



New Wessex's Submission

Ryan closes his eyes, trying to shut off the buzz that echoes in the hollow chamber of his chest.

Sophie had gone over the details of tomorrow's performance a million times. She had also made him promise to get a good night's sleep.

A good night's sleep. Ryan hasn't had much of that for the past six months.

He opens his eyes to the other side of the double bed. The side that is only occupied by a lone pillow he can't bear to remove. Hard truth twists in his gut like a knife.

And now the buzz of the night before is added to the pain keeping him awake.

It'll be alright. It'll be okay. He'll manage tomorrow.

~~

Sheet music flutters all around me as I plow through a pile backstage. Where has my hat gone?

I can't play onstage without my hat. I rifle through a pile of stage props, knocking over a wig, a saxophone, and a music stand, which falls on a drum set.

Crash! The echoes are long hollow laughter in my head.

I stop long enough to wince. There's no way they didn't hear that in the audience. I can't afford these kinds of mistakes. My breathing clogs my throat. Between the floating sheets of music, I catch a glimpse of a white face in a red satin coffin.

"Ryan?"

I jump and turn to the source of the voice.

Sophie stands behind me, tapping her watch. "What are you doing? It's time for you to go on."

My hands shake. I risk a glance at the papers as they settle to the ground. The face and the coffin are gone. "I can't. I can't play my songs in front of a crowd without my hat."

Sophie laughs, and it echoes worse than the crash of the drums. Why is she laughing? Sophie knows. Sophie is supposed to understand. She grabs my arm. "You'll be fine. Okay? They paid a lot of money to see you. So go let them see you."

She drags me to the stage, and before I can breathe we step between the curtains.



A coffin sits center stage. Voices buzz beyond the footlights like a hive of scheming hornets.

The buzz invades my chest. I step back, shaking my head. “I need my hat.”

Sophie’s hand clamps on my shoulder. “You’ll be fine.”

She gives me a push.

The spotlight blinds me, trapping me on the stage. The crowd is just a black silhouette in the seats. I can feel their scowls.

I need my hat. I turn back to the stage entrance. The curtains are hung with iron padlocks. My throat closes. *No going back.*

I take a deep breath. I’ll be okay. Turning, I force my eyes towards the coffin. It’s not a coffin anymore. It’s a piano. Of course it’s a piano. You can’t play a coffin. I walk to center stage and slip onto the bench. My hands shake as I place them over the keys.

Again, that white face in the red coffin. I squeeze my eyes shut and push my fingers down.

F #m7. It sounds wrong. What’s wrong? I’m playing all the right notes.

The crowd murmurs. Off to a bad start. But it’s okay, I can salvage it. I plod on.

B7. But it sounds twisted, like a B alt chord.

The murmurs become whispers. I can’t do this. My hands shake almost uncontrollably now.

No, you have to keep going.

I start singing.

“The shadow of your smile...” It comes out weak and trembling. And out of tune.

Shoes scrape in the audience, fading away, and doors thud shut. There are doors to this place? I can get out?

No.

Keep going. It’ll get better.

Oh, no. I’ve forgotten the next chord. Is it...

Em(maj7)?

“...When you are gone...” It’s the worst yet.



Wrong chord. I can't even sing on key, either.

The murmurs and whispers crescendo, then die away altogether. I glance at the auditorium. It's empty. Doors thud again. The sound echoes through the room.

I slump and fold my shaking hands in my lap. I knew I couldn't do it.

"Look at me..." a heavenly voice sings behind me.

Our song! E ♭ maj7. I play the chord.

"...I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree."

B ♭ m7, E ♭ 7, A ♭ maj7.

Chills run up my arms and down my back. My breathing calms, but my heart skips a beat.

If I am dreaming, let me never wake.

I swivel on the bench. There she is, walking across the stage toward me. She's wearing that scarlet evening gown I had always liked, its satin hem swishing the floor with every step. She smiles. A thousand violins begin to play in perfect harmony. The long melodic notes cast a golden aura around the stage, around *her*, and the rest of the auditorium fades.

The footlights dance to the glimmer in her eyes.

My breath catches in my throat. *Emma*.

"Look at *you*," She says as she sits down on the piano bench next to me. "You're the one that's helpless."

I smile. "Never knowing my right foot from my left."

"Your hat from your glove?" She hands me a soft gray newsie cap.

"My hat." I take it and feel the soft fabric between my fingers. I don't feel like I need it anymore.

"What happened to you, Ryan? You used to be so good at this. You used to captivate audiences for hours."

The lump in my throat swells. I shrug, still looking at the hat in my lap. "What do you expect?" I blink back tears. "You aren't here."

She touches my hand. "You *can* do it. You still have a lot of life left in you."

I look at her, barely holding myself together. If I say something now, I'll start crying.



Maybe I can whisper. “I can't move on.”

Emma sits up. “Nope.” She stands and walks a few steps away, facing the empty theater. “This isn't the Ryan that I fell in love with.”

I sit up and wipe a tear from my eye. “What?”

She faces me. “What happened to your vitality? What happened to your excitement with life?”

I open my mouth, but I can't say it. *You are my life.*

She folds her arms. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

I look down at the hat in my hands.

I am. But I don't know what to tell her.

Her hand grasps mine. She pulls me to my feet. “It's time to get up. Be yourself again.”

I shake my head. “You took too much of my heart.”

“Stop saying you can't.”

I wrinkle my brow. Had I been saying that?

She pulls me away from the piano. “Come on. Dance with me.”

Only now do I recognize the music in the background. The footlights swirl in crazy circles then recede, leaving us in a large, gilded ballroom. A band nearby plays *Misty*.

Emma draws me to the center of the floor, and we dance, the only couple there. I follow her through the steps as the violin plays the melody through. The curve of her waist in my arm is home, and the swirl of her feet is the light in the window.

The violin finishes, guitar picks up with its own twist on the melody, and Emma sways to a stop. “Now you lead.”

I stare at her. “What do you mean?”

“You've followed me your entire life. It's time for you to take initiative for once. You lead, and I'll follow this time.”

I take a deep breath. I can do this. I can hold my own for Emma. I start stepping in time to the music. My heart skips a beat as she follows.

“See?” She grins. “You're doing it. That wasn't too hard, was it?”



I can't hold back a little laugh. I could fly through the ceiling right now. We turn and twirl around the room again and again.

She spins, floats into my arms, and leans her head on my shoulder. I close my eyes. The heat of her body begins to melt my frozen heart. A tear leaks from my eye.

All the instruments drop off, as the bass plays through his solo. I've slowed to a stop without even noticing. We just stand, leaning against each other. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know the moment will end. And somewhere in the back of my heart the pain still lurks.

She pulls back and looks into my eyes. So, she wants me to lead more...

I make a start by kissing her. Long and deep.

We pull apart and embrace. Her auburn curls brush my cheek.

"You can't follow me where I've gone, Ryan."

I hold her closer. Another tear escapes. "I know."

She pulls away, locking her gaze with mine. Tears run down her face. "I don't want that to stop you from living." She smiles and wipes a tear from my cheek. "I walked you through leading, now it's time to do it yourself. On your own."

My heart jumps into my throat.

"No." I swallow. "I don't want to wander through this wonderland alone."

She laughs and kisses me again.

"You're never alone," she whispers.

She steps back.

The ballroom fades to black. The spotlight is on me again; the piano, right behind me. I'm holding my hat again.

She seems a little farther away than a second ago. "Play me one last song before I go." She gestures toward the piano.

I don't want to move any farther from her, but I also want to play her a song.

She smiles and nods toward the piano. "Lead."

I glance down at my hat. Why am I still holding it? I drop it and sit at the piano. My pulse surges.



The Shadow of Your Smile. I have to try again.

B7. F#m7.

It sounds just the way it should. I continue with the song, instrumental this time, until I get to the last few lines:

*“Now when I remember spring,
And all the joys that love can bring,
I will be remembering
The shadow of your smile.”*

I glance behind me. She's gone.

I take a deep breath. Just because I do it without her doesn't mean I forget her. I know I'll never forget her.

The room thunders with applause, and I turn to see that the seats have filled again. Soon the whole crowd is standing.

I can hear a whisper behind the applause.

“Live.”

I stand and take my bows.

~~

Ryan straightens his jacket before stepping on stage. The audience hums with friendly chats throughout the room.

Sophie walks up and hands him his hat. “I thought you might want that.”

He wrinkles his brow at the hat. Déjà vu. He looks back up at her and smiles. “Thanks.”

She smiles back and glances into the audience. “It looks like they're ready for you.”

Ryan sighs and stares at the piano out there. He can almost feel her standing there again, smiling at him, and the memory of her presence gives a warm glow to his heart. Suddenly, his fingers itch for the keys, and his voice for something to pour itself into.

He pulls his hat on and steps out onto the stage. The crowd erupts in applause.



Ryan bows and sits at the piano, pulling the mic to his lips.

“This is for Emma.”

He pushes the mic away and plays.

E ♭ maj7.

Look at me...