, blankly looking up at the ceiling.

"What do you mean?" Mingo asked, rolling on his side to face me.

"Well, don't most artists just write a bunch of awesome songs, hire a producer, have them recorded, and put out a great new record within like, a few months? Half a year tops?" I stared at a crack in the ceiling. I thought about the musicians in my circle of acquaintances who were already moving on to their second and third albums. None of them had seemed to struggle like I did. And if they did, they kept any evidence of their artistic battles from me. "Maybe I'm not supposed to be doing this," I said, my throat tightening. "Maybe this is the universe telling me that I wasn't cut out to make music. I'm not tough enough." I thought about how difficult songwriting had become for me, the debilitating fear I sometimes felt when performing, and the rejection I felt when I didn't sell enough tickets or albums. "Maybe I should just quit and go back to a real job. Who do I think I am, assuming I could be an artist?" I felt myself sinking lower into my broken faith. "I wasn't destined to be anything great." I blinked at the ceiling and tears spilled out of the corners of my eyes. I felt them slide down my temples as gravity pulled them into my ears. Mingo touched a tear that had just escaped from my eyelash.

"Do you really want to quit?" he asked.

I thought hard. I was sick of everything. Sick of always being vulnerable, of living outside my comfort zone. Sick of feeling raw. Sick of not measuring up to my own expectations, of not being strong enough to just make a damn record. Sick of feeling like being a musician, which was supposed to be my dream, was the hardest thing in the world. I was sick of myself.

"I don't know," was all I could think to say.

But I would get my answers. They were waiting patiently for me in the insane swirls of a dead man's paintings, and the house of a gifted ghost girl.

## Step 7 - See

I stood too close to one of the ugliest paintings I had ever seen.

Dull greys, deep browns, and muted greens joined together by interlocking brush strokes revealed five figures who sat huddled around a small wooden table, drinking some kind of beverage and eating some sort of food from the same collective plate on the little table. Their clothes appeared crude in construction, rough, bulky, and handmade. The only light source in the scene was an oil lamp hanging from a heavy wooden beam in the ceiling, the light from which was just powerful enough to hint at little windows behind the table and give a general sense of being in a very small, unpolished home. Shadows encroached on the characters, who looked haggard, worn down, and yet somehow satisfied. One woman poured tea into four little cups to share; the figure next to her held a cup out towards her. I wondered if the cup was empty or full—was she giving thanks or asking for more? A young girl looked to the man on her left. Was she offering him a portion of whatever was on the plate? And startlingly, the remaining figure sat in the centre of the scene with her back to me.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. I could smell the dirt under their fingernails. I could feel the stuffy, cramped air, and the heat emanating from their overworked bodies. They were people of the earth. They were self-made, from their home to the clothes they wore on their backs. Peasants. And while the painting was in no way realistic, it told me more about these people and their lives than any high quality photograph ever could have.

"Can you please take a few steps back, madam?" a deep voice asked me gently. An older gentleman stepped toward me. His dark blue suit jacket was adorned with a name tag that bore a Dutch name I couldn't read.

"Oh!" I said. I had lost myself in the painting and forgotten I was actually standing in the Van Gogh museum. "I'm sorry." I felt my face flush as I took a step back.

"I know the magnetism of this painting," he said, winking at me. "When first I saw it, I couldn't stop looking also."

I smiled and looked back at the painting, noticing the figures' hands. So gnarled and aged, even the young-looking girl's.

"Do you know," he said, "that Van Gogh considered this painting, *The Potato Eaters*, to be his best work?"

"This is a Van Gogh?" I said, unbelieving, the words bubbling out in a rush of surprise.

He gestured to the signature. Vincent. It was indeed a Van Gogh. "There, you see?"

"I see," I said, ashamed at my ignorance of Van Gogh's work.

"No need to be embarrassed," he said . "You have come here to learn about Van Gogh, no?"

"Yes," I said, smiling.

He handed me a pamphlet. "The paintings are organized from earliest works," he pointed to the first floor on the map of the museum, "all the way up to his latest," he gestured to the top floor. "And also, along with Van Gogh's paintings, you will see other's work that inspired him. His teachers and friends and so on."

"Cool," I said.

"Very cool," he said, his Dutch accent just thick enough to make me wish he would read me the story of The Little Mermaid, from beginning to end. His walkie-talkie beeped, the voice coming through it speaking Dutch, and he was gone.

I looked around for Mingo. He was on the other side of the room, his head cocked to one side as he inspected another dark, early Van Gogh painting, this one of a skull with a cigarette in its mouth. I smiled as I approached. It was a funny image. I wondered if Van Gogh had laughed as he painted it.

We were still in Amsterdam. Though I had wanted to fly right back to Toronto and get back to work with Ron, we had ended up with two extra days in Amsterdam. Flights were so expensive it was actually more economical for us to stay in our hotel for a couple of extra nights, and fly home later in the week.

"So, two days off in Amsterdam!" Ron tried to make it sound like a good thing when he delivered the news.

I didn't want two days off in Amsterdam. I wanted to fly right back to Toronto and get back to work with Ron. I felt the need to be productive. I stressed about the money Mingo and I weren't making, and wondered how we could support ourselves if we didn't get some income flowing again soon. There are a lot of awesome things about working with my husband, but Mingo's income depends on mine, and if I'm not working, neither is he.

"Just chill out, Meaghan," Ron said. "We'll get you home soon enough. You're in Amsterdam for crying out loud. Go do some awesome stuff!"

So Mingo and I had Googled "awesome stuff to do in Amsterdam." I'm not good at taking time off in general, and the one and only thing that had brought me to this particular city were the hopes of recording my album. Since that had fallen through, I wasn't sure what to do with myself.

"You like Van Gogh, right?" Mingo had asked.

"I love a lot of his paintings," I said. I had only ever seen reproductions. I owned a small book full of his most famous works and had bought a poster of Starry Night to hang in my bedroom when I was in high school. But beyond that, I didn't know much about his life.

The day was beautiful, like the rest had been so far on our trip. Amsterdam seemed to smile at us as we walked along the canal toward the museum, and although the sun shone brightly, the dark cloud of uncertainty and self-doubt hung heavily over my head.

Was I going to quit doing music? Was it too much for me? Was I really cut out to do it? Did I have what it took? I didn't know.

I really needed to get out of my own head though, that was for sure. And although Amsterdam is notorious for its legalized red light district and recreational drug temptations, those have never been my means of escape. What I really craved was the chance to be inside someone else's head, especially if his head was brilliant. A trip to the Van Gogh museum was exactly what I needed.

"This one's cool," said Mingo, looking at the skeleton with the cigarette between its teeth. "Guess he smoked one too many."

The main floor featured Van Gogh's early works, many of them dark and dreary, especially when I thought of the paintings I knew were still to come. Still, each painting hinted at the artist he would become.

Then suddenly, we reached a painting of a field along the succession of his works that seemed to explode with colour. It was like a light had turned on in the room, and in his artistic eye. There were vivid blues in a sky buzzing with sunlight. The warm yellows of the field swayed in the breeze. I could feel the heat, and smell the warm, sweet aroma of grain the sunshine pulled from the stalks. And it hit me.

Van Gogh was painting everything. The sky, the clouds, the field, yes. But the air too. He was showing me the smells, and the temperature of that

moment. He revealed the space around the objects, the emotions, and the energy he could feel. He could see with his heart what I could only see with my eyes. And then he showed it to me, and in that moment, Vincent Van Gogh and I were connected.

"I love this," I said to Mingo as this new revelation flowed into me.

"Me too," he said.

As we moved past his first "break through" painting, I began to feel his art in a new light. Each painting was more than just a beautiful collection of vibrant brush strokes and feverishly depicted scenes. It was a communion between him and me and it broke every barrier. Even though he had died years before, even though he had never set foot on the continent where I was born, he was showing me the way he saw the world. And I was responding to it on every level. My heart beat faster as we stood in front of heartbreakingly beautiful images of flowers, trees, skies, hills, rooms, people. I could see their energy the way he saw it and in turn, began to understand things the way he did. He was opening himself to me. To all of us. Every one of the millions of people who have ever looked at his art. He was open to all of us, and we were open to him.

As we reached the top floor, I was overcome, my mind buzzing with brushstrokes of every imaginable colour.

"Did you know that Van Gogh sold one painting in his lifetime?" Mingo asked, looking at the pamphlet I had received at the start of our tour.

I laughed. "No, that's a misprint."

"I don't think it is," Mingo said. "It says it here that he only sold one painting."

"What?" I took the pamphlet from his outstretched hand.

I read: "During his lifetime Van Gogh was never famous as a painter and struggled to make a living as an artist. Van Gogh only sold one painting during his lifetime, The Red Vineyard. This painting sold in Brussels for 400 Francs only a few months before his death."

It was unfathomable. Vincent van Gogh had only sold one painting in his lifetime. Vincent Van Gogh, one of the most famous, celebrated, inspiring, and acclaimed painters of all time, had died believing that out of the hundreds of paintings he produced, only one was valued enough to be purchased by another person.

The self-doubt he must have had, the loneliness, the isolation with his own demons. And yet he fought through them all to show us how he had seen the world. Although the cause of his mental illness was never determined, I could imagine why he would have been driven mad.

Then Mingo asked me one of the most important questions I had been asked on my artistic journey. "Do you think he was a failure?"

Van Gogh a failure? "No, of course not!"

"Even though he only sold one painting?" he asked.

"Even though he only sold one painting," I said, absolutely sure of it.

"So, if you make the best record you can, and you only sell one copy, will you be a failure?"

The question stopped me dead in my tracks. I am not Van Gogh, I told myself. He is a genius. But then I thought about why I had fallen so in love with his paintings on that visit to the Van Gogh museum. He saw things the way no one else did, and then he shared his perspective with me. I loved seeing things the way he saw them. It in turn affected the way I saw things. Art as communion between beings had jump-started my heart.

But he hadn't known that long after his death, millions would flock to a huge, beautiful, modern building filled with his paintings, for a chance to see things the way he saw them. He had painted in his lonely state, just for the sake of painting, unable to stop himself, willing to share his vision with anyone who cared. He had succeeded. And it had nothing to do with the number of paintings he sold.

"No," I said quietly. "I won't be a failure. If I make the absolute best music that I can, if I give it everything I have and then a little bit more, if I put it all out there, whether I sell a single copy is of no consequence."

Mingo took my hand and we left the museum, my eyes open to a new world, where energy was twisting turquoise, and laughing yellow, and burning blue, and always moving.

I knew my success was not dependent on how many albums I sold or didn't sell. It was dependent on whether I made music at all, and how much of my own self I put into it.

And right when I thought I had it all figured out, Anne Frank had a thing or two to say to me that would change not only my creative pursuits, but my entire life, forever.

## Step 8 - Believe

Mingo and I arrived at the Anne Frank museum just in time to catch the last tour of the day. The sky had begun to relax into the first moments of violet dusk as we stepped into a sleek-looking building. A group of about twenty people were waiting for the tour to start. I listened as two barely twenty-somethings spoke to each other in German behind me. The older woman next to me discussed something with an older gentleman in Dutch, and a group of Japanese girls whispered in their native tongue close by. A Muslim family waited just in front of us, the young mother's beautiful hijab a bright red, framing her pretty face. I weaved my hearing in and out of these languages, marveling at the sounds that were unique to each of them.

The line began to move forward and we stepped into a hallway that led us to the home of the Frank family. An immediate hush fell on our little party as we stepped into the warehouse of Otto Frank, Anne's father.

We learned about the business he had run, storing and selling Opekta, a pectin for making jam. He had eventually expanded his business to include meat seasoning. But with the spread of Nazi poison and Hitler's invasion, his business was taken from him. He and his family were forced into hiding.

We continued along the tour, viewing the office spaces for Otto's employees. These devoted Germans would eventually help hide the Frank family along with four other Jews. The rooms were cheerful and bright, furnished simply with wooden desks and chairs arranged comfortably. I imagined Otto to be hard working, careful with his time and money, and deeply devoted to his family. That love had prompted him to create the Hiding Place.

I read The Diary of Anne Frank in grade six, and was deeply touched by her words then. But I could have never imagined actually being in the space she had survived in as she had poured herself onto those very pages. The rooms the eight Jews had lived in were modest and small. As I looked around the kitchen, a few cabinets lining one wall, a little wooden table in the centre of the room, I could see them with my heart. Glowing shadowy figures crowding around the table, one crouching quietly by the tiny stove because there weren't enough chairs. I imagined them in the tiny bathroom with the porcelain sink, brushing their teeth and washing up, hurrying to let the next person have their turn. I could feel them in each bedroom, desperate for a space of their own, terrified of being heard or seen, praying for the end of the war and the end of pointless hatred.

I could see Anne's bright silhouette as she hung inspiring photos in her room. A beautiful woman, a model from a magazine. Some family pictures. Illustrations of children in a garden. A popular singer flanked by two dapper gentleman. And a picture of a tree.

We climbed the attic stairs and looked through the only view outside. It was too dangerous for those in hiding to actually venture out of the Annex, and they didn't dare open a window for fear of being seen. But every now and then, Anne would go up to the attic and sit at the window where she could look out into her neighbourhood. She especially loved the chestnut tree that bloomed in the spring, waved at her in the summer, burned for her in the fall and fell asleep in the winter, only to awake to her again in the spring. I could see Anne's small, thin figure, crouched by the blacked out window, peeking through the flaking black paint that was the only barrier protecting her from being discovered by the Nazis.

The famous hinged bookcase, the very thing that had failed, in the end, to keep the Jews hiding in the annex safe from the war, stood open to the world, a testament to the power of Anne Frank's diary, that now sat on its shelves.

The tour progressed from the Hidden Annex and continued to a room where sections of her handwritten diary were on display, and a video of Otto Frank played on screens displayed on the walls. He spoke about the surprising depth of his daughter's thoughts and feelings.

I watched him speak about his loss, his pain, his freedom, and his final understanding of his beautiful daughter, and let my tears come to the surface. There was no point in trying to stop them, they were coming and I wasn't going to stand in their way. I felt them fall freely from my eyes and drop, joining thousands of others, Muslim, Japanese, Dutch, German, Canadian, human tears, falling together onto the same floor.

Otto Frank discovered so much about Anne through her diary. Things he had never imagined. Her deep and intense feelings about God. Her love for and frustration with her mother and other members of their hidden group, her hopes and dreams for a future that would never arrive. And her love of nature. Otto described how much she loved to see seagulls flying in the blue sky, and most importantly, to observe her beloved chestnut tree. She longed to go outside and be a part of the world she could only watch from her hidden cage.

I stood there, totally and utterly ashamed of myself.

Anne Frank had wanted to go outside. Perspective crashed around me like my own broken cage. She longed simply to go outside. I could go outside. Any time I wanted, I could step outside and go for a walk. Or a bike ride. Or get in my car and drive somewhere. Or I could get on a plane, fly to a different continent, and work on making an album. I could make an album! I was a musician! Full time! And I had considered quitting? Why? Because...it was hard? Because living my dream was not coming to me easily? I hung my head in self-loathing, more tears rolling off the end of my nose.

I suddenly became self-conscious of my shame, and wondered if Anne Frank was there witnessing it. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, imaging my soul reaching out from a deep place within me, glowing, stretching like a blind hand in the dark, feeling around for her soul.

But of course she wasn't there, I realized after only a moment of searching. She was outside.

"Come outside," Anne Frank whispered comfortingly to my heart from somewhere through an open window in her museum. "Come outside, and love every second of it."

I smiled. I was lucky. So, so, so, so lucky. I had the best husband a girl could imagine. I had a family who loved me. I had true friends. I had a record label who believed in me. I had an A&R guy I loved working with. I had a bed to sleep in, food in my belly, clothes on my back, music in my heart, art all around me. And I could go outside.

Suddenly I believed. I knew I was not going to quit making music. And not only was I not going to quit making music, but I was going to make it to connect with others. I was going to find the joy in the journey. And while there were times that would I struggle with everything I had in me, I was going to be motivated by love and I was going to spread that love as far and as wide as I could. I would do it for myself and I would do it for Anne Frank. I would do it for Mingo, and Vincent Van Gogh, and you. And when things got rough and I wasn't sure I could keep going, I was going to go outside and think about Anne Frank, her spirit flying as free as the seagulls she had caught precious glimpses of through the flaking paint on her blacked-out window in the attic.

Ron's office door was open when Mingo and I arrived, fresh off the plane from Amsterdam.

"Welcome back!" he said, as we stumbled into his cluttered, disorganized, slapdash, wonderful little studio. "So, that was kind of a bust, huh?" His

goofy smile was contagious and I felt one spreading across my deliriously tired face.

"Kind of," I said, The jetlag seemed to permeate my skin and seep into my bones. This was a kind of tired I could only remember from being on tour.

"Go check into your hotel," Ron said, as Mingo and I faded in front of him.

"I can't," I said as my eyelids drooped. "We still have to write our record."

"You're nuts," Ron said, shaking his head. "Go to bed. We have a lot of work to do. But not till tomorrow."

My head bobbed in the cab as I fell asleep and woke up again with every bump on the street. Unable to resist anymore, I let my head rest on Mingo's shoulder.

"Don't worry," I heard him say before sleep overcame me. "We're gonna get there."

I knew he was right, and my heart knew it too. We would get there. I just didn't know how.

## Step 9 - Clean

I sat in my chair in Ron's office next to the huge window that opened onto the bustling streets of Toronto's downtown. Two weeks ago, sitting in this exact spot, I had drawn a smiley face in the dust on the windowsill. It remained, undisturbed, smiling up at me.

Fat, sluggish snowflakes took their time reaching the ground as they descended from a grey sky. They were so lazy in fact, that they couldn't be bothered to stick around, and melted immediately upon hitting the pavement.

A thick ceiling of clouds blocked the early spring sun, shrouding the world in shadow. I appreciated being blind to the passage of time that would have been obvious if the sun had been powerful enough to poke through the clouds and push the shadows of anything in the way of its light around. It helped ease the feeling of pressure that followed me everywhere. Pressure that wrapped itself heavily around my shoulders and whispered reminders to me that I had just blown thousands of dollars and precious time in Amsterdam and hadn't gotten any worthy songs out of it. And while the experiences I had had at Van Gogh's museum and Anne Frank's house were still alive and glowing in my heart, the disappointment I felt gnawed at me. Regret licked me like a slow-burning fire. And with every week that I didn't feel like I was moving forward, a thousand years seemed to pass.

I looked at Mingo, sitting in his chair beside me, strumming chords on his guitar. He was just so happy to be here, creating music full time. If I didn't come up with the songs we would work on together, his dream of being a full-time musician would be dashed along with my own. If I didn't deliver, how were our bills going to get paid?

And what about my record label? This great group of hard-working, devoted people who believed in me and who were so patient with my process. If I didn't do my best and create amazing music they could promote, I would be letting them down.

I looked at Ron, his back to me sitting at his CP 70 Yamaha piano, softly playing along with Mingo. He had believed that we would come back from Amsterdam with an arsenal of great songs. And yet here we were, taking up space in his tiny studio, using up his time and energy. He had other artists who needed his attention too. In writing songs with us every day, he was essentially working two full-time jobs, still managing to take care of his A&R responsibilities while helping me drag songs out of myself. And on top

of that, he was a husband and father, and with every minute past normal working hours, I was stealing his time away from them.

And I thought of you. You, who haven't given up on me yet. You who come to my shows, or buy my music or art and support me, not only by buying what I make, but with your uplifting messages and words of encouragement too. How could I not give you the absolute best of myself?

And what would my life become if I didn't finish what I started? How could I face myself every day if I let myself down when it came to my promises and dreams?

The songs had to come to me, they just had to. There was too much at stake for them not to. I glanced back to my computer that sat open on my crossed legs. A word document was open staring blankly at me, only a few pitiful lyrical ideas typed, waiting, daring me to keep going. My shoulders sagged with the weight of wanting to be better than I felt I was.

But then I saw past it to my desktop, where I had uploaded a Van Gogh painting as my screen saver. I breathed in his bursts of colour and swirls of energy, and felt a surge of hope as I began to remember the lessons I had learned in Amsterdam.

I recognized how lucky I was to be in Ron's studio with Mingo beside me, coming up with song ideas and working towards not letting Mingo, Ron, the people at the record label, you or me down. I knew I would get there.

I looked up from my computer screen and glanced at the clouds that blocked the moving sun and felt myself breathe a little more freely. I felt lucky and hopeful. But I was still thankful for those clouds that helped me forget about the passage of time. At least for now.

"Do you like this chord progression for Get You Back? Maybe the chorus?" Ron was saying over his shoulder to me from his perch on the piano bench.

The week before, we had started three new songs. None of them were coming easily, but at least they were started.

"I don't know," I said, letting the chords fill my head. I closed my eyes and tried to focus only on the sound, and the emotions and feelings Ron's combination of notes caused in me.

"You don't know if you like it, or you don't know if it would work for the chorus?" Mingo asked.

There was no clarity. I opened my eyes. "I don't know," I sighed, smiling. "I'm sorry, I know I'm no help. But the songs just seem...stuck. They're in here," I pressed my hand to my chest. "But I can't seem to get them out."

Ron spun around on his seat to face us, a grin fixed across his face. "Let's take a break. Wanna go to the dollar store?" he asked.

Ron has a sweet tooth. Actually, that's an understatement. Every single tooth in Ron's head is sweet. He has sweet teeth. Skittles, chocolate bars, gobstoppers, Nerds, and strawberry flavoured bubble gum are a prerequisite for Ron's productivity. And nothing got done if there wasn't at least one bottle of Coke Zero around. I glanced over to the perpetual candy pile that usually sat on his desk and noticed that it was sorely depleted.

"Let's go," I said, thinking of fresh air in my lungs and the lesson I had learned about going outside from Anne Frank.

We grabbed our jackets and ventured out into the cool day. The dollar store was only across the street, but it still felt great to be out of doors. Ron stocked up on all his necessary evils, balancing brightly coloured packages of candy as we approached the check-out counter. Mingo picked out a bag of Nibs, some chips, and a drink, while I grabbed a miniature Toblerone bar, usually reserved for Christmas, but I needed all the help I could get.

We paid for our loot and took our time walking back to Ron's studio in the cold air.

"I'm gonna lay down that chord idea I had as soon as we get up there," Ron said as we waited for the light to change.

"Sounds good," Mingo said through a mouthful of nibs.

Ron and Mingo discussed gear, their favourite default subject, as we took the elevator back up to the studio.

Mingo followed Ron into the tiny room, carefully stepping among piles of books, papers, CDs, guitar cases and keyboards as he made his way to his chair. I hung back, giving them both a chance to get situated in the overcrowded space.

As I stood in the door waiting for them to settle in, I realized how absolutely and atrociously discombobulated Ron's studio had become since two more people, Mingo and I, had essentially moved in. It had been bad to begin with, but the addition of two extra bodies, guitars, amps, and a few weeks of living there for eight to twelve hours a day had made it unbearable.

I knew I had to do something about it.

"Where'd I put that quarter inch cable?" Ron asked no one in particular as he sat down in front of his PC 70 piano and looked around in search of it.

"Ron," I said, carefully.

"Yeah?" He didn't look up from his search. "I have a specific quarter inch cable that's usually plugged to this piano..." his voice trailed off as he rifled through a pile of tangled, black cords beside his desk, haphazardly strewn on the floor.

Mingo picked up his feet and looked under his chair.

"Ron," I said again, a little louder.

"Yeah?" He turned to search the other side of his desk. He shoved a pile of papers on the floor under the desk. "Seriously. I just had it yesterday. Where did I put it?" Having found another pile of cables, he pulled at the end of a random black cable in an attempt to free it from the cord mass, only making the knot tighter.

"Ron," I repeated.

"It's usually plugged into my computer so I can easily switch between keyboards," he explained, still pulling at the cable. When it became obvious that only a very advanced knitter could detangle the mess of cables, he dropped the now forever twisted clump and stood up. He craned his neck, trying to see the back of his computer. "Damn cords," he mumbled as he blew clouds of dust from behind the computer screen and coughed.

"Ron!" I said, unable to hold back the tide of organization I felt.

He turned to look at me. A fluff of disturbed dust floated down and landed squarely onto the tip of his nose. He blew it off. "Pfft! What?"

"This place is kind of a disaster!" I blurted. I held my breath for a moment, hoping his feelings wouldn't be hurt by the frankness of my words.

He blinked. "It is?"

I exhaled. "Yes! Actually no. It's not kind of a disaster. It's a total disaster." The songwriting wasn't coming, and instead of spending another day tugging at unwilling songs, I longed to feel productive. "Can I please help you clean it?"

"Oh, here she goes," Mingo sighed. Having lived with me for a few years, he was used to my enthusiasm for cleaning and organizing.

Ron looked around. "I guess it's a little...um...disorganized." He paused. "But I know where everything is."

"Oh, you do?" One of my eyebrows raised itself.

"I have a system. Everything is...on display. That way I just look around and know exactly where it is."

"You do?" I asked. "Cause it seems like you can't find any quarter inch cables."

"Well, sometimes the things that were once on display get covered in new things on display and it just takes a little digging," he said, back on his hands and knees under his desk now. He bumped his head and swore. "Okay. Maybe you're right."

"Does that mean we can clean your office?" I asked, hopefully. It was an itch I had been dying to scratch.

Ron thought for a moment. I waited with bated breath. Finally, he said "Okay. But—" holding up one finger—"I have to know exactly where everything is. And don't try to get me to throw out anything I don't want to!"

"I won't," I promised. I dashed across the hallway to the studio's kitchen to get a damp cloth. Finally I could clean the dust that had been dancing on the window sill and all over Ron's many keyboards.

"Oh, and don't expect me to keep it organized," he shouted.

I returned, duster in hand, my excitement growing at the thought of spending our days in a tidier, brighter, more organized space.

We got to work. I wiped every surface I could reach, relishing every moment. Ron's keyboards gleamed once again, their once dusty keys now shining glossy black and white stripes. The windowsill with the smiley face also got a thorough dusting. Mingo and Ron sorted through music books of all types, neatly arranging them on the bookshelf in the corner of the room. When those tasks were done, we moved on to the endless haphazard piles of papers on the floor. Within an hour the three of us had sorted through them and filed them neatly in binders that were added to the bookshelf. Hundreds of CDs, scattered around various surfaces of the studio, were

designated to their own shelf and were stacked in straight rows. We collected the many hard drives Ron held onto from various projects and placed them in storage bins that slid easily under the CP 70 keyboard. No fewer than three bags of recycling and one large garbage bag were collected and properly disposed of. All of Ron's pictures and awards that had spent months, perhaps even years waiting to be hung were thoughtfully placed on the walls. And by the end of it all, we had found at least ten quarter inch cables, which we wound neatly and placed in a clear plastic storage drawer.

"Shall we call it a day?" I asked, standing to stretch the stiffness from my back.

"A day already?" Ron glanced at the time on his phone. "I can't believe we just spent the whole day cleaning my studio."

"What do you think?" I asked him cautiously, gesturing to his office. I hoped he wouldn't think it was a waste of time.

"This place looks...." He glanced around the room at the books, papers and CDs stacked neatly on the bookshelf, the floor clear of clutter, pictures hung, surfaces cleaned, his keyboards polished and ready to be played. "It looks fantastic!"

I smiled, pleased that he appreciated the effort.

"Seriously," he went on. "I love it." He gazed around his office, a delighted smile on his face. "It looks so spacious now. And I even know where my quarter inch cables are!" He reached into the designated cord drawer, pulled one out triumphantly and plugged it into his CP 70.

We laughed.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "Eventually it would have gotten to the point where I would have had no choice but to go through stuff and organize it myself, but you guys actually made it fun."

I dusted my hands off on my jeans as we gathered our belongings to head home for the day. While it was true that we weren't any further along in our song-writing, I felt lighter. Ron was happy with his studio space, and that made me glad. Not to mention that I would also be a lot happier working in his studio now that it was orderly and spruced up a bit.

I couldn't be sure, but as Mingo and I walked back to our hotel room, I felt a ripple run across my heart, as if the act of cleaning had disturbed the

surface and awoken a song that had been sleeping. I only hoped it wouldn't be too late breaking the surface.

## Step 10 - Receive

Mingo was asleep beside me, his breathing steady and soft. I lay on my back wide awake, my eyes open and staring into the dark. My heart thumped as though I were about to step onto stage in front of fifty-thousand people. I had felt this only a few times before in my life. A song was on its way to me. And it was going to come soon.

Songs come into existence in different ways. Some float down in little bits at a time until a thick layer of music forms. Those take patience to create, and faith that eventually every last snowflake that belongs to that song will fall. Not giving up on Snowflake Songs is the hardest part. You Don't Wanna Love Me took years to wander its way down to me.

Other songs are shy and run away at the first sign of movement. They are the prey, and I am the hunter. Armed with a net, I creep around and around them in calculated circles until I see an opportunity. I swipe my net at them swiftly but gently, so as not to hurt them. And they're caught—either that or the Hunted Songs get away, laughing at my clumsiness as they escape. Friends Like You kept trying to run from me. But my hunting paid off after a few weeks of chasing.

Some are just annoying to write. I know they're in there, and they could be amazing. But they're stubborn and won't co-operate. If I keep chipping away at them, sometimes they come out alright. I don't always have the energy to dig out the Annoying Songs though. Sucks To Be You did its best to stay in me. I won in the end.

I am afraid of the songs that have teeth and claws, and fight me, armed with my own regrets. They are the stories that don't want to be told, the ones that want to stay buried in the deepest parts of me. I don't often get too close to the Untouchable Songs. Every now and then I accidentally write one, but I haven't learned yet how to tame them, or catch them, or love them. Their bites and scratches leave me aching. No Untouchable songs made it on to Have A Heart. Some day I'll tame one.

Then there are the songs that are miraculously bestowed on me. I don't deserve them—I am just the vessel they choose to come through. I have to be ready to receive them, or else they fly off to someone more worthy. Like a burst of rain, they fall quick and hard. With no mercy or consideration they strip everything from me, but leave my soul drenched. They are the Gift Songs.

I have only experienced a Gift Song a few times in my life. But as I lay in the dark, I recognized the signs, something coming and my heart racing to meet it.

I got up as quietly as I could, glancing at the clock as I did. Red numbers blinked 2:15 am at me. I silently grabbed my guitar from the corner of our hotel room where it was propped, took my computer from the desk where Mingo had been doing the business books before bed, and tiptoed softly into the only room available to me, the bathroom. Shutting the door behind me, I left the light off, so as not to wake my sleeping husband. I sat on the edge of the tub in the blackness and opened my laptop, the bright light of the screen biting into my eyes. With my guitar propped on my lap and the computer on the toilet lid, I opened a new Word document and sat, ready to receive the song. I waited.

Then it came. An overload of emotion, a rush of energy that was difficult to contain. A song in response to the conversation I had with my sister earlier that night, who didn't know how beautiful she was, how strong she was, how amazing she was. A song for my friend who didn't know how important he was to me. A song for the people who were my entire world and had no idea that they meant so much, or how crucial they were in my life. I did my best to channel it through my insignificant voice and guitar. It was like riding a wild horse. Powerful, strong, frightening, and beautiful. I loved it when it had finally been delivered. The song is called Mirror.

At 7:30 am I crawled back into bed. My butt was numb from sitting on the edge of the cold hard tub and my back complained from being hunched all night. My eyes burned when I finally shut them. I felt totally drained, yet completely satisfied. Sleep was waiting to take me away as soon as I lay down till I awoke to the sound of Mingo's electric toothbrush.

He slowly opened the bathroom door, his hair still wet from his shower, dressed and ready for the day. I rubbed my eyes, still burning, and tried to blink away the sliver of sunlight that sliced between the heavy curtains.

"What time is it?" I croaked.

"Almost ten," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed to stroke my hair. "We should get going soon if we're going to be on time to work with Ron."

I closed my eyes and felt myself drifting back into sleep. "Can we be late today? See how Ron likes it for a change..." I mumbled, aching for a few more hours rest. But then my heart thumped against my ribcage, reminding me of the new song. My eyes snapped open. I sat up too quickly and rubbed my head.

"I wrote a new song last night," I said, suddenly awake.

"You did?" Mingo asked.

"Can I play it for you?" I was excited for someone else to hear it.

I grabbed my guitar and stumbled through Mirror, singing the lyrics through my craggy morning voice, reading them from my computer screen. I heard spaces that needed to be filled in and syllables that needed to fit better into the music. The bridge needed some serious reworking and the chorus required attention but the bones were there. I finished playing and looked at Mingo. He smiled.

"Can you help me with the bridge?" I asked. "And the chorus isn't finished yet so—"

"It's great," he said, interrupting my excuses. He was quiet for a moment. "I really think this could be the best song you've ever written."

My heart thumped in response. "Really?"

"Absolutely," he said. His sea-coloured eyes meant it.

I hugged him tightly, squishing my guitar and computer screen between us.

The phone buzzed. Mingo read a text from Ron.

"Ron wants to start a few hours late today," he said.

I handed Mingo my little guitar and together we reworked some of the chords in the verse, making it suit the lyrics better. Then we moved on to the chorus. The core ideas were there, but Mingo expanded them, drawing out the most emotional elements and emphasizing them.

Before we knew it the time had passed. "We have to be at Ron's studio in twenty minutes," Mingo said. "You better get ready."

I ran a comb through my hair while I pulled my t-shirt over my head. In my rush I grabbed Mingo's toothbrush and scrubbed my teeth furiously. The bristles were totally askew. "Ugh," I said, as I rinsed it under a stream of hot water. "You need a new toothbrush."

"Oh, feel free to use my toothbrush," he said, laughing at my frenzy. He opened the door and stepped into the hotel hallway.

"Sorry!" I mumbled, and dashed out the door behind him.

Our walk to Ron's took about half an hour, and it was always one of my favourite parts of the day. Mingo and I would talk about music the whole way. Music we were listening to, new music we had heard, but then we would talk about what we wanted our songs to sound like.

"Mirror has to be epic-sounding," I said. "It has to feel powerful. It means so much to me."

"Totally," he said. "Maybe some big drums,"

"And strings!" I added.

My heart thumped as I dreamed of all the things this song could be.

Ron wasn't there when we arrived, so we waited outside his studio door, excitedly exchanging ideas.

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late." Ron had finally arrived.

"Ron," I said, barely even annoyed he was late. "We wrote a new song!"

"Awesome," he said. "Let's hear it." We went into his newly clean office and got settled.

Mingo pulled out his guitar and began to play.

I closed my eyes and opened my throat. Mirror floated out, and I again felt a surge of power. I thought about my sister, and how badly I wanted her to hear her song. I thought of this song showing her how important she was to me. I imagined her realizing how incredible she is. I couldn't help the tears that sprang to my eyes as the song ended.

I looked at Ron. He wasn't saying anything. He was just looking blankly behind me at the wall.

I panicked. He didn't like the song. He hated it in fact, and at that very moment was wondering why he had ever agreed to work with such an untalented artist. I realized I had been holding my breath, and was starting to feel my face go white. I glanced at Mingo. He flicked a nervous glance at me and back at Ron.

Finally Ron spoke. "I don't want to freak you guys out," he said slowly. "But that song..." he trailed off again, as though choosing his words very carefully. I couldn't stand it.

"Do you like it or not?" I blurted.

"Like it?" he asked. "I love it. It's called Mirror, right?"

I nodded and finally exhaled.

"As I was saying," he went on, "I don't want to freak you out, but I think that this song, Mirror, has some major cross-over potential."

I blinked. "Cross-over potential?" I had never heard that phrase before.

"Cross-over potential means that I think this could have the potential get on mainstream radio."

"Oh," I heard myself say. I sat in stunned silence and thought. I had actually never thought that much about mainstream radio. My previous record had been supported by some local radio stations, and by the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). "Well, that's...cool. I guess?" I looked at Mingo.

"I don't really care what radio station plays it," he said. "I just think it's a great song. That's all that matters."

"That's true," Ron agreed. "But radio opens a lot of doors."

"What kind of doors?" I asked.

"Well, obviously it just gives you exposure to so many people. A lot of people who might not ever have the chance to hear you otherwise."

"What makes this song different from the other ones we've been writing?" Mingo asked.

"A few things," Ron said. "But mostly the chorus. You know how on your last record, most of your choruses were basically just tag lines at the end of a particular section? One particular line may have repeated, but it wasn't necessarily a huge departure from the rest of the song, or even a separate section?"

I thought through most of the songs that were on my last album, The Cricket's Orchestra. I Know, If You Asked Me, You Got Out, Five More Minutes.... Most of them were exactly that.

"Well that's a real old school way to write songs. See, older songs usually have an A, B section that repeats and the chorus is basically just a tag line at the end of one of those sections."

I thought about some of my favourite old tunes and realized that what he was saying applied to every single one.

"Modern choruses usually start off with a big bang," he said, his hand shooting up into the air, "that's usually your tag line. Then they might repeat that line, or something similar." His hand dipped and swooped back up. "Then they go on a little journey down here," his hand swooped down and his fingers rippled over the air. "And then they deliver something awesome for the last line," his hand closed into a fist and punched the air.

"Can you do that again?" Mingo asked with a smirk on his face.

"The whole thing, or..."

"The last part," Mingo said.

Ron rolled his eyes and smiled. "They deliver on the last line!" He punched the air again.

Mingo and I laughed.

"And that's exactly how you wrote the chorus in Mirror."

"I had no idea there was that kind of formula for choruses," I said.

"Obviously," said Ron, "as this is the first time you've ever written one."

"What if," I said, after a moment's consideration, "I don't want to go for mainstream radio?"

"Here's the thing." Ron said. "Radio is a vehicle, like the internet, like videos, like your website, like award shows, like songs getting placed in TV shows or movies. They're all really great tools to help us get your music out there. But your music has to be solid. We aren't going to make songs for radio. We are going to make what we consider to be great music and the best songs we can. And if radio wants to play those songs, we should let them."

"I don't know," I said hesitantly. "I don't know much about top 40 radio."

"Do you think Mirror is a good song?" Ron asked us.

"Yeah," Mingo said.

"Will it be a good song if it gets played on radio?"

"Yeah," Mingo repeated.

"What about if radio doesn't play it? Do you still think it's a good song?"

"Yes," Mingo said again.

Ron looked at me. I nodded.

"Do you want more people to hear your music?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. I wanted anyone who wanted to hear my music to hear it. "But I can do both, right? I want to make awesome songs that are meaningful to me, but could potentially reach a larger audience."

"Exactly." Ron nodded. "We make the songs awesome, if radio plays them, then awesome. If not, we still think they're awesome. Make sense?"

"That makes sense," I said. "But I'm still not sure I'm a top 40 artist."

"What's a top 40 artist?" Ron asked.

"Well, you know...I...I don't know." I stammered. "A lot of that stuff is mostly electronic dance music stuff..."

"Do you listen to top 40 radio?" Ron asked.

"...Sometimes," I said.

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Name five top 40 artists."

"Um...Katy Perry." I said. "Rihanna." I bit my thumbnail. "Lady Gaga, obviously. Oh, what's that guy's name...The one who sings that one song with the things going on in the background..."

"Seriously?" Ron asked. "Why don't you listen to top 40 radio?"

"I'm not sure I like it I guess."

"So, you're making a judgment about something you don't actually have an opinion on. You're writing off an entire group of musicians and songs, just because they get played on a particular radio station. But you don't know if you like it or not because you're not even willing to give it a chance?"

As soon as he said it, I realized how stupid it was. I liked to pride myself on being open to all sorts of different kinds of music. I liked to think that I

judged music based on songs, not just genres. But here I was, uneducated about a whole world of artists and their songs.

"Go listen to top 40 music," Ron said. "That's your homework for this weekend. Go home and listen to it. Learn about it. Then come back and tell me whether you like it."

"Fair enough," I said.

"I think you'll hear the possibilities this song has once you're familiar with the range of music that's getting played on mainstream radio now," he added. "Play the chorus again?"

We spent the rest of the day refining Mirror. Ron tweaked a few of the chord voicings and helped iron out some of the lyrics.

Mingo and I walked home, our heads full of new possibilities.

"What if this song, or any of these songs actually gets played on mainstream radio?" I asked.

"I think that would be awesome," he said.

"It really would be, wouldn't it?"

"Let's check out billboard dot com tomorrow," Mingo said. "Oh, and I need a new toothbrush."

"I'm sleeping in," I yawned.

## Step 11 - Beware

I woke up at eleven thirty, refreshed and caught up on sleep.

"Hey," said Mingo, pulling out his earbuds. He was sitting in bed beside me, the computer propped up on his knees.

"Morning," I croaked.

"I'm just checking out the songs that have been on the Billboard Top Ten. Some of these songs are really great," he said.

"Cool. I want to hear," I reached over the keyboard to unplug the headphones from the headphone jack. A catchy beat pumped from the computer speaker.

"Wanna go to the Eaton Centre today?" he asked.

I pictured the overcrowded streets outside our hotel, and the bustling mall. The thought of going to the biggest mall in the biggest city in Canada on a Saturday made my stomach churn.

"I don't know," I said. "I feel like just kicking around here."

"The Eaton Centre is literally like, a five minute walk from here. There's a Shopper's Drug Mart on the first floor. I can get my toothbrush there."

"Okay, well let's go and not stay long?"

"Sure," he said.

The street was buzzing, just as I had anticipated. People walked single file along the sidewalk as they passed each other to avoid collisions. I grabbed Mingo's arm, feeling a nervousness I couldn't explain. A dog chained to a bike rack barked as we passed. I jumped, clutching Mingo with all my might.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I looked up at the sky as Mingo and I navigated along the cramped sidewalk. Buildings towered all around us and I felt trapped.

Suddenly, someone behind us yelled. Adrenaline burst through my veins and my head whipped around. A homeless man muttered as he walked quickly past us, elbowing his way through the throngs of shoppers.

"That guy totally scared the crap out of me," I said, trying to laugh. "I guess I'm jumpy today or something."

"You sure you're okay?" Mingo asked.

I'm okay." I tried to push my anxiety away. It was stupid.

But when we reached the corner of Young and Dundas, panic bubbled up inside me.

"I really don't want to go into the mall today," I said, stopping in my tracks. People streamed around Mingo and me.

"Why not?" Mingo asked.

"I don't know what's going on with me today," I said. "I'm just freaked out or something. There's too many people. I just want to go back to our hotel room."

"Okay. You can head back but I'm just going to run in and get a toothbrush. I'll come right back."

My heart pounded at the thought of him going into the crowd without me. It was crazy. I couldn't explain what was going on, but one thing was certain. I wasn't leaving him.

"No, I'll be okay." I said. "This is so weird."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah."

I clung to him as we approached the mall. My heart raced. There have been times when I have wanted to avoid large crowds, but this feeling was new. It was persistent and intense. But I couldn't explain it. So we stepped inside.

The mall was packed. Teens hung out in the huge arching hallways. Moms and dads pushed strollers that carried crying infants. Little kids attempted to escape their vigilant parents. People of all sorts buzzed from store to store, and Mingo and I weaved our way through the hustle.

"See?" Mingo asked. "It's not that bad."

"I guess," I said. My shoulders relaxed an incremental amount. I loosened my grip on Mingo's arm. We were in the Eaton Centre. And everything was okay.

We meandered along the main hallway, stopping when something caught our eye as we made our way to the Shopper's Drugmart.

"Want to grab some lunch at the food court?" he asked. We were one floor above the bustling mayhem of the Urban Eatery. Tempting smells wafted up through the open atrium, but one glance down from the floor above revealed a packed area that I absolutely did not want to be a part of.

"Definitely not," I said, moving on.

"Yeah, me neither," he said, though he obviously wanted to order from the fast-food Chinese restaurant.

I laughed. "If you're really hungry we can go down there."

"Nah," he said. "I'll get something later."

"I kind of need a new hoodie," I said as we passed by a clothing store. A little more of the unreasonable tension left my body as we stepped into the clothing store.

I picked up a sweat shirt from a neatly folded stack. It was fuzzy and soft on the inside.

"I like this one," I said.

A toddler ran past me and out the store front giggling as her mother chased after her.

BANG! A huge noise shot through the air.

My heart jumped in my chest. Mingo's eyes snapped to mine.

"What was that?" he asked. "Sounded like a huge metal shelf falling over or something."

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The shoppers surrounding us looked around with bewildered expressions on their faces.

But I knew. I had no idea how I knew. I had never heard them before, and I hope I never will again, but as my heart thrashed in my chest it told me what it had been trying to tell me all day.

I looked to Mingo, trembling. "Those are gunshots."

## Step 12 - Run

My brain is always loud. It's full of thoughts, opinions, and music, and constantly spins. My heart is so much less complicated. It communicates the only way it knows how. Through beats. Sometimes it's hard to hear over the constant noise of my mind. But I have heard it before.

When I was sixteen and a new driver, I had driven myself to work a shift in my parent's car. As I drove home I had the overwhelming feeling that I was going to get into a car accident. I remember my heart thumping increasingly harder as I sat motionless in the driver's seat. It was like I was running the distance I was driving. As I got closer to home the feeling became impossible to ignore. I decided to get off the main street and make the rest of my way home along back roads. I took a right off the main street and approached a stop sign. Being as careful as possible, I slowly came to a full and complete stop. Seconds later the deafening sound of metal crunching burst into my ears as I lurched forward. I had been rear ended.

Warnings about true friends, fake friends, sketchy situations, my heart was always right. I just didn't always listen. But when I did, things were okay.

When I moved to Halifax Nova Scotia I saw a boy on the bus. He had a mop of dirty blonde hair and beautiful turquoise-grey eyes. But my heart had recently been decimated by someone who had twisted my mind in on itself. I was steering clear of possibilities for a long time. But this boy, my heart beat to me, this boy was different. It took a long time for me to allow myself to get close to him but the more time we spent together the more my heart told me he was safe. He was good. And finally that he was mine. It has been the best thing that ever happened to me.

See? My heart always knows. But most of the time I don't. And when I don't listen to it, it can be deadly.

BANG! BANG!! Two more shots rang out. I looked past Mingo to the hallway and saw people running in every direction. A little girl toddled toward the entrance. I started toward her. □

□

“Emma! Emma come here!” Her mother grabbed her and pulled her away from the rush of shoppers and into her arms.

“Everyone get to the back of the store!” The manager pulled the doors shut with the help of a few employees. Her hands shook and fumbled to lock us in. “Get to the back of the store and hide behind the shelves!”

I couldn't move. □

□

Three girls still stood at the front of the store crying. Their phones were in their hands. They held them up against the large window that opened up onto the food court, recording the scene below.

“Oh my god,” one sobbed. “He's shot. He's shot.” Her hand was over her mouth, as if by covering her mouth the words would not escape.

From where I stood I could just barely see down and into the food court. An arm on the floor. Something red pooling. I took one step toward the window and stopped. I would never be able to unsee what I was about to see.

I turned to Mingo. There was fear in his eyes.

“Let's get to the back of the store,” he said too quietly, his voice shaking. He took my hand and we joined the terrified crowd.

Twenty or so people stood close to the back wall. A young father clutched a whimpering child in his arms, his big hands stroking her soft curls. Her dark brown eyes were wide with fear. Two teen girls held each other close as tears slipped down their cheeks. Their friend bit his lip and pulled at the bottom of his shirt.

A woman next to me sobbed in whispering tones into her phone. “I love you, Mom. No, I have no idea. We're hiding at the back of the store. I just wanted to tell you I love you.”

Mingo stared at the ground. I held my breath.

Recent news stories flashed through my mind. Mass shootings at public schools, theatres, and malls. Was this one of those events? Would we join nameless victims on a long list?

Had he already claimed his intended target? Or was Death coming for us? Was he on his way right now, coming up the escalator that separated us from the crime scene of the food court below? The doors covering the entrance were mesh. Would he stick the end of his gun in and randomly open fire? Would I see the people around me burst open? Or would I be struck first? Would any of us survive?

So this was what it was like to be so alive, so close to Death.

My heart thundered. Why hadn't I listened to it? It knew. Somehow it knew I needed to be on guard and had tried to warn me, like all those other times. I had heard it but I hadn't listened. It had warned me about the Amsterdam trip too. It let me know when Mirror was going to come. It had been right about everything. Why didn't I listen?

Right then and there, hiding from an unknown gunman behind a rack of sweatshirts on sale I decided that I was going to listen to my heart from that point on. I would never doubt it again.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing, concentrating on finding the centre of myself. I found it, throwing itself against my ribcage as if it longed for escape. 'Run. Run. Run!' my heart said. This time I listened.

“We can't stay here. We have to go. Right now!” I whispered to Mingo.

His eyes were bright with adrenaline. “But it might not be safe.”

“It's not safe in here either.”

I scanned the back and side walls of the store. One of my first jobs had been at a small gift shop in a mall. I had often been in charge of taking out the trash and knew that each store usually had an alternate entrance connecting to a hallway that joined all the stores making garbage disposal easier.

Sure enough there was an nondescript door at the side of the store. I may not have ever noticed it before, but now it was perhaps about to save my life. I looked over at the manager. She seemed to be thinking the same thing I was.

She made her way over to the side door, her keys jingling on her wrist band. She unlocked the door. “I can't recommend you go out here,” she said quietly. “But anyone wanting to leave is free to do so.”

Some of the shoppers moved toward the door. I surged forward, pulling Mingo behind me. We hurried along a corridor and reached some steps leading to an exit. The young father clutching his daughter struggled with her stroller. Mingo picked up the front end and we helped them up the stairs. Everyone seemed to disappear and suddenly Mingo and I were standing alone outside the mall.

The street that should have been bustling with people was oddly bare. I looked up into one of the bluest skies I had ever seen and sucked in a breath. It was as if the day had no idea what had just happened.

My racing heart began to slow. "What should we do now?" I asked Mingo.

"I have no idea," he said, stunned.

We walked in silence down the deserted street. In the distance police sirens screamed their way toward the Eaton Centre.

My mind ran in circles, trying to wrap itself around what it had seen and heard.

I had been in the same space as a person who had enough hatred and anger in them to fuel murder. There was no TV or movie screen protecting me from fiction. I had been in the same city as this person, the same mall even. Had I walked past them?

The TV in our hotel room was on when we came in. It was showing live coverage of the shooting at the mall. A picture of white-sheeted stretchers being carried from the front entrance. I sank exhausted on the end of the bed as Mingo clicked the TV off. He sat down beside me and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. I looked at his long, slim fingers.

I had seen a hand. Limp and lifeless on the floor. There was a person attached to that hand. That person had a mother, family, and friends. Was he okay? Was he dead? Mingo had wanted to go down to the food court. If we had gone for lunch, could that have been my hand? Could that have been his hand?

I had made us leave the store. What if the shooter had decided to walk through the mall, looking for more victims? The realization that I had selfishly taken both our lives into my hands struck me like a slap.

I began to cry. Mingo pulled me into his chest and held me close. I sucked in deep breaths, but there wasn't enough air.

"I can't believe I did that!" I sobbed.

"What? What did you do?"

"I made us leave the store. I put us in danger!" My lips trembled as I tried to get the words out.

"We have no idea what happened there today," he said. "Maybe it was gang-related, maybe it was random, maybe there was a specific target. Maybe we were safer leaving. You don't know. You were just doing what you thought was best."

“I know, but...I could have lost you today,” I gasped.

□

“Shhhhhh,” Mingo whispered. “We’re safe now.” He pulled me down onto the soft bed.

We lay together as the clueless sky fell from a bright blue to a gentle purple. Mingo’s breathing eventually became soft and rhythmic. I closed my eyes.

I fell asleep with my head on Mingo’s chest. His heart was saying one word. Home. Home. Home.

### Step 13 - Recharge

Our little plane wavered in the air as it descended through a thick layer of fog. Mingo tensed in his seat beside me. He hated turbulence. I touched his hand and peered through the tiny window. We left the sun brilliantly shining above the clouds and descended into the overcast, raw, beautiful wildness that surrounds the Halifax, Nova Scotia airport.

We had to go home. There were no other options. After what we had just been through, we needed to be home.

"You guys were there for that?" Ron had exclaimed on Monday, two days after the Eaton Centre shooting. Mingo and I sat in our regular spots in Ron's studio, he by the door and me by the window. We had shown up ready to work, but feeling tired, drained, exhausted. I glanced out the window to the busy streets below, then back to Ron. His eyes filled with concern.

"Yeah," I said looking down into my hands. I bit my lip to distract my mind from recalling the experience and focus on the present, even if it did hurt.

Mingo didn't say anything.

"Well, what do you want to do? I mean, that's a crazy thing to experience," Ron said. "Are you sure you're up for working today?"

My eyes began to fill with tears at the memory of the lifeless hand. I looked down quickly, letting my hair fall in front of my face hoping Ron hadn't noticed. I could feel droplets brimming along my eyelashes, threatening to escape. Cars honked along the buzzing city streets outside my window. Throngs of people bustled along the sidewalks. My nerves were raw. I was spent. I knew I needed the quiet that couldn't be found in the city. And I knew Mingo needed the peace of being in his own home. But we had to finish this album. I didn't want Ron to think we weren't committed or willing to work hard. I blinked the tears away, but instead of falling down my cheeks discreetly like they were supposed to, they plunged boldly from my face and splattered on my hands folded in my lap.

"Here's what we're going to do," Ron said softly. "You guys are going to go home for a break. Okay? Amsterdam was super intense. And now this... You guys really need to take some time off. I'm not going anywhere. We have a great start on a bunch of songs. You're going to go home, get recharged and come back when you're ready. It might take a few weeks, it might take a few months. But I'll be here when you come back."

I decided then and there he was the best A&R guy that has ever existed.

Landing at Stanfield International Airport in Halifax is like landing in a dream. Thinning fog reveals the seemingly endless miles of emerald trees and shimmering pools of water. Relief floated over me as the ground gently pulled us closer. My heart started to slow for the first time in days. It was like the land itself calmed me as we drifted down.

I looked into Mingo's wide eyes, the same beautiful grey green as the cold, sweet Nova Scotian ocean. "I'm glad we came home," he admitted, in such a sweet way it made my heart hurt.

"Me too," I said, squeezing his hand as the plane touched down on the runway.

Sucking in deep breaths of pine and ocean, we stepped off the plane. Pure oxygen entered my blood stream and I pictured it like glowing particles of white light flowing through my veins, being carried along my limbs to my fingers and toes. It cleaned me.

Our luggage arrived promptly and we met our regular driver in the designated area.

"How was your trip this time?" he asked as Mingo and I buckled ourselves in.

I wasn't sure what to say. How was our trip? We had been gone for so long. Months. In some ways it had been wonderful. I thought of the Meaghan who had flown out of this airport with no songs in her back pocket. The Meaghan who hadn't been to Amsterdam yet, the one who had never met Van Gogh or Anne Frank. I thought of the Meaghan who hadn't yet written *Mirror*.

Then I thought of the Meaghan who hadn't had the worst co-writing session of her life yet. The Meaghan who had never heard gun shots before. She seemed like a different person.

"It was pretty eventful," Mingo said.

"What has the weather been like for the past few months?" I asked the driver before he could pose a follow-up question, desperate to be safely in the present moment and not lingering in the recent, upsetting past.

"Oh good. You know how it is. It's been some rainy the past few weeks, but then we had a stretch of sun the past few days that would make you think you were on vacation in LA!" He laughed a deep, throaty, smoker's laugh.

He chatted pleasantly for the remainder of the ride home and I let myself get lost in the soothing rumble of the tires on the road. I rolled down my window and rested my arm on the ledge, feeling the cool, damp breeze touch every inch of skin. Somehow just being in Nova Scotia was healing me. I could already feel it. My heart sighed and finally rested between the slow rise and fall of my lungs.

We arrived home in the evening sunlight. The clouds had parted and bright shafts of pink and yellow light bathed the front of our little house.

We waved goodbye to our driver, and I sat on the front steps listening as the early spring peepers began their evening song while Mingo went to fetch our mail. I watched him amble back from the mailbox, flipping through flyers, magazines, and varied envelopes. I watched him furrow his brow and squint at one.

I loved him so much in that moment. And I could have lost him only days before. The most important person in my universe. The best thing that had ever happened to me. My whole life. And yet here he was. And here I was. We were home, together.

A wave of gratitude overtook me. I threw my arms around him as he approached.

"Wha—?" Mingo dropped a few of the letters on the front steps.

I squeezed him as tight as I could, feeling every inch of space he was filling, his solid body against mine.

"I just love you," I said.

"I love you too," he said, hugging me back, planting a kiss on my hair. "Let's go inside," he said lugging my huge suitcase up the front steps.

I grabbed his considerably smaller one and followed him through our front door.

I made a point of losing myself in the everyday, normal, mundane tasks of life. I cranked Kid Koala and cleaned out the garage. I rode my bike to the market and bought our favourite peanut butter balls. Mingo cooked us delicious and simple meals of roasted PEI potatoes, chicken breast, and steamed vegetables. We went on evening walks around our neighbourhood. We got together with our friends for Sunday night dinner. I met up with my girlfriends for our favourite noodles at our favourite Thai food place in Halifax. And every night we slept in our own bed.

I started to relax. And then I started to notice a slight discomfort in my heart. Now and again throughout the day, I wondered what I was doing. What was my purpose? What was I aiming for? I needed a focus.

"Wanna try working on one of the unfinished songs?" Mingo asked on evening neighbourhood walk after I told him about my impending itch.

"I guess," I said. The sky above me was painting itself into all sorts of Van Goghs.

"I mean, if you're bored then maybe that's a sign you're ready to get back to work on the album."

"Maybe," I said, unsure.

We sat in our little home studio after the walk, Mingo in front of his computer and me behind him on the couch.

"What do you think of this?" He played a new drum loop he had programmed earlier that day.

It sounded cool. Fast. Unrelenting beats thrummed in my ears. I searched my brain for an idea, any idea that could fit on top of the sounds that pounded along. But nothing came to me. And I realized it was because there was nothing there.

"I have no idea," I said in a sonic stupor.

His eyebrows furrowed a little. "What don't you like? The snare? The kick? The ride?" The loop beat on.

I listened, straining to pinpoint what wasn't working, and for the first time since we had started working on the album, I wasn't able to separate the drum sounds. I couldn't understand what I was hearing. My heart started to thump in annoyance.

"I just can't seem to hear it or something."

Mingo's shoulders hunched forward as he reached for the computer keyboard. He stopped the loop.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "It sounds good. It does, I don't know what's wrong with me. I just can't—I can't hear it."

"You can't hear it? Like, it's too quiet?" he asked.

"No." I thought for a moment. "I can't understand what I'm hearing. Maybe I'm just not ready to keep working on music," I said. "I mean, I know it sounds cool, but I just can't hear what would go over it. I have no ideas." I looked down at my hands. "I don't think I'm ready to write yet."

"That's okay," Mingo said. "I think it's a cool drum loop so I'm going to keep working on it. Maybe you'll feel like working on it tomorrow."

My heart tightened. I knew it was going to take a while.

The fact remained though, I needed to work. I needed a focus. My paints were the perfect solution.

Over the next few days, I pretended that I wasn't a musician at all, but was instead a full-time painter. A gallery in Saskatchewan had asked me to make forty of my miniature paintings to show in conjunction with a concert I was due to give with the Regina Symphony. I set to work right away finding forty beautiful little frames and wracking my brain for forty quirky painting ideas. There was no shortage of ideas there, and I set to work immediately sketching them.

The days began to blur together, fused with swirls of jewel-coloured paints and strange little characters who appeared in front of my eyes. I worked in my little studio room upstairs slowly amassing a collection of miniature paintings. By sundown each day there were two or three more in my growing collection, four on a good (and very long) day. Mingo spent his days in the studio downstairs, finding new sounds and creating inspiring tracks for us to work on when I could finally hear music again. We broke for lunch, meeting on our back deck to catch up on our progress, and again at dinner, followed by our evening strolls. But at the end of our nightly walk, I went right back upstairs, working till my back ached from hunching over my tiny creations, my eyes burning from focusing on the miniature details, my fingers begging to let go of the paintbrush.

I fell into bed exhausted from a satisfying day of mining myself for visual creativity. The weight of my unfinished album was still usually the last thought that pulled me into sleep, but I also knew my strength would return. Soon I would be flooded with inspiration. Each night as my head sank into my pillow and my breath slowed enough for me to feel the silence of the Nova Scotia moon, I thought I could hear a few more drops of melody falling into my musically depleted heart.

## Step 14 - Ignite

Forty miniature paintings adorned warm white walls in a little gallery in Regina. I stood nervously in a corner, clutching a drink of water. People came and stood close to my tiny paintings, as if peering into my mind.

I was used to having a guitar or at least a microphone between me and my audience. And I wasn't used to being able to hear them talk about me. I had thought I was ready to get back out into public, but standing here now, I was beginning to doubt it. I was wearing my little black dress, but I wished I had worn white so I could blend into the walls. I might as well have worn nothing, I felt so exposed.

A kind looking older gentleman walked over to me.

"Are you the artist?" he asked.

"How could you tell?" I said, nervously choking on the sip of water I had just taken.

He laughed. "Oh, I've been where you are. Many times. I recognize that look."

"You're an artist? I mean a real one?" I asked, awkwardly wiping a rogue droplet of water from my chin.

"Yes," he said. "And so are you."

"Oh, I don't know. This is my first art show," I lowered my voice to a whisper. "And I'm not really sure what I'm doing," I admitted to him behind the back of my hand, immediately feeling stupid. It was obvious I didn't know what I was doing.

He stepped close to one of my paintings, an octopus, all eight arms preoccupied with getting ready for the work day.

"This is lovely," he said. "Whimsical. Colourful. Imaginative. Really lovely."

I felt my face blush. "I don't know," I trailed off, then decided to take the compliment and change the subject as quickly as possible. "Thank you," I said. "Do you get nervous at your own art shows?"

“Oh yes, all the time. It's awful, standing here while your work is on display. People coming and going. Maybe they care, maybe they don't.” □

“How do you handle it?” I asked.

“Well I don't like to go to my own openings.” It was a very good point. I was glad I had tried it at least once though. “I also start a new project before every new exhibit.”

I stopped sipping my water. “Really,” I said turning that idea over in my mind.

“Yes, that way I obsess over my new ideas and I don't have time to get nervous about the old ones. I ignite a new fire before the old one dies.”

It was brilliant. My mind needed to be moving, to be busy burning on new ideas. And all of a sudden, my heart jumped in my chest. I was ready to make music again. Move on to new ideas. It was time.

“Thank you,” I said. “Really, it's been great to meet you. What did you say your name was again?”

“I don't think I did. I'm Wilf. Wilf Perreault.” He reached out his hand.

I felt my face flush for a second time. “I...I had no idea...” I took his hand and weakly shook it as the realization washed over me. “I am very familiar with your work. I like it very much.” □

□

I had seen Wilf's art in various Canadian exhibits and in numerous publications. His huge canvases usually depicted detailed wintery laneways, rich with the deep blues and pinks often reflected by freshly fallen snow. And Wilf Perreault had just told me that my paintings were lovely.

“Well thank you, dear,” he said kindly. □□

A gallery worker touched my arm. “Meaghan, one of our guests would like to speak to you.”

I looked to Wilf. “You go on,” he said. “Good luck with the rest of your exhibit.”

“Thank you so much,” I said. “Really, you have no idea what your words have meant to me tonight.” □□

He smiled.

By the end of the exhibit all of my paintings had sold. But I had moved on from worrying about whether people would buy my paintings. In my heart I was working on my album.

## Step 15 - Disappoint

New York was sweet, as summer burst from the trees of Central Park. Bright green leaves sparkled against an azure sky. Our hotel was a stone's throw from the park's entrance and I had decided to go for a morning walk before my day of meetings.

Hope filled me as I thought about what the day might hold. "He could be here," I thought. "My producer could be here in this city right now!" My heart leapt.

Our first appointment of the day was with a producer named Teddy, who had worked with some A-list musicians and whose music I admired very much. Mingo and I took a cab, and as we rode, I listened to his latest release through my headphones. My heart buzzed in tune with the melody. The cab pulled up to a dark blue door crammed in amongst a patchwork of buildings and front entrances.

Mingo squeezed my hand as we waited by the buzzer. "You got this," he said.

"This could be it!" I said squeezing back.

"Just keep your eyes and ears open. Pay attention to how you feel around him. You'll know."

"I really think he could be the one!"

Mingo smiled.

A crack in the door appeared.

"Yep," he said. I realized it was a question.

"Oh, hi. I'm Meaghan Smith and this is Mingo. We are here to meet with Teddy."

"Cool," he said and pulled the door open. We followed him through a maze of hallways, doors, staircases and finally came to an elevator. He punched in a code and we zipped up a few floors.

"Just through there," he gestured. Mingo and I stepped into a tiny room with an impossibly high ceiling.

We followed his pointing finger through a heavy soundproof door into a tight recording studio. A big, tall guy with a flop of soft blond hair sat in front of the consul. A smaller man sat behind him on a large plush couch. They both stood and stretched out their hands.

"Hi," said the smaller one. "I'm Lawrence."

"I'm Teddy," said Teddy.

"I'm Meaghan." My hand met his, my heart dancing. "I love your music!" The words gushed out before I could stop them.

"That's awesome," he said, smiling genuinely. "I'm glad you like it."

Lawrence was Teddy's manager, and after a few minutes of introductions he and Mingo left to let Teddy and I get better acquainted.

"So," Teddy said. "What did you want to work on today?"

"Well, I'd love to know what you think of my songs," I said.

"Sure, let's see what you've got."

I handed him a USB device and he plugged it into the computer. The demo of Have A Heart came up first. Teddy listened for a few seconds.

"I like this," he said slowly. "It has some potential." He skipped ahead to the next track. Friends Like You began to play.

"I don't like this at all," he said after hearing the first few bars. "It's not my style ." He skipped ahead. Mirror began. He paused, his finger hovering over the skip button.

The lyrics began. I watched his face intently as he listened. His expression changed as my voice sang through the speakers. The chorus began and he smiled a little.

"This isn't bad," he said.

The chorus ended and verse two began. "Actually, it needs a lot of work." He pressed stop.

"What do you think needs work?" I asked. I searched myself to see if I was feeling hurt. I wasn't sure yet.

He leaned forward in his chair. "It's too..." he searched for the right word. "...written."

"Too 'written?'" I wanted to learn all I could from him.

"Yeah, like, you start off the chorus by saying, 'Let me be your mirror,' and then you come full circle at the end of the chorus saying 'Cause I wouldn't be me if you weren't my mirror.' It's just too cheesy. Too perfect. Too ... written."

I sat, stumped. I felt Mirror was the best song I had ever written. I tried to imagine the lyrics any other way. I couldn't.

"But..." I spoke slowly, trying to process my emotions and words carefully. I wanted to be open to criticism. He was a songwriter I truly respected and whose opinion I valued. "But it's exactly what I mean. The lyrics can't say anything else because I don't mean anything else. That's exactly how I feel. That's exactly what I meant to say."

He shrugged. "I don't like it."

That was fair. Not everyone was going to like what I did. I liked it. I couldn't imagine it any different. I wasn't going to change it. But that didn't mean that he couldn't be my producer. Did it?

He sat looking at me expectantly.

"Well, if you're not into any of these songs, should we work on something new?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said. He spun around in his chair, face to the computer, back to me. In a few moments he had opened up a blank track on the computer and was searching for drum sounds.

"So, what kind of song do you want to write?" I asked.

"Let's just see where it goes," he said. He began to program a drum loop. The snare was particularly harsh.

"I'm not really sure about that drum sound," I said.

He didn't respond. I wondered if he just couldn't hear me. I was sitting behind him on the couch, after all. I grabbed a chair and pulled it up closer to his.

"I don't really know about that snare sound," I repeated.

"Oh don't worry about that," he said. "We'll nail down the right parts later. I'm just trying to get something started." He ploughed ahead, laying down a bass line.

I closed my eyes as I listened to the track come together, hoping for the ideas to come. But nothing appeared. The sounds were too distracting. I couldn't hear past them.

"Any ideas yet?" he asked. I opened my computer in the hopes that one of my older song ideas might work.

I scrolled through my song ideas. "How about a song about... wishing you didn't love someone but you do?" I finished the sentence like it was a question, and instantly felt shy and insecure.

"Sure," he said, now laying down some guitar chords. I couldn't believe how fast he was working. And so far I had not had anything to do with the song. "Just let me get some chords for a verse down," he said, punching commands into the keyboard as he copied and pasted the chords he had just played.

"But...how do you know those chords will work with the lyrics?" I asked. This was feeling less and less like a co-writing session and more and more like a writing session that I was simply witnessing.

"We'll figure all that out," he said, waving a hand in the air.

"But isn't that what we're here to do?" I asked. I felt like the kid at the back of the class who had no idea what was going on.

He kept working.

I wanted to keep an open mind. And I wanted this to work. I wanted him to be my producer. Or maybe I just wanted to find a producer so I could keep moving forward with my project. Was I just so desperate to find my producer that I was willing to sacrifice my own musical vision? Is that what it was going to take to get this album finished?

The shadows in the room crept along the walls. I watched the clock on my computer screen blink as the seconds slipped by. Soon it was 5:00 pm. Teddy stood up and stretched.

"I think we got a pretty good start on this co-write today," he said, stretching his back.

I had nothing to do with the track that Teddy had just made. I had been a spectator as he had created his own track. There was no co-writing going on at all.

“You do?” I asked doubtfully.

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll email you the track,”

“Sounds good,” I said, forcing a smile. “Thanks a lot for your time,” I added.

Disappointment fell around me as I met Mingo back at our hotel room. □

□ “How’d it go?” he asked.

□

“Not great,” I admitted. “I basically just watched him make his own track. I had nothing to do with it.” □ □

“Hm. Maybe he just works really fast.” Mingo said.

“I guess I work really slow,” I replied.

“So will it work out, do you think?”

“I want it to so bad,” I said. “I don’t know. Maybe I just had an off day. Maybe we can try again.”

But as we soared back to Nova Scotia, I thought deeply about our writing experience, and my once-blossoming confidence in Teddy began to wilt. I shook my head as his song pumped into my ears. I needed to think positively. I wasn’t giving up on him. Not yet anyway.

## Step 16 - Deflate

"So," my manager's voice crackled through cell phone static into my ear, "Teddy has some time available for you in September and can work on three songs with you."

"Really?" I stepped out my front door into the sweet warmth of the summer sun. "That's great news!" I sat down on my front steps and smiled as my heart began to dance. Finally, things were moving forward and come September I would be forging my way toward a finished album. "I'd love to head to Los Angeles by the first of the month for a couple of weeks or so! We could get some great pre-production started on a couple of songs the first week and finish them up for sure—"

"No." Coleen cut me off. "No, Meaghan. He only has four days available for you. At the end of September."

"Four days? What do you mean?" My heart froze mid-leap.

"I mean, he says he can offer you four days in total to do all three songs," she explained. "He's got a lot going on right now with a few other albums he's finishing up. So he only has four days available at the end of September."

"But...I don't...How do you record three fully produced, awesome, perfect songs in four days?" I tried to imagine how in the world I could complete a song a day and love it enough to put it out into the world forever.

"You said he worked really quickly while you were in the studio in New York," Coleen said. "Maybe that's just how he works best."

I thought back to our day together. I remembered the way he had made decisions quickly, not waiting to hear my thoughts, or even ask for my opinion. I recalled the way he had brushed aside my desire to look for a different drum beat, and bass sound, promising to find them later. I had a feeling that I had gotten a pretty good picture of how he worked. It looked different now, in this daylight.

"I don't know," I said. "The odds of hitting three songs out of the park in four days are so small. I like to take my time finding the right sounds and exploring sonic options. I can't see how it's possible to pull this off."

"He also wants at least one of the songs he produces to be a co-write," she added.

"Well, I guess I could give co-writing with him another try," I said, recalling the painfully awkward session we had. "He writes really great songs." I tried to imagine the song we would write together.

An unfortunate scene appeared in my mind. Teddy feverishly writing a song within a few hours and me being dragged along behind, not able to keep up with his pace and not comfortable with the end result. "But he'd have to give me at least a couple of extra days to write a song. And how do I know the song we co-write will be good enough to get on the album?"

"The co-writing session would have to happen within the four day time line."

"Seriously?" My heart was in free-fall now with every new bit of disappointing information.

"Seriously," she said.

"I don't think that's possible," I said. "I can't write a new song, and produce it along with two other songs in just four days. What if I just write all three songs with Ron and Mingo ahead of time," I said. "That way we don't have to spend a day writing and we can devote all four days to production."

"He insists that at least one of the songs is a co-write," she said. "He obviously thinks you're talented, but he'll make more money on a song that he's both written and produced. He'll be able to collect royalties on the publishing side as well as making a profit off the production."

It made business sense for Teddy, but didn't make any sense for me. I didn't want to be contractually obligated to include a song on my album that hadn't even been written yet. Especially if I only had one day to write it with someone I had just met and didn't know very well, never mind the pressure of a return flight looming only days away.

I sighed, feeling what had promised to be a bright day turning into a dark one.

"There's more." She cleared her throat. "He doesn't want you to be in the studio while he's working."

"What does that mean?" I was stunned. He couldn't have meant while he was working on my songs. That would be ludicrous. "You mean while he's working on other people's albums, right? Of course I wouldn't expect to be

in his studio while he's working on other artists' music." I chuckled in that horribly awkward way you laugh when you wish you were completely misunderstanding the situation but know you aren't.

"No," she said. "Your music. He doesn't want you to be in the studio while he's working on your music."

My heart plummeted to the bottom of my ribcage as I tried to imagine what those four days would be like. Me dropping my songs off in the hands of a virtual stranger in the morning and picking them up at the end of the day, hoping they would be recognizable to me, one of them being a brand new song that I barely knew.

"It's not personal," she said. "Some producers just work that way. They don't like the artist to be in the room while they're working on the production of the songs. And lots of artists like to work that way as well. They're fine to show up at the end of a production session when the song is ninety percent done. They usually have a few revisions to make, but overall don't mind trusting their producer to get the songs to a good place."

"I don't work that way," I said, finally. "I definitely don't work that way." There was no way I was going to let go of my songs. I was there when they were conceived, I was going to hand-deliver them into the world for you to hear, and I was going to be there with them along every step of the way in-between.

There was only one more question I had to ask. "Just out of curiosity, how much does he want for his four days?"

"Yeah, that's the other clincher. It works out to about forty percent of your album budget."

"Forty percent?" I exhaled, dazed. I pressed the palm of my hand into my forehead. "So, let me get this straight. He wants to give me only four days to fully produce and finish three tracks. One of those three tracks has to be one that he co-writes with me and therefore isn't finished yet so I don't even know if it'll be a good song, a mediocre song, or a totally sucky song. He also wants to have full control over the production and basically banish me from the studio only to allow me in at the last minute to make any changes. And he wants to charge me forty percent of my album budget to do it."

Silence hung in the distance between our cell phones.

Coleen sighed. "Yes." She knew as well as I did that it wasn't going to work.

"Are they willing to budge on any of this?" I asked.

"No," she replied.

"Then my answer is no. It's not going to work," I said, my heart now lying still and limp at the bottom of my ribcage.

A pause, and then she spoke, sounding as tired as I felt. "Don't stop looking. Your producer is out there, Meaghan. We'll find him. Or her. Wherever he or she is. We can't give up."

"I know. Thanks for trying to make this work with Teddy," I said.

I sat defeated on my front steps and looked out at my front lawn. A breeze gently lifted my hair and I breathed the summer air deep into my lungs, wishing it would inflate my deflated heart. □

□

One name remained on my dream producer list. But he lived far away, in London, England, and the odds of him being available to work with me seemed as small as the Atlantic Ocean is large. □

□

"At this point, what have I got to lose?" I thought. I dialed Coleen back.

"Hey. I think we should to go England."

## Step 17 - Breathe

“You alright?” A twenty-something guy opened a tiny wooden door in a wall of mismatched bricks that looked like a mouth full of too many yellowing teeth in need of dental care.

I blinked. What an odd question for a stranger to ask me. Was I alright? I had woken up at four that morning, my internal clock refusing to adjust to UK time. So I was a little tired. But I was alright.

“I’m alright, yes. Thank you,” I answered and asked awkwardly, “Are you alright?”

“Good, yeah.” His eyebrows arched and a charming cockney accent flickered across each word. “Come on in then.”

He stood aside, holding the door open as Mingo and I lifted our guitars up over the crooked threshold.

I love London. I feel at home there. I think it must be the grey skies that give way to sun a minute later, then shower rain the next moment. It can't make up its mind either which makes me feel confident about my insecurities. And there are always so many insecurities knocking at my door when I go meet a new producer.

This particular matching was exceptionally nerve-wracking. I had never met Ash Howes. I was a huge fan of his work, though. He had been my first pick for producer, but I had assumed I didn't stand a chance working with him. But we had actually heard back from him. And we had talked on the phone once or twice. He seemed very nice.

So here we were. On a different continent. Spending more than half my album budget on four songs. I tried to be sure that this was it. That this time it was really going to work. But I had no idea.

We pulled our guitars up a set of narrow cement stairs, finally reaching a cramped hallway. Grammy awards—some broken—were piled on top of each other on a shelf, pointing our way to the studio in which we would spend the next five days. Five days to do four songs and half of my album budget. This had to work.

It was a tight timeline, almost as tight as Teddy's. But there were some very important differences. □

□

"I really enjoyed your last album," Ash said during our first phone conversation. His voice was steady and soft.

"You've heard it?" I asked. I hadn't expected that.

"Yeah, it's great," he said.

"What do you think of the new songs I sent? Do you think they're too written? Do you think they need to be reworked?" I asked.

"Do you mean them?" he asked.

"Every word," I said.

"Then they're done," he said.

"And you'd be okay with me being in the studio while we're working on them?" I asked.

"Where else would you be?"

"How do you feel about working with me?" I asked, finally.

"I feel really good about it," he answered.

My heart beat happily in response. It trusted him. I decided to trust him too.

"Let's make some music."

I could hear his smile.

The studio was everything a studio should be. Comfortably cluttered but not trashed, blinking coloured lights on equipment, a soft couch draped in colourful worn blankets. It was warm enough to take a nap but too exciting to entice sleep.

Ash Howes extended his hand. "Nice to finally meet you, Meaghan," he said. I desperately tried to gauge a vibe from him now that we were meeting face to face. Would this work? Would these next five days be successful? Or would they end the way so many other attempts on this album had ended?

He wasn't tall, but he wasn't short either. His head was shaved, and he wore casual jeans, a cool t-shirt and vivid kicks. I guessed him to be early forties, but a very youthful early forties.

I searched myself, feeling around for any doubts. But my heart kept its steady rhythm. I still trusted him.

“Nice to meet you too, Ash.” I exhaled.

“Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee? Tea and biscuits?”

Tea and biscuits. This is another reason I love England. “Maybe in a bit, thanks.”

“Well, shall we get started?” he asked. “We have a lot of ground to cover.”

I nodded. How on earth were we going to get it all done?

“These are my friends,” Ash said. I noticed the other guys in the room. “I was thinking they could help us out with some programming.”

“Cool,” I said, nodding to each of them. They smiled at me.

Ash pressed play. The first song was ready to go.

“What are you thinking for this one?” he asked.

“Well for this song, I was thinking...” □

□

I was interrupted by the ringing of Ash’s cell phone. A reminder that he was a big time producer, and I was a little nobody from Canada, with a stung heart. He took his cell phone out of his pocket.

“So sorry,” he said. “Let me just...” Without even checking to see who was calling he quickly shut his cell phone off and put it back in his pocket. And that’s where it stayed while we were in the studio.

I blinked, slightly amazed that someone of his calibre had decided to prioritize our session.

“You were saying?” he looked at me, wanting to hear my ideas.

My good feeling about him intensified.

The next four days were a blur of sounds. Mingo and I came to the studio each day, armed with our guitars. Ash was always there before us, with everything prepped and ready for our arrival. We worked quickly, creating bed tracks. I threw down some rough vocals. Ash hired talented musicians

to come in and play. A drummer, key players, horn players. He looked after everything, and with each passing day I trusted him more and more. I fell asleep often before my head hit the pillow, exhausted from a frenzy of sonic decision making. But it was happening. My songs were becoming real.

Finally it was time to do vocals. I had been dreading vocal day. These songs were by far the most challenging for me to perform. As I headed into the studio that day, I had no idea whether I could pull it off.

I stepped up to the mic. My headphones hugged my ears. I could hear every ounce of my breath coming back to me.

“Can you turn it down a little bit in my headphones?” I asked Ash through the booth's window. I cleared my throat. Ash ran the tape.

I started singing. But my throat tightened up. My voice cracked.

“Ugh. Can I try that take again?”

Ash had the tape ready to roll. I tried to push the notes out. But they wanted to stay in my lungs.

Five passes of the first song later, I was frustrated and embarrassed. Ash could feel it.

“Can I get you anything? A tea?” □□

“I can't seem to get past this,” I said, exasperated.

“Why don't you come out of the booth for a moment. We'll take five.”

I stepped out into the stairwell, turned on my cell phone and called Ron.

“Ron, I can't do this. I can't sing these songs. Why did I write them the way I did? The notes are too high. And too low. And too fast. I can't sing them. I can't sing.” My voice cracked and my heart slouched further with each blow I dealt myself.

“What are you talking about you can't sing?” Ron said boldly. “You're Meaghan god-damn-Smith. You won a Juno. You're signed to one of the last standing major labels. You're in London, England recording your second record, that you have worked tirelessly on. You're there because we believe in you. Yeah, these songs are a little more challenging but that's what you wanted. That's why you wrote them the way you did.”

He was right, I had wanted to challenge myself. I had to do it. "Yeah," I said. "But how?"

"You just do it. Now get in there and sing your ass off. I want you to come home with no ass when you're done. You're going to be ass-less because you've just sung it off. Got it?"

I laughed into my cell phone. "Got it."

I walked back into the warm studio. The guys were chatting and laughing. Ash motioned me over.

"Would you be more comfortable if these guys left? And it was just you and me here?" □□

I thought for a moment. "Yes," I said.

Ash nodded. He had thought so. He was so good at this.

"Guys, you want to go get some Indian food or something? We're just going to knock out some vocals. Come back in two or three hours?"

Mingo sat next to me as the guys gathered their coats and readied themselves to go. "Do you want me to stay?" he asked. "Cause I don't mind staying." □

I knew he loved Indian food and wanted to hang out with the guys and talk gear. "You go ahead," I said.

I stood in front of the mic again. Now it was just me and Ash. I put the headphones on. Ash's voice came through them.

□

"We're going to do this one section at a time," he said. "So you just worry about the first chorus for now. Then we'll move on to the second one. Then we'll go back and get the verses." He paused, peering at me through the window of the booth and smiled. "You can do this."

I smiled back. I closed my eyes. I took a breath.

## Step 18 - Freeze

Mingo and I crept along a treacherously snow-drifted highway in western Canada. We were on a Christmas tour. Every day I eagerly checked my emails between sound checks, show times and flights, hoping to see an email from Ash with an attachment. I opened my email on my phone for the fiftieth time that day. My heart sank. Still nothing.

I looked out the windshield. Snow blew sideways across the road. Mingo's knuckles were just as white as he clutched the steering wheel. We drove past a car that had slid off the road. Craning our necks, we checked to see to see if anyone needed help, but there was no one in the car. Another driver must have already picked them up.

“Seriously,” he said through gritted teeth. “Touring in the winter in Canada. Maybe not such a great idea.”

“You say that every year,” I said, but silently agreed as we drove past yet another car in the snowy ditch.

My phone beeped. I looked down.

“Oh! Here it is! Have A Heart from Ash!” I plugged my phone in to the car stereo and pressed play. □

□ Music bubbled up from the rental car speakers. We listened.

My heart floated suspended within me. I waited for it to move. For it to skip. For it to even flutter. But it was still.

The song ended. Mingo opened his mouth, but nothing came out and he closed it.

I pressed repeat and listened again, urging my heart to tell me what it thought. Still nothing.

I looked at Mingo. “What do you think?” □□

“It's...Um...I mean it's good...” his voice trailed off as he tried to articulate what he wasn't feeling.

The wind howled against our car. It shuddered in response. I should have been terrified, but I wasn't. I felt nothing. “It's exactly what I asked for. It's sonically great. The parts are all there. I don't get it,” I said.

I pressed play again, listening intently. All the decisions I had made about drum sounds, bass lines, and vocal harmonies were present. The keys I had asked for were right where we put them. Everything was sonically pristine. So why was my heart so still?

My phone beeped again. Friends Like You had just arrived. Maybe Have A Heart just wasn't quite finished yet. I pressed play.

Friends Like You pounded through the speakers. But my heart was still.

Get You Back arrived in the next email. Again, I pressed play, hoping for even a twitch from my heart.

Nothing.

I knew I should have been beyond excited. I should have been ecstatic. These songs, so long in the making, so challenging to write and so painful to bring into reality were finally in existence. But as my new music filled our rental car, all I was getting from my heart was radio silence, as though it was as frozen as the wind that blew across our path.

## Step 19 - Beg

Ron stared fixedly at a stain on his carpet. Have A Heart boomed through his studio speakers. I was hoping it would have more impact playing through his high-quality equipment. Maybe then it would reach my silent heart.

The song ended. I felt the same disappointing stillness. We sat in silence for a few moments, the air around me ringing with emptiness. Ron put his fingertips together and looked up.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I searched myself, trying to form a sentence out of the nothingness I felt. I was afraid to admit that after all we had been through, to finally have gone to England to record with Ash Howes I still somehow felt empty when I heard my songs. □

□

“Well, it's everything I asked for. Ash did everything right. The recording and sound quality are superb, and I loved working with him. And I think my vocal performances are pretty good. But...”

Ron waited, his eyebrows raised. “But?”

I had to say it. I had to get it out into the open and let the notes fall where they may. I took a deep breath and before I could change my mind, I blurted out “It's not moving me. It's like my heart doesn't care.” I froze, waiting for Ron's reaction.

He closed his eyes, nodding in agreement. I exhaled relief.

“There's great stuff in there,” he agreed. “You're right, it's exactly what we asked for.” He hit play again. “But these drum sounds you chose, for example,” he spoke over the song. “They're too...pointy.”

I listened intently. Suddenly I felt a flutter between my lungs.

“And this synth thingy,” he waved a hand in the air, mimicking the slicing sound of a synth I had chosen. “It's too harsh. Your voice is unique. You need sonics that are going to accentuate your sound, not fight against it. This bass for example,” the fuzzy deep notes of the bass sound Ash had programmed thrummed in the room. “It's a good sound for you. It matches

the sonic world your voice is in. But a bunch of this other stuff just isn't working.”

My heart thumped.

“Your voice is unique, Meaghan. It's not the kind of voice that would ever win American Idol.”

I flinched a little, though winning American Idol had never been a goal of mine.

“I mean that as a compliment. Don't get me wrong, those are some talented singers, but your voice. Your voice stands out. Your voice is soft and round and strong. It can be breathy or focused. It's pure and clear. It's special. It's one of the reasons I was excited to work with you in the first place.”

I smiled. I knew I could never compete with the crazy vocal acrobatics of so many current pop singers. But I believed in my voice and wanted to explore my limits.

We listened through the rest of the tracks. Ron pointed out other sounds and parts that fought against my voice. The music ended.

“I chose these sounds though,” I said, as the silence settled back around the room. I felt embarrassed that I hadn't heard it back in England.

“Well, it was a quick trip. We tried to get a lot done. Maybe you didn't have enough time to really hear your production choices,” Mingo said.

Ron concurred. “You're the kind of artist that...shall we say...needs time.”

I felt the blood rush into my cheeks. I knew they were right. But I didn't want to be that kind of artist. I wanted to be successful. I wanted to be confident. Why couldn't I be the kind of artist who could whip off fifty killer songs in a month, go into a studio for a few weeks with a great producer and confidently bang out an album? Why did I struggle so much? Why didn't I know myself well enough? Why did I have to make everything so hard? Panic began to rise in my chest.□

“So, what does this mean?” I asked, my heart burning. “I don't have the money to go back to England. And Ash is so busy. We used up all our time with him and he's had to move on to other projects. He gave us exactly what we asked for, but listening to these songs with you, I feel like I have to make some serious changes. These tracks are supposed to be finished. We're still so far behind.” My head began to throb.

"I've blown through my entire budget. I've been through my list of dream producers. I've literally been halfway around the world. Twice. And I feel like I'm barely any closer to being finished this album."

I looked from Mingo to Ron and tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

"Why do I just keep blowing chances? Why do I keep screwing things up?" I bit my lip, fighting back tears of frustration.

□

"Meaghan," Ron said, "Every artist goes on their own crazy ride when they make something worthwhile. You don't hear about the growing pains and tough times they went through to get to that end product. All you see is the finished product. "

"I wish people talked about their failures as well as their successes," I said, angry now. "It would sure make me feel better to know I'm not the only total screw-up in the world."

"Maybe you should write a book," Ron said, laughing. I wasn't in the mood for joking though. "Look all I'm saying is that this is part of the journey. You have to go through some of this stuff to get to where you want to be."

"Okay but how am I going to finish this album?" I was starting to freak out. "Where am I going to find another producer who can help me fix these tracks and finish all the other ones that haven't even been started yet?" I looked from Ron to Mingo. "I need someone who gets my sound. Someone who knows what I'm looking for." From Mingo to Ron. "Someone who's on the same page as me. Someone I'm comfortable with..." my voice trailed off as the obvious answer dawned on me.

My heart thrummed steadily. I had my answer.

"You," I said, pointing to Mingo. "And you," I pointed to Ron. "Both of you. You can be my producers."

They sat in stunned silence.

"Oh come on!" I said excitedly. "It'll be fun!" □□

"Fun!" Ron said. "Meaghan, I have a full-time job. I'm an A&R guy, remember?"

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□

"Yeah, but you're also a producer," I pointed out. "And you just told me

exactly what kinds of sounds I need to find for these songs. You get it. You get me! And Mingo, you know too! You know what kind of programming I'm going for. You know how to get those sounds. You can co-produce this record. We already know we work well together. All three of us basically wrote the entire album together in this room." My heart pumped faster. I was definitely onto something.

Ron eyed me cautiously. Mingo, his head tilted back slightly, looked unsure.

"Please," I said. "I'm begging you. I know I'm a pain in the arse. I know I'm picky and I'm frustrating, but I know what I want. And I won't quit till I get it. I know we can do this album. I know we can!"

Mingo puckered his lips the way he does when he's thinking very hard. Then he grinned. "I'm up for trying it out."

My face burst into a smile. "Thank you!" I said to Mingo. I shifted my gaze. "Ron?"

"Well." He paused. "Okay."

"Really?" I jumped up from my seat.

"But I'll have to check with the head of the label to make sure it's okay." He was interrupted by my huge hug. I turned and embraced Mingo, my head against his chest as I held him.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I said in time to my own heartbeat. "I promise, this is going to work."

"It better," Ron said.

Mingo smiled.

## Step 20 - Work

"I was up all night," Ron said. He spit a huge glob of strawberry gum into the garbage pail next to his desk. The pail was dotted with previously chewed pink chunks, giving the air a faint strawberry scent. His hair was even more twisted and wiry than usual and his eyes were red-rimmed and puffy.

"Were you?" I plopped my bag down next to my usual chair in his studio. "Doing what? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is awesome," he flashed a deliriously tired smile and spun around in his chair to face his computer. "Check this out." He pressed play and Have A Heart soared through his speakers.

I sat down in my chair and listened as a new, surging drum beat pulsed beneath a breath-taking ascending piano part. My voice floated over top of the new sounds, right where Ash had put it. And it was everything I had ever hoped it would be.

My heart burst within my chest. "This! This is it!" I yelled over the music. "This is what I wanted it to feel like! To sound like!"

"I know!" Ron yelled with glee.

We both looked at Mingo, whose eyes twinkled as he smiled .

The next few weeks were made up of days and weeks of creating new sonic landscapes. Mingo and I walked through the freezing Toronto streets to Ron's studio each day excited to leave eight hours later with more chunks of finished songs in our pockets. Piece by piece, the songs began to shift into place. While Ron took his evenings and weekends to catch up on his A&R duties, and spend time with his family, Mingo and I would work feverishly in our little apartment, searching for more sounds, recording what we could on our laptop. Mingo began programming drum loops while I tweaked my songs till they were as perfect as I could get them.

Monday mornings couldn't come soon enough. My heart was always the first to rise, thumping me awake with eager anticipation of another day filled with music. Each beat, each note, each day brought me closer to finally finishing the album.

□

I bought a sheet of bristol board from the dollar store and listed the song titles in a neat column on the left side. Different instruments and sounds were written in a row across the top. Every time we finished recording a new instrument I would check off another box on our chart. Slowly it began to fill.

Mingo and I often arrived at Ron's studio before him. We would set up the computer and review what we had done the session previous, listening intently. I would close my eyes and focus on my heart. Did it still flutter and flare at the sound of my new songs? If it did, we could move on. If it didn't, something needed to be fixed and I would make notes to review.

Mingo would debut the tracks he had laboured on during our off-time. His homemade head-bobbing drum loops, thick and rich bass sounds, and glinting guitar licks adorned the songs we had written. I reveled in watching his confidence grow in his own abilities as a songwriter and producer.

Ron would rush in, a flurry of musical ideas and twisted hair, his strawberry gum scent following him wherever he went. He would listen to what we had done, eyes closed, head cocked to one side. I could see him hearing delicious melodies we hadn't added yet. He would sit down at his computer and make those hooks a reality. I loved seeing him work, easily plucking intricate melodies from his keyboards.

Soon we had pieced the songs together enough to take them into Canterbury Studios, a cozy recording space tucked away in Parkdale, Toronto. Live drums, keys from a glimmering grand piano, and rich guitars added fullness and dimension to each song. Glowing, velvety live strings and bright bursts of horns dazzled my ears.

If a song wasn't working, we dismantled it, examining each fragment carefully before reassembling it, replacing anything that my heart didn't approve of. It was satisfying, exhilarating, and exhausting. Each night I plunged into a deep sleep that seemed to last only minutes till my heart raced awake each morning.

Two months passed. My demanding heart and our long work days were catching up to Ron. His other artists needed his help, and his emails began to pile high. The label began to wonder if we would ever finish our album. Mingo and I pushed forward, every bit of musical progression inching us toward the finish line. I lost track of the days. My life was either in Ron's studio or in our tiny Toronto flat, but no matter where I was, music whirred nonstop through my brain.

Then one sunny, slushy spring day, all the boxes were checked. The three of us stood in front of our completed chart. □

□ “So...” Mingo said.

“That's it?” Ron finished the question.

“That's it.” I exhaled. “It's finished.”

My heart agreed, and finally settled into a slow, rhythmic rest.

## Step 21 - Retreat

Steve Keane, the head of Warner Music Canada, shook Mingo's hand. He hugged me, my face pressed into his chest. We let go and I took a step back. His dark eyes sparkled at me from behind his thick glasses.

“So,” I asked. “What do you think?” The album had been circulated to the head of each department. Today they were weighing in.

“In a word?” he asked.

Steve had been with me from the beginning. He had believed in me. He had vouched for me, had given me chance after chance, all with the belief that I would deliver something great. My heart hung suspended mid-thump.

“I love it. It's great.”

“You do?” I smiled.

“Yes. It's definitely a big leap forward,” he said, holding up a hand. “But there's a lot of potential for some great crossover tracks at radio. And the whole thing sounds killer. It's a great progression from your last album. We're all really excited about it.”

My heart fluttered happily. I had passed the first listening test. □  
□

Now, Steve told me, it was time to decided on a couple of singles. This was new territory. My last album had been such a different process, and I had never chosen a single.

“Do you have a favourite song on the album?” Steve asked.

“Well, I know I'm not supposed to,” I admitted. “But I do. I poured my soul into every song, but Mirror is so meaningful to me. And I'm so pleased with how it turned out.” I looked to Mingo.

“Mirror is my favourite too,” he said.

“I agree,” Steve said. “But I'm not sure we should lead with Mirror. I think it's the strongest song on the album, but I think we should hit radio with something more upbeat. We have to re-introduce you. It's been a while since your last release, and you've never gone to radio with anything like this before.□□”

“Have A Heart.” I said. “I think we should lead with Have A Heart.”

Steve nodded. “Have A Heart it is. We'll service it to radio soon. If all goes well, we'll follow up with Mirror.”

My heart bounced happily as Mingo and I left the Warner head office. We still had to wait for radio to weigh in, but for now the universe smiled on me. My album was finished and it was going to be released soon.

“So, you must be excited.” My friend Jen smiled over her tea at me. “Your album is coming out soon.”

“I'm thrilled!” I said. “Honestly, there were times I wasn't sure it was going to happen.” I pulled the soggy teabag from my mug and plopped it on the side of the saucer.

“I know how you feel,” she said, touching her belly. I smiled. She had been waiting so long to be a mother. And to twins no less.

“How are you feeling?” I asked. “Can you feel them kicking yet? Any weird cravings?” ☐☐

“No weird cravings, and no kicking. Yet.” She smiled. “I'm just brutally tired. All the time.”

“You know what? Me too,” I said. “For different reasons, obviously!” I added, laughing. “But I've felt kind of sick for a long time now. Like, a month. I must have that flu that's going around.”

“Really?” Jen asked. “What are your symptoms?” ☐☐

“It's weird,” I said. “I'm not achy or coughing. But I feel super nauseous all day. And everything smells weird.” I sniffed my blueberry muffin, the kind I ordered every time I went to The Bike And Bean, and wrinkled my nose. “Do you think they changed their recipe?”

Jen eyed me. “You're tired?” she asked. ☐☐

“Yeah, even after a full night's sleep. I must just be so drained from working non-stop on the album for months.”

“When was your last period?”

“My last—But what would that—” I couldn't remember. I had been so focused on finishing the album that I hadn't even noticed it had stopped coming.

Jen took another sip of her tea, her dark eyes locked on mine over the top of her cup.

“I'm not—I mean, I can't be.” I shook my head. “No. There's no way.” I picked up my muffin and took a big bite. I gagged.

“Meags,” Jen said. “You have to go to your doctor.”

“Jen, I'm not pregnant,” I gasped after a gulp of tea. “I can't be pregnant. I'm about to go do this promo tour, and then I have to release my album. You know, the one I've been working on forever?” I could feel my cheeks flushing. I quickly shed my jacket.

□

“Okay,” she said, her gaze unwavering. “Well, if you are, it'll just be a detour. You can still live your life. You can still release your album.”

“No, for real no,” I insisted, pushing my muffin away.

“It might be nothing,” she said. “But it might be something. I still think you should go get checked out soon. Like today. Maybe right now.”

I hugged her goodbye and got into my car. I sat very still in the driver's seat, listening carefully to my body. Most of the time I wasn't particularly aware of my own physical existence, but now I needed to pay attention. Did I feel different? Was I just sick? Or was I pregnant?

I imagined a baby, tiny and bean shaped, growing in the centre of my body. My heart leapt.

“No,” I said out loud. “I'm not. I'm not. I can't be.” I touched my belly. It felt exactly the same way it always had. No difference at all. I imagined myself going on my promotional tour, the album coming out, touring it hard, playing festivals, visiting radio stations, and doing interviews for the next few years before moving on to record another album. There was no baby in that picture.

My heart didn't move.

I imagined a baby again. A tiny soul, encapsulated in the form of a beautiful, pink, turquoise-eyed baby, resting peacefully in Mingo's arms.

A surge of beats erupted from beneath my ribs. I gasped as my hand gripped my chest.

I fumbled for my cell phone.

“Hey Mingo, what are you doing right now?”

“Just working on music stuff,” he said.

“Will you come to the doctor's office with me right now?”

“Of course.” Concern filled his voice. “Are you okay?”

“I don't think so.”

## Step 22 - Ache

My doctor's back was to me as she bent over a file folder. It lay open on the counter in front of her.

“It says here,” she said nonchalantly, “that yes, you are pregnant. Have you been taking a prenatal vitamin? That's very important, especially at this stage of development.”

All sound fell away. Nothing existed in that moment but Mingo, and me, and a baby. Three hearts beating. Mingo blinked at me. I stared back at him. Our faces matched, eyes wide, mouth slightly open, our breath being taken away.

Then in a rush, my senses returned. Simultaneously I felt wonder. Hope. Fear. Sick. So sick. My nausea had not confined itself to the mornings. It was ever-present. I woke up sick, ate breakfast and was sick, took my vitamins and got sick, went back to bed feeling sick.

And then trepidation. Anxiety. Questions boiled in my brain.

What about the album? It was just about to be released. How could I work it when I was so sick? How could I tour it? How could I get up on stage and sing, feeling like I was about to throw up every second? If I wasn't working, neither was Mingo. If I was too sick to work, what would we live on? How would we survive?

What would my fans think when I wasn't out working and touring right away? Would they lose interest? Would they still support it? Would they care?

What would everyone at the label say? What was Ron going to think? I had pushed him so hard to help me create this album. Would it all be for nothing?

We staggered in a fog from the doctor's office, blinking into the bright sunlight. We drove home in silence.

Mingo helped me up the stairs and pulled the sheets of our bed back. I lay listless as my mind and stomach swirled. □

□“It's good news. Isn't it?” I asked weakly.□□

“Of course it is!” Mingo whispered into my hair. He kissed my head. “I'm so happy. Are you happy?”□

“I'm happy,” I said. “I just have no idea how we are going to do this. I mean, we've always talked about having children some day, but it was always somewhere off in a sunny, hazy distant future.”

He nodded.

“I guess this is the future,” I laughed shakily.

“Go to sleep,” Mingo coaxed. “We have a bit of time off before the promo tour starts. We'll figure everything out. It'll be alright.”

I closed my eyes and fell asleep to the beat of my own heart and the thought that there were now two hearts in my body.

I had no answers when we hit the road to do our promotional radio tour. Have A Heart had been serviced to radio as our first single and was starting to take off. Every day my inbox was filled with notices about new stations that had added the song. Everyone was so excited about the progress. And all I could feel was sick.

I hid backstage at our Vancouver showcase. The room was full of important guests, radio programmers, album reviewers, writers, musicians, and promoters. My stomach lurched as I peered out from my green room.

“Are you going to be okay?” Mingo asked.

“I have no idea.” I clutched my ever-churning gut. “I am so sick.”

“You have to tell me if this is too much for you.” Mingo put both hands on my shoulders and turned me toward him. “You and the baby are priority above everything. You know that, right? You don't have to do this if you can't.”

“I have to do this,” I said. “I would never forgive myself if I gave up on the album at this point.”

“Okay,” he relented. “But you say the word and we'll go home.”

As I stood on stage that night, my body disappeared and only my voice and the audience remained. I sang till my breath ran out, and rushed off stage to meet everyone who had come. As soon as I stepped onto the concrete floor, my nausea returned. Still, I shook hands and smiled, thanking my guests for their attendance.

“That was fun!” Ron said. He had joined us on tour as our keyboard player. “Do you guys wanna go get some Indian food?”

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□

I gagged. “No, no, you guys go ahead,” I waved my hand. “I'm just gonna go to bed.”□□

“Meaghan, it's only like, nine o'clock,” Ron said.

“Ha! I know. But it's past my bedtime. I must be getting old,” I laughed. Turning away from the band I clamped my hand over my mouth and ran to the restroom to refund everything I had been able to choke down that day.

Mingo helped me back to our hotel room and tucked me in.

“When are we going to tell them?” He sat on the side of the bed.

“I have no idea. It's still not three months yet,” I said. “This is my first pregnancy. Things can still go wrong. It's probably best not to say anything until we're sure.”

He kissed my cheek and headed out for dinner with the band.

The tour continued, my nausea getting harder and harder to conceal. I woke up every morning sick to my stomach and it continued all day. Every club we played, hotel we stayed in, and rental car we drove had a new and unpleasant smell.

One morning, after a particularly brutal bout of retching, I met the band in the hotel for lobby call wearing a huge scarf to hide the broken blood vessels in my neck.

“Good morning,” Ron greeted me cheerfully. “Or is it?” He peered at me.

“I'm fine,” I managed through a hoarse throat.

“You sure? Cause you don't look fine.”

I swallowed hard. My heart thumped furiously with questions about whether I should tell him.

“Meaghan, if something's not okay you can tell me.”

“I feel sick,” I admitted.

“Like, sick to your stomach sick?” he asked.

The word stomach made me gag. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, do you think you have the flu?”

“No,” I said definitely.

“How do you know? Do you want to go to a doctor?”

“I don't need to go to a doctor.”

“How long have you been feeling like this?” he asked.

“Oh, going on two months now,” I sighed.

Ron's brow furrowed with concern.

“And I'll probably be sick for another seven or eight months,” I added.

His eyebrows raised. “Are you—” his lips silently formed the word—  
“pregnant?”

“I'm sorry Ron,” I said nodding. I felt my eyes filling with tears.

□

“Are you kidding me?” he asked, a huge smile spreading across his face. He pulled me into a hug. □

□ I blinked the loose tears down my cheeks.

“No, I'm not kidding,” I said weakly into his shoulder.

“Mingo, you old dog,” Ron said as Mingo walked over to us.

“Does he know?” Mingo asked. I nodded.

Ron shook Mingo's hand. “You guys are going to be parents!” he whispered excitedly.

I wiped the stray tears away. “Ron, what does this mean for the album?”

“Well, the timing of things is certainly going to have to change. But don't worry about that. We'll get it all sorted out. You guys are going to have a baby!” I couldn't help but smile at his optimism. It was infectious.

“I know,” I moaned through my smile. “I'm just worried about the release. We worked so hard to finish the record.” Mingo put his arms around my shoulders.

“Honestly guys, don't stress about it. Making music is great, but nothing will compare to how you're going to feel about that little person when you have him. Him?” he asked. “Or is it her?”

“I have no idea. All I know is that it's making me sick. All the time,” I grumbled.

“Can you finish the tour?” Ron asked seriously. “You know your health and the baby comes before all of this,” he added, waving his hand in the air.

“I know. And I can finish the tour.” There were only a few dates left. I was determined not to give up. “In the meantime, please don't say anything to anyone.”

“Your secret is safe,” Ron said, his hand over his heart. “Here, let me get that.” He lifted my guitar case into the van. We did our best to get through the rest of tour. Mingo watched me continuously. He helped make sure I ate enough nutritious food and took my vitamins even though I couldn't keep much down. He tucked me into bed every night by seven.

The last show was at the Drake Hotel in Toronto. Relief swept over me as I sang my last note and did my last round of the room. I had made it through the promotional tour. We were scheduled to fly home the following day. Now all I needed to do was to sleep.

An hour after falling asleep, I awoke with a start, my stomach churning. I barely made it to the washroom before throwing up everything I had eaten that day. I brushed my teeth and went back to bed. But a half hour later, I was running to the toilet again. Seven or eight trips later, Mingo was on the phone as I stumbled back to bed. □

□

“My wife needs a cab,” he was saying into the receiver. “We have to go to the hospital.”□

□

A few minutes later we were at St Michael's Emergency. The kind nurses and doctors took me in right away, hooked me up to an IV and gave me anti-nausea medication. It was like a switch was turned off and for the first time in months I felt relief. They ordered an ultrasound immediately.

Mingo held my hand as a technician squelched cold gel onto my exposed belly. □

□

“And, here's your baby,” she said, moving the wand across my abdomen. Relief washed over me as I looked at the fuzzy picture of our little one. Two tiny arms and legs twitched and moved on their own. Mingo squeezed my hand.

“You can hear the heartbeat too if you want,” she said. □

□

Whoosh-whoosh. Whoosh-whoosh. Whoosh-whoosh. The sound of a determined tiny heart filled my ears. Tears rolled down my face and collected in my hair as I lay on my back listening to my baby's little heart. My other heart.

“Everything looks good,” she added. “That's a very strong heartbeat. You guys will be able to get out of here soon.”□□

Mingo squeezed my shoulder. “We should probably stay another night at the hotel. But I think we're going to have to make a phone call first. We have to get Warner to change the time of our flights back to Halifax.”

I tried to imagine what I was going to say to Steve Kane. Would his reaction be similar to Ron's? Would he be supportive? Or would he be disappointed? Would the label drop me? Would I still have a career?

“She's right here,” Mingo said into his cell. “She has something she wants to tell you.”

□

“Hi Meaghan,” Steve's warm voice was full of worry. “Mingo says you're at the hospital.”

“Steve,” I said, my voice quavering. “I'm—I'm sick.”

“You are?” he asked.

“Yes, I'm—I'm—” I stammered, trying to form the sentence I was afraid to utter. I just had to say it and let whatever was meant to be, be. “I'm pregnant.”

“You are?” His voice lightened. “Well that's wonderful!”

I felt myself smile. “It is?” □□

“Of course!” Steve said. “Kids are awesome, you'll see.”

“What does this mean for the album and the release and everything?” I asked, unable to conceal the uncertainty in my voice.

“Well the first single is out, and it's doing pretty good,” he said. “We'll have to take a break for a while. You're going to need some time to get through this, and you'll want some time after the baby's born.”

“I don't want to take time off.”

“It doesn't sound like you have a choice, darling.”

I sighed. He was right. I couldn't keep going.

“You just need to get home, have some down time, and don't worry about anything. We'll figure out where we go from here. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But I want to get back to work as soon as possible.”

□

“I know,” Steve laughed. “No one doubts your work ethic. You get home safe. We'll talk to you soon.” He hung up.

The plane jostled us back to Halifax where once again, Mingo helped me up the stairs and into bed where I stayed for the next seven months.

## Step 23 - Break

□

I pulled on the twisted sheets of our bed. My huge belly had become so cumbersome and it was difficult to roll onto my side without having to totally rearrange pillows and blankets in the process. My hands touched my hard, full belly. It had reached its capacity, but there were still two weeks left to go. I felt the little being inside me shift, as if trying to get comfortable too.

Sleep was a break from the still ever-present nausea and constant ache of my body. I closed my eyes, begging it to come to me and give me the reprieve I so desperately needed.

Whoosh! A rush of warm water gushed onto our bed. I gasped, my eyes popping open in wide surprise. My heart thundered in my chest.

“What! What is it?” Mingo asked in a frantic, sleepy panic.

“I think—I mean I’m pretty sure my water just broke!” My lips began to tremble as I pushed back the sheets. Our bed was soaked with clear liquid.

“Seriously?” Mingo jumped out of bed and turned on the light.

“Seriously,” I said. □

□

Mingo helped me stand on shaky legs. More water ran down my leg.

□

□

“This is it!” he said, his eyes no longer drowsy, but awake with adrenaline.

“This is it, we’re going to have a baby!” □

“I guess so!” I said breathlessly, feeling a tension begin in my belly. “I’m pretty sure I’m having a contraction.”

“Whoa, already?” Mingo ran a hand through his unruly bed head. “You stay here, I’ll grab our stuff!” He dashed from the room to load the car up with hospital bags we had packed only days before.

□

I sat in the silence of the middle of the night, my heart racing in my chest. We would leave our little house as two people and come back as three. It didn't matter if I was ready or not. It didn't matter if I thought I could do it. It was happening. I was going to be a mother. A full day later I lay struggling to push in a hospital bed. I had lost track of time. I had lost track of myself. All I knew was that something was wrong. My heart pumped to the best of its ability, but I knew I was in trouble.

"It's been five hours of active labour," I heard a nurse whisper to my doctor. "And twenty-seven hours of labour before that." □□

My doctor nodded.

□

"Meaghan, can you hear me?" she asked. Her face floated before me. I could barely nod but I could hear her.

"Can you push anymore? Or do you need some help?"

□

"I can't. Please, I need help," I whimpered. I used the last of my energy to form those words. My body was finished. My heart felt silent. Mingo clutched my limp hand. My doctor turned to the nurse.

"Get the specialists in here right away," she said under her breath.

And then everything went dark. I came to and could hear waves beating on a shore. Steady and rhythmic. Or was that a heart beat? I blinked my eyes. Was I on the beach under a searing sun? No, it was a huge light. I could see the individual light bulbs. And there was a high, cement ceiling past that. A team of masked doctors pulled on me once, twice, and all of a sudden, my full belly fell empty.

"He's here, Meaghan! Our baby's here!" Mingo exclaimed. I turned my eyes toward his face. There were tears in his eyes.

Then I remembered. I was in the hospital. I was having a baby.

A tiny cry as if from an angry little kitten pierced the sterile room. I gasped and looked down to see two little arms reaching into the air.

I closed my eyes and smiled, letting the tears escape my eyes on their own. I was too tired to help them along. His spirited cries continued, a sign that he was alive and healthy, and that was all that mattered to me.

A nurse laid him on my bare chest, his dark-haired head resting just above my heart. His cries ceased immediately, his tiny warm body rising and falling as his lungs took their first few breaths.

"He recognizes your heartbeat," the nurse said, smiling. "He knows you."

I smiled and kissed him. "Is that true?" I whispered against his soft head. "Well, I know your heartbeat too."

"So, you sustained some pretty serious damage during the labour and delivery," my doctor spoke the words slowly. "It'll be some time before you can move around easily again."

□

"Like, how long?" I asked. My first few weeks of being a mother had been in a hospital bed and I was hopeful that I could leave soon. I wanted to sleep in my own bed with Mingo and let little baby River see the home we had made

for him. I wanted to sit on my deck in the sunshine. I wanted to walk along the nature trails by my house. And I wanted to get back to work.

“It's hard to say at this point. You might need some reconstructive surgery, but we won't know till you heal up a bit more. In the meantime, try to walk if you can. It will help you heal.”

Reconstructive surgery? My mind reeled as I wrapped my head around my broken body, thinking of all the things I would give to have it back to normal. I tried to swing my legs off the hospital bed. Pain shot across my hips and through my body. I cried out. □□

“Just go really slowly,” she coaxed. “This is going to take time.”

She left a prescription for pain medication on my bedside table. I turned to Mingo.

“I don't have time,” I said through frustrated tears. “Albums have an expiry date. I need to get back to work before this one runs out.”

“I know,” he said. “But you just had a baby. And you basically can't walk. We have no choice. This is just going to take as long as it takes.”

I knew he was right. But we were running out of money. I hadn't worked for more than half a year. And the worst-possible-case-scenario was that Warner would deem the album too old and want to either let me go or move on to another project.

□

I had no choice though. I lay in bed helplessly day after day, waiting to heal. My nausea had been replaced with ever-present pain in my hips and back. I forced myself to walk with the help of a walker. I swung one leg in front of the other, going a bit further down our hospital wing each day. And every day I imagined myself inching closer to being able to properly tour my album.□

Baby River saved me from sinking into deep despair. His soft little body, his tiny but strong fingers clasping mine, his tiny cries and squeals through the night burned themselves into my heart. The three of us began to learn each other. I started to recognize the sound of his different cries. Mingo strummed on the ukulele when he needed calming. I nursed him every two hours and Mingo changed his diapers. We snuggled him and loved him through the exhausting hours. I was supposed to be resting and healing but I had never been so tired in my life.

□

After three weeks in the hospital we were finally discharged. My mom and dad moved in with us for eight weeks while I recovered.

Months passed. I slowly regained mobility in my legs and was able to walk to the end of my street and back, adding a little more distance each day.

River's blue eyes brightened, and he went from his teeny newborn-sleepy state to a darling, chubby, pink-cheeked baby boy.

Ron checked in by phone every now and then. "How you feeling?" he asked.  
□□

"A little better every day," I responded, as River squealed and chirped from his jolly jumper. "In fact, I almost feel normal. Almost."

"That's great to hear!" I could hear the smile on his face.

"I'm not sure I'll ever feel normal," I said. "But it's a new normal I guess."

"So, what are your thoughts on getting back to work?"

"My thoughts?" I repeated, watching River as he bounced happily. My heartbeat was steady in my chest, giving me strength with every thump.

"My thoughts are, that I'm ready to get back to work."□□

"Finally!" Ron shouted into the phone.

"Finally," I agreed.

"Everyone at the label is good to move forward with Mirror. We want to release it to radio in the next few months," he told me.

My heart fluttered with excitement.

"We're basically starting back at square one, you realize," he warned. "A lot of time has passed."

"I know," I sighed. "I couldn't have done anything differently though." I reached out to River and his chubby little fingers automatically curled around mine. He giggled and turned his head away from me, eager to get back to jumping.

"You know," Ron said. "Most people don't get to release an album once. Here you are getting to release the same one twice. I'd say you're pretty lucky."

□

"I'm starting to believe that," I said. "It's been a long road. But I really believe in Mirror. It's my strongest song. It's the best I have to offer."

"I guess we'll see," said Ron.

"We'll see," I agreed.

My heart flipped and flopped as I imagined my voice floating over radio waves, spinning off record players, reaching through headphones, flowing from my throat, twisting over distance and connecting with your ears.

## Step 24 - Have A Heart

"Ugh." Mingo fell face first on to our hotel bed, his voice muffled in the mattress. "I have never even imagined being this tired," he whispered.

"I hear you," I whispered back from the opposite side of the bed. We had finally gotten River back to sleep after walking the hotel room floor for an hour and a half in our attempt to keep him quiet, sparing our sleeping neighbors his mid-night cries.

"We have to be up in 40 minutes to catch our next flight," Mingo mumbled.

Panic triggered my heart into action. I hadn't slept for longer than two hours at a time in months and I was getting even less sleep on the road. I had skipped a few doctor appointments to be on tour. My body was still working on healing. It had been months since River's birth, but I still had a long path to recovery ahead of me. My mind was in a constant state of fog. I couldn't focus on anything. I was forgetting what cities we were in. I couldn't remember my own lyrics. My body ached. My eyes burned. My thoughts were so dark. I was not myself.

Added to this, touring had always been challenging for me at the best of times. I loved the moments on stage, when I could connect to you. But the rest of the time was full of my self doubt and my struggle to be an extrovert while my introverted self simultaneously tried to pull me back in. In the past, Mingo always managed to help me pull myself together and keep us both going but that was unmanageable now with River being our main focus. His needs trumped everything else, and taking care of him meant I had no time to take care of myself.

And even though River was constantly on the go, crawling and exploring everything within his reach, I knew he needed to stop moving. He needed us to not strap him back in his car seat for hours as we drove between gigs. He needed us to not hold him still for an entire flight as he squirmed and cried to be free of our arms. He needed us to not leave him in a different hotel room every night with my mom or sisters while we went to sound check, came back for a quick meal and dashed back to our show for the night. He needed us not to repeat this process every single day. River loved being in our home. He flourished with a regular routine that consisted of long walks outside, crawling in the grassy park in our neighborhood while the breeze brushed his feathery hair and the sun kissed his chubby cheeks. He loved the path we biked along and the bridge that crossed over the babbling river, often carrying a family of ducks along its current. He loved

knowing that after lunch we read his library books before he went down for a nap. He slept better in his own little crib. He loved having a bath in our over sized jacuzzi tub before bedtime. He needed us to be home.

I could leave him with one of my sisters, they had all offered, and of course my parents or Mingo's parents would be happy to take care of him while we were on the road. But sometimes our tours could be weeks long, and the thought of leaving him for more than an evening was absolutely unbearable to me.

The answer burned in front of me in the blackness. We had to stop touring.

I waited for the alarm on my phone to go off as I counted the hours I had actually slept that night. Two and three quarters. We would be home in a few days, but my breath caught in my throat as I thought of the tour dates we had scheduled later in the summer. Going on the road again felt impossible.

"Mingo," I whispered into the dark.

"Yea?" he responded barely audibly.

"I don't think we can do another tour."

"No kidding," he agreed.

"Really? You don't think we can do it either?" I turned on to my side to look at him. I hadn't expected him to be thinking the same thing I was. He rolled to face me.

"No way," he said. "And I don't want to leave River with anyone for weeks at a time."

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"I have no idea. All I know is we can't keep doing this."

I finally closed my eyes and felt my body relax, relieved beyond explanation that Mingo felt the same way I did.

The alarm buzzed.

We pulled ourselves through the last few tour dates and collapsed as soon as we arrived home. Weeks blurred as we caught up a bit on our sleep, but River still needed us multiple times through the night. I hoped that

catching up on sleep would change the deepening dread I had about our upcoming tour dates. But it didn't. I knew I had to tell my manager.

"Hi Coleen," I spoke into my phone a few weeks later as I sat in front of my computer, agonizing over our upcoming tour dates.

"Hey, how are you?" she said. "Is he sleeping any better?"

"No," I sighed.

"Oh no," she said.

I took a deep breath as my heart thundered, willing me to say the words I knew I had to. "Coleen, I don't think I can do the upcoming tour dates," I blurted out.

A pause. And then she spoke, "Okay...."

"And I'm not sure I can keep touring," I went on. "I'm just not sure it will work for our family."

"Oh," she said. "You realize, Warner signed you with the understanding that you would be a touring artist."

"I realize that."

"So this could really change things."

We sat in silence for a moment. I might have been able to force myself to go out on the road to do a few more tours. But then I thought of River. I thought of all the times he had wanted to move his little body, to crawl around and explore, but I had to put him in his car seat for upwards of six hours at a time while we traveled to our next gig. I knew he would grow into a little boy and be past the baby stage in no time. But I also knew my son. And the reality of our family situation would remain. As full time touring musicians Mingo and I would always have to be on the road. And that meant River would have to be on the road too. And until I was making enough money to afford a tour bus I could not rationalize that life style for my son. My mother heart thumped for him.

I swallowed. "I realize that."

"Let me see what I can do," she said, and hung up.

I sat very still as I felt my world slow down and then come to a complete stop.

I knew this was the beginning of an end. My mind began to run, churning with wild thoughts of regret and fear. What about the label? What would they say? How would they feel? After all, they had invested in me, believed in me. I have numerous talented and hard working friends who take their babies on the road, or leave them in the care of capable and loving relatives while they pursue their dreams. And it worked for them. So why wasn't it working for me? Was I lazier than them? Weaker? Could I just not take it? After everything I had done for this album, to make these songs and put them out into the world, was I really just going to walk away from it like this? Was I even walking away? Or just taking a break? For how long? Would anyone want to work with me when I was finally able to handle it? Or would I become obsolete and unable to create anything at all? Would I end up alone and talentless and worthless and pathetic?

I thought back to the beginning of my journey, to the album that had been the most important thing to accomplish in my life. It still was important and deserving of my attention and hard work. I was so proud of all I had accomplished in the making of it. But I was a different person, sitting here in the solitude of my studio. I was a different person but my heart was the same.

I recognized its gentle pressure as it tenderly pulled me away from the sorrow I felt about to totally consume me.

"Trust me," it sang softly.

"I'm not sure I can," I whispered.

"Have I ever led you astray?"

"No," I said.

"So trust me again now," it beat steadily. "It's time for things to change. All will be okay."

"I'm not quitting," I insisted. "I'm not quitting music. I just have to do it a different way. I have to do it in a way that works for me and Mingo and River. The problem is, I don't know what that way is."

"That's okay," it thumped reassuringly. "I know."

I wiped a tear away as new ideas flooded into me. Ideas of writing commissioned songs for specific people. Or traveling to an area and staying there for a few weeks while we stayed with family and friends during the day and played shows in the evenings. I could create a

subscription based model and continuously produce writing and music and art for people who really wanted it. There were ways to make it work. My heart was right.

I looked out my window. Mingo and River were playing on the street with some of the neighborhood children. They loved to see baby River and give him hugs. He smiled at the soft grass tickling his bare feet as Mingo helped him toddle shakily across the emerald lawn.

My heart had this one. It was in charge, as it had been all along. And if I had learned anything at all it was that I could trust my heart. I still had songs in there. I still had things to say. I still had things to create. But I had to practice what I was preaching. I had to take a chance, and this was the ultimate test. I had to let it all go. I had to have a heart.

River's giggle was carried up to my window on a warm gust of summer air. I closed my computer, put down my phone and went out to join them.

## Step 25 - Surrender

So here I am before you. Me on my tiny stage, you floating in front of me, vast and alluring. It's that silent moment now, the one before I sing. The one where I take my first breath.

I have been on a journey to meet you here. I have changed. My heart still beats in me. It's the same heart that told me to start. To meet, and sing. To go, confront, leave, see and believe. It told me to clean, receive, beware, and run like hell. I listened to it when it told me to retreat, to ignite, and to disappoint. It helped me deflate, breathe, freeze and beg. I worked, detoured, retreated, ached and broke to its beat. It knows its priorities. It told me to write. And now it's telling me to surrender.

This chapter is ours. It belongs to you as much as it belongs to me. It hasn't been written yet. You are writing it right now, by reading this book, by listening to my music, by letting my heart touch yours. We will write each other's chapters together, whatever they may be.

I give you all I have. And then I wait for your response.