

You are a
universe...



FULL TILT

Emma Scott

author of RUSH

FULL TILT

Full Tilt #1

Emma Scott

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was not easy to write. It was not the next story I sought to tell. But it would not leave me, despite the pitfalls and difficulty. It scared the crap out of me, to be honest, but begged to be told. Because I believe love stories come in all shapes and forms. Some people meet, fall in love, tragedy strikes, and they persevere together, maybe fall apart, come back, and find peace in the love they had. But what about those who fall in love when the tragedy is already looming on the horizon, in plain sight? What is love worth to those who are at the end of their journey instead of the beginning? Love can begin at any time, in any facet of life. That is the beauty—and hope—of this human existence. I hope this love story does justice to that idea.

I firmly believe in the concept of Happily Ever After. For everyone. No matter when or who or how they fell in love. Because that love existed, they felt it, and that is worth everything. It cannot be conquered.

Love always wins.

DEDICATION

This book is about brothers much as anything else. It is dedicated to my brother, Bob, who set me on this path—unwittingly—with one magical email and a suggestion. You set me on this journey, telling love stories—my calling—and changed my life forever. With thanks and love, this one is for you.

PLAYLIST

:

Lightning Crashes, by Live
Hurricane by Halsey
Chandelier, by Sia
Yellow, by Coldplay
My Heart Will Go On, by Celine Dion
Like a River, by Bishop
Free Fallin' by Tom Petty
Chasing Cars, by Snow Patrol
Spirits, by the Strumbellas
Hallelujah, by Rufus Wainwright, lyrics by Leonard Cohen

PART I

Full tilt (*n*) (*poker*): Playing emotionally instead of rationally; making impassioned rather than logical decisions.

PROLOGUE

jonah

Fifteen months ago...

White light pierced my eyes. I struggled to keep them open, then gave in and let them fall shut again. I listened to the machines instead, let their sound pull me out of unconsciousness. The beeping pulse was my heart. My new heart, pumping slowly in my chest. Yesterday, it belonged to a twenty-three-year-old basketball player who'd been in a car accident outside Henderson. Now it was mine. Grief and gratitude danced at the edges of my consciousness.

Thank you. I'm sorry, and thank you...

God, my chest. It felt as if an anvil had crushed me, smashed my ribs. Somewhere within the deep, heavy ache was my heart. A great swelling agony underneath my sternum that had been cracked open like a cabinet, then stapled shut again.

I groaned and the sound surged out of me, riding a current of pain.

"He's waking up. Are you waking up, honey?"

I forced my eyes open and the white light was blinding.

Maybe I'm dead.

The white of hospital sheets and stark fluorescents seared my eyes, then settled. Dark shapes took form. My parents hovered over me on my right. My mother's eyes were wet and her hand reached to brush a lock of

hair from my forehead. She adjusted the nasal cannula that was jammed up my nose though it probably didn't need adjusting.

"You look wonderful, sweetheart," she told me in a tremulous voice.

I felt like I'd been run over by a freight train, and before that I'd been deathly sick for weeks. But she didn't mean I looked good. She meant I looked alive.

For her sake, I managed a smile.

"You did good, son," my father said. "Dr. Morrison said everything looks real good." He gave me a tight smile, then looked away, coughing into his fist to hide his emotion.

"Theo?" I croaked and winced at the deep bruise of pain in my chest. I breathed shallowly and looked for him on my left.

He was there, crouched in a chair, his forearms resting on his knees. Strong. Solid.

"Hey, bro," he said, and I heard the forced lightness in his deep voice. "Mom's pulling your leg. You look like shit."

"Theodore," she said. "He does not. He's beautiful."

I didn't have the energy to give my brother a joke. All I could manage was a smile. He smiled back, but it was tense and hard. I knew my brother better than anyone. I knew when something was eating at him. Anger burned in him like a pilot light and now it was flaring hot.

Why...?

I cast my gaze around the room and then I knew. "Audrey?"

The air tightened and my mother jumped as if someone had poked her with a needle. Looks were exchanged all around me, like birds darting over my bed.

"It's late," my father said. "She's gone home." He was a city councilman, and he'd turned on his politician's voice, the one he used when he needed to tell an unpleasant truth in a pleasant way.

My mother, a kindergarten teacher and adept at comfort, swooped in. "But you should rest now, honey. Sleep. You'll feel stronger after you've had more sleep." She kissed me on my forehead. "I love you, Jonah. You're going to be just fine."

My dad took my mom by the shoulders. "Let's let him rest, Beverly."

I rested. I fell in and out of fitful, pain-soaked sleep, until a nurse tinkered with an IV in my arm and then I slept deeply.

When I awoke, Theo was there. Audrey was not. My new heart began to thump a dull, heavy pang. All the adrenaline circuits were reconnected, or whichever hormone kicked in when something you thought might last forever was over.

“Where is she?” I asked. “Tell me the truth.”

Theo knew whom I meant. “She left for Paris yesterday morning.”

“You talked to her? What did she say?”

He pulled his chair closer. “Some fucking sob story. How she had a plan for her life and this...” His gaze swept the room.

“This wasn’t it,” I said.

“She couldn’t hack it...” He tore his hand through his hair. “Fuck, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head a little. “I’m glad you told me. I needed to hear it.”

“I’m sorry, bro. Three years. Three years you gave her, and she just...”

“It’s okay. It’s better.”

“Better? How the fuck is it better?”

Already, my eyes felt heavy and wanted to close, to drop the curtain and let me sink back into oblivion for a little while. I didn’t have the strength to tell him that I didn’t hate Audrey for leaving me. I had seen it coming. Even sick with a rapidly failing heart, I could see how she twitched and jumped, eyes darting to the door, plotting an escape route from my illness and the life it would leave me.

It hurt—I felt every one of those three years we’d been together like a knife driven into my new heart. But I didn’t hate her. I didn’t hate her because I didn’t love her. Not in the way I wanted to love a woman—with everything I had.

Audrey was gone. Theo could hate her for me. My parents could marvel at her cruelty on my behalf. But I let her go, because at that moment, I didn’t know she’d be the last...

CHAPTER 1

kacey

July, a Saturday night

I was drunk.

Why else would I have my cell phone in my hand, my thumb hovering over my parents' house number in San Diego?

Drunk dialing, I thought. Not just for ex-boyfriends anymore.

I snorted a laugh. It came out more like a sob and echoed around the stairwell. I sat in the dark, narrow space, knees pulled up, trying to make myself small. Invisible. On the other side of the cement wall I could hear the muffled shouts and whistles of three thousand people waiting for Rapid Confession to take the stage. Our manager, Jimmy Ray, had given us the ten-minute cue a good twenty minutes ago and my bandmates were probably looking for me.

I took a sip from my Evian water bottle, three-quarters filled with vodka—because I'm clever like that—and contemplated my phone. I dared myself to call. I warned myself not to, just put it away and join the band in the green room. We'd hit the stage, play for yet another sold-out show. I'd get hella famous, make some serious money and continue to screw a different guy every night.

Because, rock and roll.

What a joke. I wasn't rock and roll. I looked the part, especially tonight in my miniskirt, thigh-high boots and bustier. My hair—bleached to almost white—curled around my shoulders in pin-up girl perfection. My lips painted red and my eyes lined in black. Tattoos decorated my skin, adding to the impression of a grunge rock chick, but they weren't a costume. They were mine.

I looked the part, but I felt like a piece of glass, shattered and scattered all over. I didn't know who or what I was anymore, but I glittered prettily in the spotlight.

I took another sip of vodka and nearly dropped my phone. I fumbled to catch it and when I lifted it up, I saw I had hit that big green call button.

“*Shit...*”

Slowly, I put the phone to my ear. My mother answered on the third ring.

“Hello, Dawson residence.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. My jaw worked but I couldn’t make any sound come out.

“Hello?”

“I...”

“Hello, may I help you?”

She’s going to hang up!

“Hey, Mom. It’s me. Kacey.”

“Cassandra.”

I hated that name and hadn’t used it for years, but wrapped around those three syllables, I heard the relief in my mother’s voice. I *heard* it.

“Yeah, hi!” I said brightly, too loudly. “How uh... How are you guys?”

“We are fine,” she said. Her voice was hushed now, as if she didn’t want to be overheard. “Where are you calling from?”

“Las Vegas,” I said. “Because we’re on tour. Me and my band? Rapid Confession? It’s a sold-out show tonight, our second night in a row. Actually, most of the shows on our tour have been sold out. It’s pretty great. We’re hitting the big time.”

“I am very happy for you, Cassandra.”

I heard my father’s influence behind my mother’s words, turning her into a goddamn robot spouting lines she’d been forced to memorize.

“And our latest single? ‘Talk Me Down’? Well...” I bit my lip. “It’s number six on the Billboard Hot 100. And I... Well, I wrote it, Mom. I mean, my band and I wrote it, but the words...they’re mostly mine. And ‘Wanderlust’? I wrote that one too. It’s number twelve on the charts.”

Nothing.

I swallowed. “How is Dad?”

“He’s fine,” my mother replied, her voice almost a whisper now.

“Is... Is he there?”

My mom sighed, a tiny exhalation. “Cassie... Are you safe? Are you taken care of?”

“I’m taking care of myself, Mom,” I said. “And I’m a success. This band... We’re a hit.”

God, I hated this. The pathetic tone of my voice, the bragging of the band’s accomplishments, begging my mother to feel happy for our success when I hardly felt a thing myself, except the need to be loved. It was like a

hunger that was never sated. A desperate starvation twisted and twined into my guts, tangled in ravenous knots I couldn't unravel.

I could never quell that awful appetite. Only drown it in alcohol for a little while and try to puke it out the next day.

"Mom? Please, just tell Dad..."

"Cassie, I have to go."

"Wait, can you put him on? Or just... Can you tell him you're on the phone with me right now? Just do that, Mom. See what he says."

Silence. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said finally. "He's been...cheerful lately. No upsets. I don't want to disturb him."

"Is he still mad at me?" I asked, my voice wavering. "It was four years ago, Mom. I'm not even with Chett anymore."

Chett ditched me in Las Vegas four years ago, leaving me broke, heartbroken, and reeling. A cross-country tour, a record deal, countless one-night stands and two new tattoos later and here I was, a wayward kid again, begging her parents to forgive her.

I fought back the tears. "I told you this, Mom. But did you tell *him*? Did you ever tell Dad I was homeless and sleeping at the Y when he kicked me out? *Homeless*, Mom. I was fucking seventeen years old."

I heard her swallow hard. Forcing down tears and emotions and everything she wanted to say but never would. She hadn't told Dad anything about me other than I was still alive, she had heard from me and I was doing well. She kept to her script, no matter how many times I begged her to try out some new material.

"You should have known better than to bring that boy home," my mother said, mustering a little firmness. "You knew how it would upset your father."

"Everything I did upset him," I cried, my voice clanging around the stairwell. "Nothing was ever good enough. Yeah, I knew bringing Chett home was a bad fucking idea, but I *wanted* to get caught. Do you know why, Mom? To force Dad to talk to me. And how goddamn sad is that? His own daughter. His own *child*."

"Cassandra, I have to go now. I'll tell your father I heard from you, and—"

"That I'm doing well?" I finished. "Not *well*, Mom," I snapped, and wiped my nose on the back of my hand. "We're a fucking *sensation*. We're the *next big thing*..."

"You know I don't care for all this foul language, Cassandra," she said. Now her voice was turning to stone, walling me out. But I couldn't stop.

"You tell Dad that, okay? You tell him I made it, and that I did it

without his fucking help or approval or...or his goddamn roof over my head.”

“I’m going to hang up now, Cassandra.”

I sucked in a breath, instantly regretting every word. I needed to hear more of her voice. “Mom, wait. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...”

The line was quiet and I thought she’d hung up until I heard her draw in a shaky little breath.

I eased one of my own and closed my eyes. “I’m sorry. Tell Dad...” I swallowed down the tears. “Tell him I love him. Okay? Please?”

“I will,” she said, though I didn’t believe it. Not for a second.

“Thanks, Mom. And I love you too. How are—?”

“I have to get off now. Take care.”

The line went quiet for good.

I stared at my phone a few moments more. A tear splatted onto its face and I wiped it away with my thumb. I thought about pressing the ‘call’ button again. I could call her back and tell her I was sorry for swearing. Or I could call back and say I wasn’t fucking sorry at all. I was never calling again. I was as done with them as they were done with me.

Are they done with me?

The thought made my heart ache. No, not yet. My mother held on. She needed my phone calls. I knew that. But if I never called her again, she wouldn’t call me. I knew that too. She was still a bystander in her own child’s life.

I slumped against the concrete wall. I could hear the crowd on the other side growing restless. It sounded like a thunderstorm moving closer. If we didn’t take the stage soon...

I needed a smoke.

I pulled a battered soft pack of cigarettes from the top part of my thigh-high boot, and lit it from a matchbook tucked into the cellophane.

I drew in deep, exhaled, and slumped lower against the wall, weighed down by all the tears I didn’t cry over the last four years. They threatened to burst out now in my own thunderstorm. I battled it all back, inhaled it hard, wrapped it in smoke and pressed it into my gut where it sat like a lead weight.

Dad won’t even talk to me.

I exhaled the thought back out. *So what? Who cares what he thinks? He’s never given a shit in twenty-two years, why would he start now? Fuck him.*

A brave speech, except I would’ve given anything to hear my dad’s voice, and not have it be laced with disappointment or anger. To hear him

say he missed me or he loved me. To be told I could come home any time I wanted and the door would be open...

But he'd shut and locked that door, maybe forever, and the foundation on which I'd been built was crumbling to dust.

The crowd roared on the other side of the wall. They were clamoring for us. For me. They loved me.

And as Roxie Hart would say, I loved them for loving me.

I took another pull from my vodka and rose from my crouch just as Jimmy Ray busted through a door on the landing above mine, looking frantic and wound up.

Our manager was in his mid-forties with thinning hair. His suit—always Armani, since a mid-size label signed us three months ago—hung a bit loose over his lanky frame. His wild eyes landed on me and he collapsed against the wall in exaggerated relief, his hand over his heart.

“Jesus, kitten, give me a coronary why don't you? The gig was supposed to start half an hour ago.”

I ground out the cigarette under the heel of my boot and plastered a smile on my face. “Sorry, Jimmy. I had an important phone call. But I'm good now. Ready to kick ass.”

“Good to hear it. This crowd is going eat us alive if we don't get out there, a-sap.”

I moved past him but he stopped me, his hand on my chin, studying my face.

“You been crying?”

I sucked in a breath. Jimmy Ray wasn't anyone's idea of a father figure, but he'd been good to us. Good to me. I felt myself start to wilt under his kindness, wanting to tell him...

“Because your makeup is smeared,” he said. “Make sure you fix it before you go on, yeah?”

I nodded mutely.

“Thatta girl.”

He smacked my ass lightly, to get me moving, and followed me out of the stairwell, back to the green room where the rest of the band was waiting.

CHAPTER 2

kacey

They were all dressed in full concert gear: leather, vinyl and lots of chunky costume jewelry. Violet, our bassist, wore her brown hair pulled tight to one side, revealing the small black raven tattooed in the shaved skin of her scalp above her ear. She gave me a nod, and flashed me the peace sign.

Lola, my best friend, sat in a deep chair, spinning her drumsticks deftly around her fingers. She jumped up and came to me, peered at my face through shocks of black and electric blue hair. Her dark eyes were sharp, observant and full of concern.

“You okay? Where’d you take off to?”

I was spared answering by Jeannie, our lead singer. She’d been doing her vocal warm-ups, but stopped in the middle of a scale.

“What the actual fuck, Kacey?” Her eyes, lined in kohl as black as her skin-tight leather pants, zeroed in on me. She was a pretty gal, our fearless leader, or would be if not for the perpetual constipated look on her face.

I felt the weight of the room on me, heavy and accusatory. I crossed my arms over my chest, affected a pinched, slightly mid-Western older lady voice. “*Hello, Jeannie, who’s bothering you now?*”

Lola snickered, and Violet muffled a laugh behind her hand.

“Who’s bothering me? You...” Jeannie’s confusion morphed to irritation. “Wait, are you quoting some stupid movie at me again?”

“Stupid?” I gaped dramatically. “*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* is nothing short of a classic. A national *treasure*...”

Jeannie flapped a hand, her bracelets jangling. “Whatever. If you devoted as much time to the band as you do to partying and watching 80’s relics—”

“Come on, Jeannie,” Violet said, with a sigh. “Let’s not start any shit right before the show. She’s here. We’re fashionably late. So what?”

Lola nodded. “Only newbies start a show on time. She’s ready to kick ass, right, Kace?”

“Oh, stop coddling her, for chrissakes,” Jeannie snapped at Lola, and then Jimmy swooped in and pulled her aside, talking soothingly to her in a low voice

Under my breath I said, “*Mmm-mmm-mmm, what a little asshole.*”

Violet burst out laughing, but Lola’s eyes flickered to my ‘Evian.’ She was a human Breath-a-lizer, that girl. Quickly, I tossed the bottle in the trash before she got wind of its contents and laid another of her patented lectures on me. The vodka had already started to work anyway, putting me one giant step back from reality, as if I were behind a pane of glass.

“Let’s not fight, ladies,” Jimmy chided, bringing Jeannie back to the center of the green room. “Three thousand paid ticket-holders are waiting.”

“He’s right,” Jeannie said, and mustered what we called her Fearless Leader expression: stiff and serious as she eyed us in turn. “We need to get focused and give them the performance of our lives. Circle up.”

We formed a ring in the center of the green room, holding hands, while Jeannie murmured a sort of vague invocation. Violet was a Buddhist, Lola an atheist, so the group prayer was more about channeling our energies, being grateful for our opportunities, and getting the four of us in tune with each other so we could play as one cohesive unit.

Was this what I wanted? I mused while Jeannie droned positive affirmations. I suspected the answer was no, but I’d come too far now. Lola was counting on me. If it hadn’t been for her, I’d still be on the streets. She’d taken me in after Chett ditched me, and we’d gotten this gig together. She needed me to *not* fuck this up, and I needed to *not* be a fuck up.

“Forget every other show,” Jeannie was saying, her typical closing statements. “Forget we’ve been on the road for months. These fans deserve our best, so let’s go out there and perform as if it were the first day of the tour. Blood, sweat, and tears, ladies.”

We made loud noises of agreement to get amped up, then headed out.

Lola pulled me aside. “Are you okay? For real?”

“Sure, I’m fine. Totally.”

“Where were you?”

“Oh, I... I called my parents.”

Lola’s shoulders slumped and she covered her eyes with one hand. “Oh shit, no. No, no, no. I keep telling you to give it up. It always bites you in the ass, Kace. Every time. You get all upset, then you get even more wasted than usual.”

“No, no, it was great!” I said. “I only talked to my mom but... Well, my dad said hi. I heard him in the background. That’s a start, right?”

Is this where you're at? Lying to your best friend after all that she's done for you?

Lola looked shocked. "Really? He talked to you?"

"He said hi, Lola. He really did."

Lola studied me through narrow eyes and finally relented.

"That's great, Kace," she said, hugging me. "I'm really happy for you. To be honest, I've been worried lately. You party twenty-four-seven and have a different guy in your bed every night."

"Not every night," I said. "I have my dry spells. Like Tuesday."

Lola snorted.

"Let's go, girls," Jimmy reappeared at the door. "They're waiting."

I flashed Lola a reassuring smile. "We're going to kick ass at this show tonight. I promise."

"I wish you'd promise not to party so fucking hard afterward. Maybe you'd be able to *remember* how kick-ass the show was."

I pretended to be affronted. "That is the least rock and roll thing I've ever heard in my life. Keith Richards would roll over in his grave if he heard you talk like that."

A smile twitched Lola's lips. "Keith Richards isn't dead."

"See? Nothing to worry about."

She rolled her eyes and laughed, slinging her arm around me.

Protectively, as always.

Hugo Williams, the Pony Club's head of security, appeared at the green room door to escort us to the stage. His dark eyes were warm and kind as he smiled at me, his teeth white and bright against the dark of his skin.

"Hey, Hugo," I said, as we filed out.

"Hey, sweets," he said in his deep baritone.

This was only our second night at the Pony Club but Hugo seemed extra considerate of me, going out of his way to make sure I felt safe.

Jimmy slung an arm over my bare shoulders. "Sounds like a rowdy crowd tonight, Hugo."

I smiled up at the bodyguard. "Hugo'll take care of me. He's my hero."

The big bodyguard nodded, like a soldier given an order, and led us to the stage. We took winding back hallways with pipes running along the ceiling. Our footsteps clapped and echoed on the cement.

Jimmy turned to me. "You ready?"

"Born ready, Jimmy."

"That's my girl."

I joined my band mates at a short flight of stairs that led to the stage. A

roar went up—the crowd responding to the MC taking the mic.

“Las Vegas! Are you ready for Rapid Confession?”

Another wave of sound, like an avalanche ripping apart the walls of the venue.

The door opened, a dark rectangle blazing with stage lights. We streamed up the short flight of stairs and onto the stage. My red Fender was waiting for me on a stand. I looped the strap over my shoulder and saw Jeannie throw me a nod and a nervous smile—a peace agreement. I nodded and smiled back, agreement accepted.

Lola clashed her drumsticks over her head in a four-count lead-in to “Talk Me Down.”

I played my goddamn heart out. I wrote “Talk Me Down” for myself. It was an anthem to everything that scared me about where I was going and what I was doing to myself. Nobody knew it was mine. I sang backup to Jeannie’s melody. But when I played, my heart came out. The music carved open my chest, flayed my ribs and showed the world everything inside.

I shredded my solos. All the liquor I’d drunk on an empty stomach turned the stage lights into blurry orbs of white. The faces in the crowd melted together, becoming one roaring, churning, electric mass. I fed off of the energy, sucking in their screaming approval and spitting it back out with every chord and progression until my fingers bled, and at the end of the show, I nearly smashed my Fender onto the stage.

As the last notes of the last song vibrated in the air and then vanished, the crowd lost its collective shit. I was lit up like the Fourth of July, running along the lip of the stage, slapping hands with the front row audience. They grabbed and pulled me over the edge. I laughed and laughed, surfing on a wave of adoring hands, drunk as hell and high on being loved.

The boulder of Hugo and his team rolled into the crowd, hauled me down, and marched me out. But I didn’t want it to end. I called to the crowd around me.

“I love you all so much! Come back with me...” I pointed at random strangers. “Come with me! Let’s keep the party going...”

Hugo dragged me to the green room where the band was celebrating. Champagne spewed through the air in gold and foamy arcs. I grabbed a bottle out of someone’s hand and downed half of it in one draught. I shouted at security to let in the small crowd I’d invited.

“They’re with me!” I cried.

About two dozen pushed their way in. My band mates were all too