

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *THE SEVEN YEAR SLIP*

*Ashley Poston*

# Sounds Like Love



*a novel*

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“If you aren’t familiar with Ashley Poston, you should be.”

—theSkimm

“[Ashley Poston has] easily cemented herself as a new favorite romance author.”

—Culturess

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**OTHER TITLES BY ASHLEY POSTON**

*The Dead Romantics*

*The Seven Year Slip*

*A Novel Love Story*

A musical staff with a treble clef on the left. Several wavy lines, resembling musical notes or sound waves, sweep across the staff from left to right, passing behind the title text.

# Sounds Like Love

ASHLEY POSTON

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*To karaoke nights, and favorite songs,  
and good goodbyes*

**Love is not yours to own forever,  
Love is borrowed and love is blue.  
It's a gift of time we don't got, baby,  
So I'll steal my moments with you  
And when I'm gone and buried under  
All the baggage that we found  
Remember to lose yourself, baby.  
'Cause wherever you go, there you are.  
Wherever you go, there we are  
Alive in the sound.**

*—“Wherever” by Roman Fell and the Boulevard*



## *Love Is...*

**MOST SUMMER NIGHTS** in the small beach town of Vienna Shores, North Carolina, there was music at the Revelry.

Everything about the old music hall was unforgettable. The sharp lights of the stage. The crackle of the stereo. The smell of stale beer and sweat that had seeped so far into the hardwood floors that nothing would ever get it out. The bathrooms were filled with signatures of people who had flushed at least once, the heavy oak tables scratched with secret love notes, the top shelves of the liquor cabinets packed with bottles full of water because no one came to the Revelry for the *cocktails*.

Whenever I was stuck in Los Angeles traffic and homesick in a way that ate down to my bones, I'd put on my favorite song and turn it up so loud it rattled my soul, and sometimes I could trick myself into thinking I was sitting there at the bar, my skin rosy from the hot August sun, listening to that music.

Dad had this thing where, once a band played at the Revelry, he'd take a photo and have them sign it and pin it to the wall in the lobby beside those of hundreds of other musicians who had come and played, reminding everyone that—once upon a time—they were *here*.

And so was I.



## *Kiss Me (in the Milky Twilight)*

**I WAS SECOND-GUESSING** the heels.

The plan was to dip into the concert at the Fonda Theatre, say my hellos, and ditch before the after-party. I had an early flight home tomorrow—it was a vacation I took every summer back to the Outer Banks—but when Willa Grey offers you a VIP ticket to her Los Angeles show, you don't say no. I hadn't seen her since her new album took off this spring. It had changed her life—a surprise world tour, a platinum record, international fame—and it had changed my life, too, since I had written her most popular song. Now there were rumors of a VMA performance this year, a Grammy nomination—hell, even a coveted invite to the *Met Gala*. I'd written hit songs before, both because I was good at it and because I'd lucked into a particular subsection of popcorn pop songs at the exact right time, but nothing quite like *this*. Willa had been dragged off to so many tour stops and late-night talk show appearances, we hadn't gotten a chance to chat much since “If You Stayed” hit the *Billboard* top ten, so I felt like I had to at least drop by, stay for a song or two, and remind her to call her therapist...the normal girl's girl thing.

So here I was, sweating in a theater with broken AC, squashed between damp strangers, with my heels rubbing blisters onto my feet. (I could have taken off my shoes, I supposed, but I grew up in a music venue, so I knew what was on these floors.) People around me sang Willa Grey's songs with

their entire chests, swaying back and forth with their hearts in one hand and their cell phones in the other.

And I just wanted to go to bed.

I used to love concerts. They were my happy place—my *home*. Being in the thick of the audience. Singing at the top of my lungs to my favorite songs. Being in love with the idea of existing in this moment. Or, really, being in love at all.

I'm not sure what changed—me, or the music?

Shakespeare once wrote, “If music be the food of love, play on.” And four hundred years later, a Tinder date quoted it back to me—*unironically*. And that wasn't even the worst part. Clearly the man hadn't read the *rest* of Orsino's soliloquy, because just after that line he laments, “Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, the appetite may sicken, and so die.” He wants to be *done* with love, the unrequited torture of it. The promise of a happy ending expounded in three cruel words.

Maybe that was it...there wasn't magic to the music anymore. There was just my brain listening for the verse, the pre-chorus, the bridge, the rhymes with fire, desire, *higher*—

Needless to say, that Tinder date was a one-and-done sort of situation. My best friend, Gigi, asked if I at *least* had sex with him—he was some sort of social media celebrity, but in Los Angeles you could spit and hit one, so it wasn't *that* big a novelty—and she seemed very disappointed that I'd left the restaurant without him.

I'm no connoisseur of love—I learned early on in this industry you couldn't have it all, a Great Love and a Great Career, so I chose, and I never looked back.

Well, I never looked back *often*.

I knew the *feeling* of love. Bright and buoyant and easy. Physical and visceral, emotional and impossible. I believed that. It was why I moved out to Los Angeles in the first place, to chase my dreams of being a songwriter. You didn't relocate to one of the most expensive cities in the world to wait tables and rub elbows with greasy music moguls if you weren't a *little* bit



enchanted by the idea of it. And you certainly didn't write hit songs about girlfriends in suede heels and endless summer nights if you were *that* jaded.

And now, I was here. A thirtysomething on the main floor of the Fonda Theatre, surrounded by people fresh out of college and dunked in glitter, screaming along as Willa Grey skipped around onstage with her sequin-covered pop band, the Tuesdays, regretting my shoe choice. Willa had this new "kiss cam" thing that she paraded around, zooming in on couples as the audience shouted at them to kiss. At the moment, there were two men on the large screen behind the Tuesdays, lip-locked for everyone to see.

My worst nightmare.

I watched for a moment longer as Willa whirled her handheld camera around and started singing into it. Her face filled the screen, bedroom eyes and sparkly lashes, framed by flaming red hair, emphasized by a saccharine lyric about the one who got away.

Certifiably *not* one of my songs.

Someone elbowed me in the side. Willa had told me there was a private balcony that I could sit in if I wanted to and she'd pop in to say hello after her show, but I'd bucked at the idea because I was raised in music venues. I didn't *need* to escape the masses. I was a songwriter, I wasn't *famous*. But I found myself asking the overworked barback where exactly this private balcony was, and he directed me to a set of stairs on the left side of the venue that would have been impossible to find if there wasn't a security guy standing in front of it.

That was different. Willa didn't say anything about having to pass security. I frowned, thinking there might be someone in the private balcony already who *needed* some muscle head to stand guard, though Willa hadn't mentioned inviting anyone else, either.

The security guy stopped me with a beefy arm. "Sorry, that's as far as you go," he said, though I barely heard him over the concert.

"Oh! Right. Here," I added, digging my VIP badge out of my too-big-but-never-big-enough purse. I had to lean in toward him and shout to be heard over the noise. "Willa said I could go up there!"

He squinted at it and shook his head. “You sure?”

I frowned. “Why...wouldn’t I be?”

He shrugged.

“Who exactly is up there?”

In reply, the security guy pointed to his earpiece, and shrugged again. As if he couldn’t quite hear me.

“Guess I’ll find out myself,” I murmured, and started up the stairs.

Behind me he replied, clear as day, “He’s just like his dad.”

*He.* Well, that was a clue at least. I hoped it wasn’t anyone I knew—though most men I knew refused to work with me since, well, they cited that my work didn’t fit their image. I wish I could say that female songwriters in this career were a dime a dozen, but the truth was we were rarer than stumbling upon a decent man on Tinder.

I had half a mind to just bail on the show and go home—

*Stop it, Jo. You have to at least stay until the song,* I told myself, because that’s why I was here, anyway. And I really didn’t want to disappoint Willa, even if I’d met her only a handful of times.

So I climbed the stairs to the balcony. It was smaller than the one at my parents’ venue, with barstools pushed up to the railing instead of theater seats. At first, I didn’t see anyone else—and then a shadow leaned back from the railing and turned to look at me.

Below, Willa launched into a bright, high-energy song I’d written a few years ago about girlfriends going out for a night on the town. The stage lights threw pinks and yellows up into the balcony, highlighting the stark planes on the man’s face and threading light into his hair.

*Oh.*

I’d never seen him in person, but I could recognize him anywhere.

Sebastian Fell.

Son of multiplatinum rock star Roman Fell, he had stumbled into the limelight as one of five members of the boy band Renegade, though they’d broken up over a decade ago. When I was a teen, Gigi was *obsessed* with them. She decked out her binders with printed photos, and wrote fanfic, and

in our sophomore year of high school, she convinced me to skip school, lie to my parents and her grandmother, and drive two hours to Raleigh to see them. From the nosebleed seats, we watched most of the concert on the jumbotrons, but it didn't matter. I was there for Gigi, and Gigi was there for Sebastian Fell. Back then he had swoopy hair and played the "bad" boy of the group, and I guess he lived up to that when he crashed his Corvette. I was a senior in high school then, I think. Renegade called it quits after that, and I couldn't remember what happened to the guy.

Apparently, he was now attending Willa Grey's concerts.

He'd turned twenty when he quit the band, so now he was—what—midthirties? Fifteen years looked different on everyone. On me, it grew out my hair and broke that bad habit of biting my cuticles and gave me a skin-care regimen. On Sebastian Fell, it made him unravel like a pop song turned folk. In the dark balcony, the neon lights made the shadows of the crow's-feet around his eyes darker and the wrinkles across his forehead fine. His dark hair was unkempt and shaggy, half pulled back into a bun, the rest brushing against his shoulders. Over time, a smattering of freckles had spread across his nose and cheeks and bloomed into constellations, and his cheekbones had turned sharp, though he still had those same thick, expressive eyebrows. He wasn't as tall as I thought.

I distinctly remember a *Vogue* article calling his eyes "cerulean," though as his gaze slid over me and caught the light, they reminded me more of an ocean before a storm.

Definitely not inviting.

Quietly, I went over to a stool at the far end of the balcony and sat down. I'd learned that it was always best to ignore rich and famous people. Otherwise, they'd get spooked. Throughout the next song, he kept glancing over at me.

Then, after the next song, he asked, "What brings someone like you up here?" His voice was deep and syrupy. He propped his head up on his hand as he studied me. "Haven't seen you here before."

Willa ended her song and started chatting with some of her bandmates onstage, so I didn't have to shout when I told him, "Willa invited me."

His mouth, which some tabloid article had noted as "tricky," twisted into a smirk. "Did she now?"

"She did."

"Hmm. Well," he added, sitting up a little straighter, "before you ask, no, I don't do autographs."

I stared at him, my mouth dropped open. "E-excuse me?"

"I appreciate my fans, but I'm off the clock right now."

Whatever nostalgia I had for him withered away within seconds. I tried not to scowl as I said, "I don't need your autograph, thanks. And I'm not a fan."

He smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Sure."

He didn't believe me. I wrestled down the impulse to argue, and I squinted at him. "Sorry, who are you?"

His eyebrows jerked up. Then he barked a laugh. "You're cute. I deserved that."

"You haven't seen me cute," I quipped back, "but you did deserve it."

The suave smirk on his face fractured a bit. He leaned against the railing, studying me. I wondered what he saw—obviously a woman who didn't actually belong up here. Dark hair pulled into an orderly fishtail braid, a worn band T-shirt paired with an Alexander McQueen skirt delved from the dregs of a consignment shop, hand-me-down Manolo heels that made her feet blister. He admitted, "I can't decide if you'd be fun to flirt with or not."

"Wow, if you have to think about it, I think we both know the answer," I replied wryly. I could tell him that we had a connection—that my mom once sang with his dad's band a lifetime ago—to alleviate this sort of cat-and-mouse conversation with something relatable, but I doubt he cared. Backup singers must be like bugs on a windshield to guys like Sebastian Fell.

Halfway through the next song, he scooted over two stools, leaving one between us as if it was a safeguard. "Maybe we can start over," he said over the song, though it was easier to hear him now that he was closer.