



Knocked Up
BY A

ROCKSTAR

PAIGE DAWSON

KNOCKED UP BY A ROCKSTAR

A SECOND-CHANCE, ENEMY TO LOVERS
ROMANCE.



PAIGE DAWSON

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Also by Paige Dawson

SYLVESTER



*H*ave you ever wanted to punch a billboard? No? Then you've probably never had to see the smug face of your evil biological half-brother grinning down at you from thousands of them, every corner you turned in your city of residence.

Yeah, that's the situation I was facing as I was chauffeur-driven through the city to my apartment, where I was due to meet with my brothers. The non-evil ones. Every time I thought we'd finally gotten into a zone of the city unencumbered by the lying face of Apollo Brock, there he was again, smirking from an advertising screen.

The radio in the car blared out: *“And now, an interview with the surprise bestseller of the year, Apollo Brock, whose memoir swept straight to number one in the charts and who is now a household hero for his exposé of the lives and lies of his brothers, Jude, Forest, Winston, and Sylvester...”*

I craned forwards to the driver, speaking more snappily than I usually would. “Turn that off, would you?”

The driver, startled out of his driving reverie, almost swerved into the other lane of traffic in his haste to switch off the car radio. “My apologies, sir.”

“Don’t sweat it.” I relaxed into the backseat and closed my eyes, toying with the rings on my fingers, trying to picture things that weren’t Apollo’s face. Fluffy bunnies. Marshmallows. Cats playing with string.

It was no use. I was decidedly stressed. And I didn’t like to be stressed. My general aim was to coast through life, not sweating things, living a life of leisure with not a care in the world.

Apollo had been putting paid to that for years now. One by one, he had come after my brothers, intent on revenge for the sole reason that we didn’t agree with his business practices.

Our biological father, Emory Brock, was dead in his grave, but all five of his illegitimate sons had made a pact to make up for the evils he had done unto the world by using his businesses to do good. Everything had changed when Apollo retracted his agreement and thereby made us into his enemies.

His plots against the other four Brocks included a public smear campaign against Jude, sending a spy to seek intel on Forest, and teaming up with Winston’s manipulative mom to kidnap Winston’s son, no less. All of his plans had failed in the end, but so had our retaliations. We’d come close to getting him put away for the conspired murder of workers in one of his factories, but in the end, all the evidence had gone missing. Strange.

Since I was the last remaining brother he hadn’t personally targeted, I knew I was next in line for Apollo’s campaign of vengeance. Maybe that’s why his face, plastered everywhere I looked, was putting me on edge.

The driver pulled up at my apartment block, where my security team were waiting to escort me safely inside. I’d gotten used to the constant presence of bodyguards and

security teams by now: firstly, when I'd become famous as a rockstar, and then again when I was announced as one of Emory Brock's illegitimate sons and therefore heir to one-fifth of his business. Yeah, I'd had my fair share of fame.

But recently it was something else. What with knowing I was next on Apollo's shit list, and the recent 'memoir' bringing all the brothers more publicity than we'd like, I'd doubled my security. Quadrupled, even. Though I still swanned around pretending I was king of the world, I was decidedly more cautious, though I tried to ignore the constant presence of threat.

My security led me through the building foyer, where the porter who liked to think he was a Victorian butler waved us on with a stiff 'Queen's wave'. I sent finger guns in return. I liked to come up with a different greeting for him every time I entered, just to keep both our lives interesting. He'd not enjoyed the 'secret handshake' I'd invented for us, or the time I'd come through bouncing a basketball and lobbed it over to him. The ball had bounced off his chest and into a priceless vase. Not his best morning, but one of my personal faves.

Then it was up in the elevator, surrounded by men and women whose height and muscular width could make even me jealous, if I so chose, and then down the hallway to my penthouse apartment.

At last, I was deposited securely inside. In the luxury of my own home, I had privacy – if I could ignore the guards stationed outside who would come running at any noise from within the apartment. As it turned out, this included when I accidentally grated my finger instead of some expensive cheese during a date, at which point I'd had to sheepishly

explain myself in front of a squadron of security guards while totally nude.

I was early for the meeting, so to calm my definitely-not-nerves, I pulled out my old electric guitar, plugging it into the speaker by the entrance to the balcony.

Even as I twanged the out-of-tune strings to tune it by ear, I felt a serenity wash over me that I hadn't felt in a long time. The calluses on my fingers may have mostly healed from my life of wealth and leisure, but my hands had the muscle memory of songs I'd not played in years.

There was a favorite song of mine that had never become a hit: a fifteen-minute song that was just my electric guitar and my voice. The band called it my 'vanity song'. They'd meant it fondly, while we'd still been on good terms. Then after the band had split up, they'd called it that bitterly, in interviews with the press.

My voice wasn't warmed up, but five minutes into the song I was hitting my stride. It was like I was no longer in my apartment. Instead, I could almost taste the sweat and stale beer fumes of a crowded stadium, and I could almost hear the roar of the fans as I got stuck into my favorite guitar solo. I imagined the flash of cameras, the sweeping lights that I had to squint to see past into the faces of my fans.

Eventually, the song drew to an end. My whole body was alive with rhythm. Music was the language I knew best. Everything else in my life was like speaking in a non-native tongue. I thought in music. But I rarely got the opportunity to make my thoughts a reality these days.

I paused to consider what to play next, and in the silence I heard a pounding on the door. Oops.

I opened the door to see all three of my brothers' scowling faces. Oh, they were charmers, they were.

I grinned at the assembled brothers. "Ready for the inaugural Brock Brothers Book Club?"

Jude pushed past me into the flat, surly. "We've been ready for about ten minutes now." The ex-Navy SEAL was renowned for his dislike of being early to meetings, so it must have stung that he'd arrived probably five minutes late, only to be held outside waiting.

"Yeah, and I hope it's the *only* Brock Brothers Book Club." Winston slouched after him, possibly tired from a long day of... whatever it was doctors did. Cutting people open?

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you *loved* reading, Winston?"

He shot a dark look at me as he searched my fridge for beer. "This has done absolutely nothing to endear me to the hobby."

Ever polite, Forest waited for me to step aside so he could enter the flat. "I don't know, it was fascinating, in its own way."

I laughed and closed the door behind him, giving a brief wave and thumbs up to my security team as I did. "That's very diplomatic of you. Save it for the press conference we'll probably end up giving over this."

Jude grunted as he accepted a beer from Winston. "I thought I was done with press conferences."

I snatched a beer out of Winston's hand – they were my beers, after all – and danced ahead into the apartment, leading the brothers like a pied piper towards the seating area. "Yeah, well, don't worry your little heads. I know how to take the

limelight off my brothers. I've been doing it for a while now, anyway, since all of you decided to cozy up with your new *wives*."

Winston pouted in my direction. "Awe, jealous?"

I scrunched up my face. "Not at all. I'm still living the bachelor lifestyle, and positively loving it."

Winston gestured with the beer bottle to the guitar stood up at the other end of the vast open-plan room. "Yeah? Does your bachelor lifestyle involve living your glory days as a rockstar, playing sad songs to yourself alone in your apartment?"

Well, he'd got me there. I feigned clutching my chest. "Ouch."

"Leave off him, guys." Forest was always sensitive to any discord amongst us. "We all know he's the next target for Apollo. Don't give the guy any more grief than he already has."

"Grief? I don't know what you're talking about. I'm grief-free. Smooth and easy."

Forest looked at me with some concern. "I've got a number for a--"

I jabbed him playfully in the chest. "Don't you dare offer me the number for a therapist, Forest Brock. My brain is perfect. It needs no tinkering."

Forest grinned. "Whatever you say. Shall we get started?"

One by one, we all located our hardback copies of Apollo's book. It was entitled: "*The Black Sheep: The Lives and Lies of My Brothers*", an unsurprisingly on-the-nose subtitle. The book itself was a huge, hefty tome, detailing mainly the past two decades since Emory Brock's passing.

I'd known about a week before the release that the book was going to drop. Despite being the CEO of *Brock Entertainment*, the wing of my dear biological father's business that had dealt with everything media related, I hadn't been able to procure an advance copy of the manuscript. My connections were worthless when it came to Apollo Brock. It had made me distinctly uneasy.

So, after convening, we'd waited patiently for release day. The copies had landed on our doorsteps, signed with a little personal note from Apollo, on the morning of publication.

We all took our turns venting about the various tales Apollo had told about our businesses and our personal lives. He had an imagination, that was for sure. Each lie contained just a kernel of truth in it, that made it seem more convincing than by right it should.

"So, what now?" Forest closed his copy of the book. He was most secure when he had a plan.

Winston shrugged. "Do we sue him?"

"It seems like that's what he wants us to do." Jude clasped his fingers together in front of his face, puzzling it over.

Forest nodded. "That's true. And if that's what he wants us to do, he likely has something planned for when we do it."

I set my book down on the coffee table, turning it over so I didn't have Apollo's face leering up at me. "Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I've heard a sequel is in the works. If he's already a household hero, he's determined to cement that status, and continue to make things difficult for us, I guess."

Winston threw his book down in disgust. "He clearly didn't write this himself, right? He's not spent months

tinkering away at a manuscript in his little villain's lair..."

"That's a good point." Jude frowned, the bulky muscle around his neck and shoulders rippling in thought. "Who did write this?"

Forest was scanning the copyright page towards the start of the book. "He's not credited a co-writer, so I'd imagine he's contracted a ghost-writer under a non-disclosure agreement. Their identity is supposed to remain totally anonymous."

I raised my hand like a kid in class. "I may not have been able to wrangle my connections to get us an advance copy of that manuscript, but there are many people in the entertainment industry who owe me a favor. I bet I could get us the identity of the ghost-writer."

Forest seemed relieved that there was some course of action. "That's a start."

I grinned. "Finally, a use for my skills other than bringing news helicopters to help you three out."

Winston jabbed a lazy finger at me. "Hey, we never asked for helicopters."

"Forest's wife did once, thank you very much. You know, they're handy in all kinds of situations..."

Forest tilted his head to the side, a slight smile about the corners of his lips. "But not tracking down an anonymous writer, I presume."

"No. You're right. I'll get on it ASAP. Meeting adjourned?"

Jude stood up decisively. "Meeting adjourned."

My brothers had all had their little Apollo missions in the past. It seemed now it really was my turn.

LUNA



I clinked glasses with the barman and took a gulp of the bourbon-on-ice that was my customary celebration drink. My throat stung with the sweet-and-spicy liquid, an old familiar feeling. It was a routine I usually indulged in with little enthusiasm after a job well done. This time, I did feel a bit of a flutter of excitement in my chest. This project had been quite different to my others.

The barman took a swig and raised an eyebrow at me. “What’re we celebrating this time, then? Or is it another case where you can’t tell me?”

I looked at him darkly over my glass, my face straight. “If I did, I’d have to kill you.”

He stared at me.

“No really, I mean it,” I intoned.

He continued to stare. After a few moments, I gave in and smirked.

He shook his head and moved to serve another customer. “You’re a scary lady, Luna.”

I watched him go and took another sip. The sting in my throat was less harsh this time. I only really drank when celebrating a work milestone, so it always hit me quite hard

when I did. The same barman had been present for quite a few of these small celebrations, and it amused me every time he'd tried to guess if I were a spy, or working on a top secret scientific project, or something equally bizarre.

The NDAs I signed didn't usually live up to the secrecy to which I kept them. It was rare a celebrity memoir made the charts, though they tended to do decently well. But this was a secret I had to keep under lock and key, because this book had gained some serious publicity. Serious publicity resulting in the book shooting straight to number one in the charts, no less.

I was in it for the money. That sounds morally bankrupt, but I had my reasons. My client, Apollo Brock, was somewhat of a weird guy, but we'd bonded over the course of writing his memoir, to the extent I'd likely call him a friend. And the success of his memoir meant I was already contracted for the sequel – at an even higher rate of pay.

Looking around the dingy basement rock bar I frequented, I smiled. The posters were peeling off the walls, the paint was chipping where other posters had once been, and the glasses were clearly a mismatch of whatever the owner could find, rather than a branded set. In small groups, various punks of all ages gathered. It was a dive bar, but fights were less frequent than at most. When they did break out, it was usually some metalheads arguing about Metallica, or whatever, and easily sorted out by security telling them to hang their heads and go to opposite ends of the room.

No, I certainly didn't splash out on the luxuries of day-to-day life. Why bother? I liked it better here. Cheap and not-so-cheerful.

Besides, I was saving all my money for my dad. Just because my dreams of a music career had gone to shit, didn't

mean his had to.

He was a composer, brilliant, but totally unaware of how he might have ever gone about getting his compositions heard. Or even played. He wasn't getting any younger, and his dreams were humble compared to how lofty mine had been. He just wanted, once, to hear an orchestra play and record his music. I'd sworn to myself that I'd help him achieve his dream before he died.

That had been my driving force since my own career as a solo artist had been in tatters. That, too, was how I'd ended up in the career of celebrity memoir ghostwriting.

Well, it had started when I'd done a favor for a classmate who had gone off to be a rockstar, been offered a publishing deal for his memoir of how the band had fallen apart, and remembered that I'd been top in English class. He'd passed my name on, and it had gone from there. A long chain of wealthy people's recommendations had led me to Apollo Brock, one of the wealthiest men in the world.

At some point I was able to cover my cost of living and could have started hand-picking my projects per my area of interest – biographies and memoirs of musicians. It was the idea that I could save up to achieve my dad's dream that had led to my pursuit of more and more wealthy clients. It was in my best interests to stay on Apollo Brock's good side, because it was with the money from his second book that I'd finally have enough.

Taking the last mouthful of my bourbon and coming back into my surroundings, I realized I hadn't noticed the bar hushing just slightly. I surreptitiously looked over my shoulder to see what they were looking at.

There, by the entrance to the bar, was the most out-of-place guy I'd ever seen here. He was dressed in all blacks and greys, like so many of the other patrons, but he had none of the scruffy, slightly smelly charm of their outfits. He looked clean. His haircut looked professionally done, not with a pair of shears or blunt scissors like the other guys – and girls – in here. His stubble was artfully upkept, his face that of a male model in an edgy ad campaign for men's fragrance.

I knew this guy. He was also, by coincidence, the last person I'd ever wanted to run into in this entire city, and for some reason he was at my regular bar.

To make things worse, this guy – Sylvester Brock – was not only my childhood sweetheart, but he was also the guy who'd sent my music career under, *and* he was the half-brother of my newest top client, Apollo.

He locked eyes with me, and it was over. *Fuck*. He was heading over. I whipped my head back around and stared down into my glass, swirling it. The ice cubes that hadn't fully melted clinked the sides in a little musical number of their own.

His footsteps stopped just a pace behind me. "Luna Black?"

I groaned silently into my glass. Audibly, I sent a retort. "The one and only."

There was a scraping noise as he grabbed the barstool next to me and pulled it out. The next thing I knew, he was joining me at the bar, resting his elbows onto it. "What are you drinking?"

I didn't look at him. "Nothing. I was just finishing up."

He leaned even farther forwards, trying to catch my eye. His voice was seductive, a low purr. “Perfect. Then you can have a word with me somewhere private.”

I looked sideways at him. The proximity was a little intimidating. By god, he’d aged well. When I’d last seen him, aged eighteen, he still hadn’t quite grown into adulthood, his features. Now, he was broad rather than lanky, chiseled rather than gaunt.

Wealth made beautiful people beautiful, I guessed. In which case, I dreaded his opinion of how *I’d* aged, since I’d spent most of the two decades since our last meet being broke as fuck.

An involuntary shiver ran down my spine. I realized I could smell him – not his aftershave, or his hair products, or whatever it was rich people used to smell nice. No, I could smell the scent of his skin, the musky, salty scent of years of my life, of my obsession with the boy who had held my hand and guided me into his sparkling life, then just as easily dropped me from it as if I were dirt.

I shook the ice cubes in my glass again, sending them tinkling. “No thanks. I’m headed home.”

The barman swept past us to the other side of the bar, raising his eyebrows at me as he went. The clientele of the bar were giving us a wide berth. I shook my head to indicate I didn’t need any help, and he shrugged and served a customer on the other side.

Sylvester drummed his fingers onto the bar surface, the rings on his fingers jingling and clacking against it as he did. “I know who you work for.”

I looked sharply to him, then over to the bartender, who had turned his head slightly in our direction at that sentence and was clearly listening in. I sighed as casually as I could. “You can have a quick word with me outside. Then I’m getting a cab home.”

He stood up. “I can drive you.”

“No thanks. Come on, then.” I slid off the bar stool and wrapped my thick black coat around me, checking the pockets to make sure I still had all my possessions with me.

Then, I beckoned him to follow, and I headed for the exit, giving a lazy wave around at the other patrons of the bar. I knew a lot of them. Not well, but they were familiar faces. I received a few confused waves in return, then pushed my way out through the swing door and up the stairs that led to the noisy street outside.

When the doors swung shut behind us, I rounded on him halfway up the stairs. “How’d you find me?”

Illuminated by the shadowed daylight, he was even more handsome. Age had given him slight lines – crows feet, and a little furrow between his brows. Smiling or frowning, that was generally how Sylvester was. Never passive. “I have my ways.”

I scoffed. I would do well to remember that this man was a threat, however nice he smelled, however special he had once made me feel. “Of course. Do your ways include ‘money’?”

“They might do.” Sylvester sniffed haughtily.

My body was betraying me. I felt a flush rise to my face, my chest. I pulled the coat tighter around me so as not to let him see the effect he still had on me. “Out with it, then. What do you want?”

He was frowning at me, his soft brown eyes slightly puzzled. He pushed back his hair with his right hand, the rings on it gleaming against the daylight, and looked up at the noisy street. “I thought I’d get a better greeting after two decades.”

I held my arms even tighter into myself, as if I were cold, though the day was mild enough. “Did you? You must have been a bit deluded, then.”

He stared back at me, and I felt his eyes taking in every detail of me in the fading daylight. I crossed my arms and tucked my head down, trying to block myself from view. I wasn’t a woman who liked to be looked at. If I could’ve chosen, I’d be totally invisible.

He shook his head slightly, blinked, and clasped his hands together in front of him, those rings clacking together again. “Fine. I want you to not work on Apollo’s next book.”

I looked up at him and laughed a slightly mean laugh. “That’s not surprising.”

He frowned, serious. He was as earnest as he’d been when discussing the intricacies of his favorite songs, or the most underrated members of bands he adored. “I mean it. The things he said in his book are both slanderous and dangerous. You’re putting people’s lives at risk here.”

It was easy to get caught up in Sylvester’s opinions, his passions. He was by nature a charismatic man, and his passion only added to it.

But I was determined not to be swept away in the current of his charm. “By people’s lives, do you mean your poor reputation?” I pouted in slight mockery. “I’m sure you can take it.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You don’t know anything about your client, do you?”

I shrugged and smiled. “I know quite a lot. It’s all in the book. Have you read it?”

“Oh, yes. It was certainly inventive.” He looked up as a motorbike roared past, then fixed his bright, sharp gaze back on me. “Look, whatever he’s paying you, I’ll pay you more, plus the cancellation fee, whatever it is.”

I rolled my eyes, avoiding the intensity of his gaze, which could become mesmerizing if I met it for too long. “While it’s tempting to not have to even work for my money, I can’t do that. I have a career to uphold. I’m fairly sure if I pulled out, Apollo could destroy my reputation. Besides, I don’t want to do that. I like the guy.”

Sylvester blinked, and then shouted up at the sky more than to me, as if cursing the gods for some ill deed. “You *like* him? You like Apollo Brock?”

Ah, there was his sore spot. Well, it’d be a waste not to push it. I grinned as if I didn’t know what I was doing. “Yeah! He’s funny. What’s wrong with that?”

Sylvester was practically hysterical. “He’s *funny*?! ”

I wagged my finger, releasing my grasp on my coat so that it fell apart and exposed that I did in fact have a body underneath the thick layer of wool. “Come now, Sylvester Brock. Don’t tell me this is jealousy.” I was in control now. I’d rattled him. “You don’t get in touch for two decades, but the moment I work on a project with your brother, you’re trying to buy me out?”

“Half-brother. And no.” Sylvester was getting visibly frustrated, not just incredulous. I remembered the signs of it:

shifting his shoulders more than any person should need to do for good posture, blinking less than usual, staring at me like an enraged rhinoceros, his nostrils flaring. Good. I was winding him up. “He’s just not commonly known as a people person.”

I shrugged. “Hmm. That’s where you’re wrong. He’s had a bit of a redemption in the public’s eyes as of recent. I don’t know if you’ve heard about it.”

His eyes snapped back at me from the spot on the wall he’d been staring at furiously while I spoke. “Less of the snark, please, Luna, we aren’t teenagers anymore.”

“You sure? A pretty snivelly teenage attitude of privilege you have, coming here and asking me to destroy my career just because you’ve fallen out with your brother.”

“Half-brother.”

“See? Petty. I don’t care to get involved in petty feuds. Now, I’m off. You go and do something to relax. Enjoy your billions. Seeya.”

I didn’t even take a last look at him before I swept off up the steps. I’d already seen too much of the new Sylvester Brock, and there was enough of his old self still there to make me feel deeply conflicted.

I walked off like I’d won, but when I was only a block away, a feeling of sadness washed over me and I felt like I might cry. It was quite draining to keep up a hard exterior like that. Particularly when I’d had a bit to drink and had been suddenly faced with a situation that I’d been dreading for two decades.

Well, it had finally happened. Sylvester had finally returned to my life. Only it wasn’t groveling and apologizing, like I’d always hoped it would be. No repenting for his sins,

for how he'd treated me, not to mention his bandmates, every single one of his friends.

No, he'd turned up because he wanted something from me. He needed something that I had. And though it hurt me more than I could ever express, more than I could even comprehend, I had to keep that hurt close to my chest and focus on the real takeaway here: I had something that he wanted, and I had the satisfaction of turning him down.

If only it weren't such a hollow-feeling satisfaction.

SYLVESTER



I watched Luna's retreat until she turned the corner and was gone. A noxious cocktail of feelings was stirring in my stomach. Red hot anger, nostalgia, and a stirring of something deeper, more emotional, something like regret, and of course, latent attraction...

The years had been kind to Luna: she looked smoking hot in a black leather jacket, baggy tee, black jeans and dark make-up. Her hair was dyed black as it had been as a teenager – lacking the often-ginger roots she'd had back then. She was less scruffy, more polished: a sign that she had entered the professional world, as I had, too.

Though the years had been kind, her eyes hadn't. The hatred in her narrowed gaze had been quite clear. I didn't need to be a psychological expert to spot it. From the moment she'd turned around to see me at the door of her regular bar, her jaw had been tight and clenched, her dark red lips squashed into a thin, grim line.

I'd ruined her celebrations. *Well then. Good.* If she was profiting from Apollo's image boost, she was just as bad as he was.

Okay, not quite that bad. But still quite bad. She was the friend of my enemy, and that made her my enemy. I should

hate her. I should be seething with absolute loathing for her. I dredged up the anger until it was all-consuming, enough to push away everything else.

Yes, anger was helpful. I'd focus on that feeling. Brush away all the other, more confusing ones, for now.

I seethed in the back of my chauffeur-driven car all the way back to the office. I'd spent days trying to track her down, and that's how she reacts? Well, she wasn't to know I'd spent days. And I suppose, she didn't care, either.

Her famous Luna snark hadn't changed during the twenty years that had passed since we'd been sweethearts. It hadn't normally been directed at me when we'd been close, apart from in jest. Only once, really: when she'd found out I'd dropped her as a support act from my band's tour.

I hadn't thought back to that period of time for a while now. It was more than a little painful. But in the interests of blocking Apollo's plan to apparently become the internet's most favorite person, I retrieved a memory from its box and let it play out in my head.

It wasn't the moment she confronted me. That was too painful to go back over, even now. But the fallout had been almost as bad.

* * *

TWENTY YEARS AGO...

We'd just finished our final band practice in our hometown before we set off on the big tour. There had been no good point to say it, so I'd just come out with it while the guys were still distracted polishing their instruments or whatever it was

they did at the end of practice: “Guys, we’re dropping Luna from the tour.”

The eyes of everyone in that room snapped to stare at me. I felt the tension rise almost immediately. I studied the black nail polished fingers of my right hand, as if deciding whether to change them to a slightly different shade of black for the tour. Charcoal, perhaps, or onyx.

Reed, the lead guitarist, was first to speak. “Wait. What the fuck?”

I shrugged as if it was no big deal. “You heard me.”

Reed stood up. “Erm, veto.”

I met his eyes as coolly as I could. Here began the great deception I had to lead my bandmates in: that I didn’t care. “We don’t have vetoes.”

He looked at me with disgust, and then glanced at everyone else in the room. They were letting Reed fight for them – in general, they agreed with whatever he said. “Fine, a vote. Hands who doesn’t want to drop Luna from the tour.”

All hands in the room, besides mine, went up.

My heart pounded as anger and adrenaline flooded my body. I wrestled it down. *Just be indifferent. Just be calm. Act like this isn’t eating you up inside.* “It’s too late. It’s already done.”

Reed rounded on me. “What the fuck, Sylvester? Who made you in charge?”

“The record company did when they listened to my decision and acted on it.” I shrugged again, even though I was seeing red every time I blinked, and there was a lump in my throat threatening to choke me.

He shook his head and walked over to the other side of the room. His voice was ominous, regretful. “We made a mistake allowing you to be our point of contact.”

I followed him over to the sink, turning off the tap when he went to refill his water. His eyes flashed with anger as he set his bottle down on the side.

I took a step closer to him. “Who got us this record deal, huh? Who invited the agents to watch us play, who networked with them afterwards while you guys downed pints and made stupid jokes in the corner?”

To my surprise, he didn’t back down. “Oh, so the extrovert is king. No matter who formed the band, invited you in, co-wrote all the songs...”

I interrupted him, giving up my attempt at intimidation, walking off towards the door and addressing the room. “It’s done, guys. Even if I wanted to undo it, there’s no going back now. They’ve replaced the support on the tour already.”

Pete piped up amongst the tension. “She’s not just your girlfriend. She’s our friend.”

Well, I could correct him on that count, too. “*Ex*-girlfriend.”

Reed was back in the fight again. “Seriously? You broke up with Luna?”

I nodded somewhat stiffly. “It was for the best.” My voice came out more quietly than I anticipated. At least the low volume hid the slight waver on the word *best*.

* * *

YEAH, she had good reason to despise me.

I glanced around. I was in the elevator on the way to my office. Apparently, I'd been so trapped in recollection that I'd drifted automatically out of the car, in through reception, and into the elevator. I hope no one assumed I was on drugs.

I strode into my office, the previous anger somewhat dimmed by my remembrance of why exactly I deserved Luna's wrath. The top floor of *Brock Entertainment* was octagonal in shape and looked out over the city in all directions. I sometimes felt like I worked in the beacon room of an impossibly large lighthouse. Of course, I'd designed the building as a monument to my own vanity. It was good to acknowledge one's own flaws, so that no one else could mock them and pierce your skin.

I sat down heavily at my desk, sending useless papers flying. The floor was littered with them. I kept a messy office, and everyone who might enter was under strict instructions to leave it that way. I felt more comforted when my office was a mess. The only time I'd let the cleaner do more than an arbitrary mop and vacuum, I'd spent a week messing things back up again until I was comfortable enough to work there.

I thrived in chaos. So why was I so unsettled by this thing with Luna and Apollo?

If Luna couldn't – or wouldn't – break her contract with Apollo, I supposed that was fair enough. She had a good point about her career and reputation. I may not like what she'd grown up into – a money-chasing morally bankrupt ghostwriter for the rich and famous – but I could respect that she'd built a career out of nothing, at least.

She'd said nothing about taking on additional clients, though. If I wanted to keep a close eye on Apollo, the best thing I could do would be to keep my enemies close. And that

involved keeping my common connection – Luna – close, too. Though she despised me, and with good right, I'd make her an offer she couldn't refuse. If she was as money-motivated as she'd said, she'd accept. Then, I'd figure out how to best utilize that thread binding me and Apollo together to my best advantage.

I drafted an email, offering a large sum of money to work on my own memoir concurrently with Apollo's. Then I upped the sum. And again. I didn't know how much Apollo was paying her, but I wanted to make sure it was a decent offer.

Send.

The email whooshed off into the ether, or wherever emails whooshed off to.

Though the memory I'd unearthed had been painful – and there were more like that in the memory banks from around that time – I was feeling decidedly nostalgic. That combined with my guitar renaissance the other day had me inspired. I knew how to pass the afternoon's anxiety: I'd spend it looking up my old *Needlehead* bandmates and seeing what they were up to these days.

The lead guitarist, Reed Stokes, had been the one I'd had the bitterest split with. He, in fact, had penned his own memoir about the whole thing. Unlike Apollo's piece of work, his was unfortunately true. Every shitty thing I'd done that he described had been carried out by me – as part of my cunning plan to burn all of my bridges before inheriting one-fifth of Emory Brock's fortune.

It wasn't that I didn't want them coming after me for money or anything. I had heaps of the stuff, I could give it out like candy. But I sensed – correctly, as it turned out – that I was about to inherit a heap of Emory Brock's enemies, too,

including the press, as well as a few new ones of my own to boot.

I'd been a protector all my life, it was just how I was.

I hadn't wanted anyone coming after those I held dearest to me. And so, I had let them go, the only way I knew they wouldn't come back from: by being totally and entirely horrific to them.

It was mainly Reed that I wanted to check up on. We'd had a lot of respect for each other in the early days of the band. We were both equally nerdy about music, though he was far smarter than me in most topics, always reading some massive tome of philosophy or literature.

His lyrics tended towards the cerebral. We co-wrote most songs, and my bold, brash lyrics had given his careful, clever lyrics the edge they needed to be popular. He would write the most delicately held together song, with so many deep meanings. I would essentially come up with some edgy sounding phrases and insert them loudly into the chorus.

Yet my lyrics were the ones most people remembered. The true fans, sure, had a deeper appreciation, and it's true I wasn't popular amongst *Needlehead's* remaining true fans. But I was the most widely known.

It didn't take me long to find out what he was up to these days. According to Wikipedia, Reed was in a new band, and it appeared he was the frontman as well as the lead guitarist. We had always clashed on ego a little, so it made sense he'd want the control that being a frontman afforded.

His new band, *Unspeakable Bats*, seemed to be doing okay. Not well enough that I'd heard of them before,

obviously, but popular within their own little scene. They were even going on tour soon.

I shut down the browser window. For some reason, I thought the rest of the band must have quietly given up music, like I had, when we split. It weirdly hadn't occurred to me that they were still out there, doing what we'd once all loved best.

Needlehead still had a lot of fans. I missed playing. If we reunited, we'd have a ready-made audience for us to play to.

I thought I'd never reach the day, but... I kind of wanted to reform the band.

If only I wasn't universally despised by not only my bandmates, but all of the diehard fans of the group.

Ah well.

LUNA



*T*wenty-five years ago...

I'd been walking down the school corridor, trying to look as pissed-off as possible so that everyone would leave me alone, when someone dared to break through my forcefield of apathy and call out to me.

The voice came outta nowhere. "Hey, nice t-shirt."

I'd hardly been present in my surroundings. Some guy had thrown me a compliment in passing, so I was obliged to acknowledge it in return. "Thanks." I smiled a tight smile intended to be polite but that I knew always came out as a grimace – I'd seen it in photos.

The guy stopped walking. I stared at him, surprised. This was Sylvester Hart, also known amongst the girls of our school – and some of the guys – as 'The Hartthrob'. Why was he stopping? Had the compliment been a joke – was he now gonna laugh at my musical taste?

But instead, he smiled. It was such a dazzling and genuine smile that, in that moment, I suddenly understood why half the girls in the school were smitten with him.

He feigned a stern frown. "Favorite Bowie album, and favorite Bowie look. Go."

“Trick question. It’s the same. Album: *Low*. Look: the orange floppy hair that’s iconic of the *Low* album.”

“Hmm.” He stroked his chin. “Sounds like you’ve only heard or seen that one album.”

I rolled my eyes and started walking down the corridor. I was already done with guys who thought they could quiz me on music and somehow one-up me. They always got schooled, and I’d long since stopped answering the questions.

He jogged to catch up with me. “Hey – sorry. That sounded like I don’t believe you’re a fan. But I do. You’ve got that serious look to your face. Like you both despise me and know all the secrets of the universe.”

I kept walking. “That’s just my face.”

“Maybe you just hate everyone and do know all the secrets of the universe. Er, my name’s Sylvester.”

Was he feigning humbleness, pretending not to know that everyone in school knew his name? I answered blankly. “I know.”

“Well, what’s yours?”

“Luna.”

“Nice to meet you, Luna. We share the same favorite Bowie look. But for album, I gotta go with *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.”

I stopped and looked at him. “Oh, so you’re a drama queen?”

He beamed at the insult, for some reason, and jabbed a finger at me. “And you’re an eccentric recluse.”

I smiled just a little, despite myself. “You got that just from *Low*?”

“Yep. And that’s how I know you gotta know more about Bowie than I do. No one’s *only* listened to *Low*.”

I nodded, repressing the goofy smile. “Astute.”

“I’ve seen you around with a guitar. You play?”

How had Sylvester Hart noticed me – and why? I was as nondescript as they came. “Yeah. Do you?”

“Yeah. I try. Hey, do you wanna play together sometime?”

I shrugged as if hot guys asked me to play guitar with them all the time. “I don’t know. You any good?”

“Er. I feel like there’s a wrong answer to this. Actually, I feel like they’re all wrong answers. If I say yes you’re gonna say I’m arrogant. If I say no, you’ll say you won’t play with me if I’m shit.”

“You passed the test. Go on, though. Be honest.”

“Yeah, I’m alright.”

“Me too. Fine. We can play together.”

* * *

BLINKING AWAY THE DISTANT MEMORY, I reread the email that I’d received from Sylvester earlier that day. He’d followed it up with a text, a voicemail, and bizarrely, an attempted fax – which had failed, since obviously I didn’t have a fax machine.

My resentment and fear had faded since the encounter with Sylvester at my regular bar. I’d been able to put my hurt back away into its box, compartmentalize it neatly away, and force myself to view his offer with rationality.

His offer had been curt but polite. No demanding I ruin my career for him – the *second* time he would have ruined a career of mine for no reason other than his own selfishness. Instead, he'd sent me a fairly decent proposal. To write *his* memoirs.

What harm could it do? He was offering a ton of cash. At this rate, I'd not just be able to get an orchestra to play my dad's compositions – I'd be able to fly in the best musicians from across the globe. The Brock brothers were seriously rich. They were also seriously dangerous, but since when did I have a sturdy concept of danger?

I emailed back a quick and curt response, my fingers flying across the keyboard almost as if I wanted to send the message before I could have second thoughts. Maybe I did want to find out what he'd been up to since we'd parted ways. Just a little.

Send.

Well, it was done. I guessed there was still a chance to back out before the contract was signed, but I knew I wouldn't.

I was feeling a bit jittery, nervous. It should be expected since I'd just encountered a ghost from my past. I did what I always did when I needed to calm down – went into the little music corner of my office, sat on the chair, and picked up my acoustic guitar.

As soon as my fingers strummed across the strings I felt my whole body breathe easier, peace shimmering over me from my hands' point of contact with the instrument and out across my whole body.

I played the opening chords of my oldest song – or at least, the one that had been good enough to have stood the test of time. Most of the songs from my debut album, the one I'd

been hoping to release to coincide with the tour, made me cringe to hear or play now. I was a teenager, with teenage feelings and teenage thoughts.

But this one, a slow and gentle song about night shifts, imagining my father at his lonely job, was still a favorite of mine today. Playing it made me feel close to my dad, too, who was too far away to visit frequently enough, and lived too remotely for me to ever consider living there. Although I was, by all accounts, an introvert, even I knew I needed human contact to stay sane.

This was the same guitar I'd had since I was a kid. As I sang the last line of the song, my gaze was drawn to the scratched-up patch of wood where Sylvester had stuck his band sticker when we'd excitedly found out about the tour, and where later, I'd attacked the thing in an attempt to get it off.

Instead, I'd accidentally engraved his logo into my guitar forever. But it was a gift from my father, and I could never get rid of the thing. Whenever I played, then, the specter of my past – and of Sylvester – would always loom over me.

* * *

TWENTY YEARS AGO...

I'd spotted him and screamed his name across the entire span of the school's corridors. "Sylvester. Sylvester! Is this true? You're not only dumping me, you're dumping me from the tour?"

He stopped and turned around, a concerned frown furrowing its way across his brown. "Luna... I don't like the word 'dumping'."

I reached him with such fury that he took a lazy step back. “That’s your objection?”

He sighed, almost as if he were bored. “Yes, it’s true. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you myself, if that would have helped. I didn’t think you’d like hearing it from me.”

“I don’t like hearing it from *anyone*. You said it yourself, you were bringing me on the tour on my own merit, not ‘cause I’m your girlfriend. Now you dump me, the next day I’m dropped?”

“It’s not like that!”

“How is it like, then?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Then opened it again. “I don’t know.”

“You do know. You’re just a liar and a coward. How do the other guys feel about this, huh? Reed and Petey and Mark, they cool with this?”

His mouth was a grim line. “They have to be cool with this. It was my say.”

I was fuming. Underneath it all was my total disappointment in who I thought Sylvester was, and who I was just now finding out he had been all along. “Wow. *Wow*. So now you’re leader of the band too, I guess. Don’t I recall you saying something about ‘just because I’m the frontman doesn’t mean I’m in charge, this is like a cooperative, we’re all equal parts and all equally important’.”

“Yeah. Well. Things change. The music industry doesn’t operate like that.”

“Convenient. So this is all about money for you?”

Something twitched in his expression. Then he relented. “Well, yeah. Anything wrong with that? Hardly any musicians ever make a living from their work. Is it so wrong I want to try and be one of the few?”

That was it. At his words, I thought of my father. My kind, gentle father who composed in his kitchen and never made a penny from his art. There was a whole universe between that and Sylvester, who’d sold out at the first chance he’d gotten.

“Fuck you, Sylvester Hart. I hope your album flops.”

From then on it was a quick decline for the music career I’d been promised. Being dropped from the tour meant that other promoters were wary to take a risk on me, since it was known that I hadn’t dropped out for ill health or any other reasonable excuse. My record label quickly saw what was happening and dropped me like a hot potato.

I’d been promised an escape from the endless, mundane high school life. I’d been promised a way to make my dreams come true, to bring home money to support my dad so he could quit his day job and focus on his passions. I’d been promised love, and I was left with nothing.

Just an ordinary girl with an entire year of school stretching out in front of her, alone, the laughing stock.

SYLVESTER



It was done. With the signing of the contract, Luna's fate was tied into mine, twenty years after I thought I'd severed it for good.

My stomach bubbled again with that mixture of feelings rising up now that my anger had been mollified.

No, I was still angry. But the anger was no longer focused on Luna. She may be my enemy, but I'd made her into my enemy by betraying her so badly. I was angry at myself. I was angry at my deceased biological father, Emery Brock, who, by pulling me into his schemes, had changed the course of my life irrevocably.

I hadn't been angry at myself or Emory in some time. Reopening the past was also reopening old wounds, facts of life that I thought I'd already processed and moved on from.

There was nothing to do about it. Time to figure out my next steps – our next steps, including the brothers.

I sent a message to the group chat.

Sylvester: *I've tracked down the writer of the memoir*

Sylvester: *If you want full details, you'll have to call by my office. I'm cranky*

Winston: *Uh oh*

Winston: *Not a fan of Cranky Sylvester*

Sylvester: *Yeah, well, too late*

Sylvester: *You'll see why when I explain it to you all*

Forest: *Very mysterious*

Forest: *I suppose I'd better head over. You in, @Jude, @Winston?*

Winston: *Sure. Better bring our hazmat suits so we don't get sprayed by @Sylvester's toxins*

Sylvester: *What am I? A lizard?*

Jude: *If you were an animal, you might be a lizard*

Jude: *What are those ones with the funny necks? Like an Elizabethan collar?*

Forest: *Hahahaha*

Forest: *A frilled-neck lizard. YES!*

Winston: *Wow. We've finally solved the puzzle of which animal @Sylvester would be*

Winston: *I'm so proud of our achievements*

Sylvester: *Fuck you guys. See you soon*

I tossed my phone onto the desk, allowing a little smirk across my mouth since no one was there to see it. Okay, my brothers could quite easily break through my crankiness. Maybe that's what I'd needed – a bit of levity whenever I found myself feeling too serious. I was the *least* serious of the Brock brothers. I had a reputation to uphold.

By the time the brothers had assembled in my office, I was a little more composed than I had been. “Just to warn you,

there's a bit of drama involved in the explanation of what happened."

A collective groan. I would have joined them in it if it weren't my own drama. We'd had enough drama in the past few years to last us a lifetime. Unfortunately, that was the life of a Brock heir.

I gave them a sympathetic look. "I know, I know. Here it goes... I tracked down Apollo's ghostwriter. It turns out, the writer... is my ex-girlfriend."

Winston chimed in with righteous annoyance. "Fucking hell, he knows how to pick them, doesn't he!"

We all knew the story of how Apollo had teamed up with Winston's own mom to try and use his own ex-girlfriend – and her secret child, of whom Winston was the unknowing father – against him.

"Yeah, I don't even know if he intended it." The words came out of my mouth, but they sounded foolish even as I heard them.

Jude's deep voice hummed with disbelief. "Seriously, Sylvester? After everything else he's done, you think it's a coincidence that the ghostwriter he chose to pen his book full of lies about us is your ex?"

"Yeah, I just heard myself say it, and realized the same thing." I growled, even crankier than I had been earlier. "But why? What does it get him?"

Forest's arms were folded. "Well, he's got you riled, so that's a point to him already. He'll do anything to get under our skin. And you *are* the last one remaining out of us that he's not targeted yet. Go on, tell us the history with your ex. Let us

dissect your tale of misfortune and determine exactly what Apollo might be up to.”

I sighed. “We were teenagers, we were in love, etcetera. I was getting ready for my first tour when I got the missive from Emory about being his son blah blah blah. So, like you three, I spent that summer at his weird old mansion while he told us a bunch of creepy, evil lies about the world. Best summer camp ever.”

Winston chuckled darkly.

I continued. “Then, I went back home, and I realized what was going to happen when the old man died. We knew he intended to leave us the company, and we’d all realized we were going to be obligated to take it over. We’d seen his lifestyle, we knew how extreme it was. I didn’t want my ex or my bandmates getting caught up in things.”

“What did you do, Sylvester?” Winston spoke like he knew what was coming. Maybe he’d guessed it.

“I dumped her and got her dropped from the tour. Oh yeah, she was supposed to be a support act. Then I spent the next few years building my music career while getting my bandmates to hate me, until we split too. Just in time for Emory’s death and the press conference that started everything.”

Forest winced. “That was harsh.”

“Yeah, well, it was for the best. Winston tried entering his new life with a girlfriend in tow, and look how it went for them.”

Winston nodded. “I kinda agree. It was shitty for Monica back then.”

Jude had his eyebrows raised. “Sometimes I don’t understand any of you.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual.” I winked at Jude.

We were all three quite different people – but being thrown into a similar set of circumstances at the same time had created a very strong bond between the four of us. I valued it more than anything. Of course, I never really showed how much I valued it... but that’s how family was. You just knew.

Rehashing my past had once again brought up the thought of contacting my old bandmates. After the Brocks had left, I opened my phone contacts. I still had Reed Stokes’ number, though I had no clue if it was still the same as it had been many years ago.

Fuck it. Call him before you chicken out again.

Fine.

I rolled my eyes at the internal voice who liked to goad me into doing stupid shit and did it anyway. Before I knew it, the dialing tone was starting up. I held the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Reed.” There was a note of surprise in my voice – I hadn’t expected him to pick up, if I was being honest with myself.

He sounded older, but no less abrupt. “Who is this?”

Ouch, and there it was – he’d deleted my number, a long time ago, likely. I cleared my throat, stalling while I decided what to do. *May as well follow through with it.* “This is Sylvester.”

An audible intake of breath on the other end of the line, like a hiss. Then: “Why are you calling me?”

“I dunno. Feeling nostalgic, I guess. Wanted to find out what you were up to.” Except I’d been internet stalking him, so I already knew.

He was sounding rapidly more spiteful. “Have you lost it? You were feeling nostalgic – for what exactly? The shitshow that was our band? No – the shitshow that was *you* in our band?”

I grew sheepish. “Err, no, not that part. The good parts, y’know, where we played music to our adoring fans and so on.”

“I don’t know what you’re after, but I’m out. Find a better excuse next time you need something from me.”

He hung up.

I stared at my phone. I was affronted – primarily, that he thought I, Sylvester Brock, would need anything from him. He’d treated me like some kind of... out-of-control teenager, crawling back to my parents for money. I suppose the last time he’d really known me, I *had* been an out-of-control teenager. And then an out-of-control man in his early twenties who definitely still acted like a teenager.

Making the phone call was a mistake. Dragging Luna back into my life, too, was a mistake, except it was one I had little choice in. I shouldn’t let my one unavoidable mistake lead to many other much more avoidable mistakes in which I humiliated myself in front of all of my former friends for an attempt at honoring the feelings of nostalgia and loss which kept arriving.

No, I must keep my eyes on the prize. Apollo’s head on a platter.

LUNA



Today was my first meeting for Sylvester's memoir. I was having second thoughts, but I'd signed the contract now.

Annoyingly, I was having high school flashbacks trying to figure out what to wear to the meeting. At school, I'd never tried to impress anyone until Sylvester. And even then, only when he'd showed he had a genuine interest in me, and a genuine interest in music.

But now... so much time had passed, and he was a different man. Wealthy, handsome, with cheekbones that could skin a snake... Inheriting a vast amount of money hadn't removed his edge, that dangerous charisma that made every moment with him intoxicating. It had only amplified it to dangerous levels, so that even though he was by all accounts my enemy, and I should want nothing to do with him, I still had a childish, insecure yearning to impress him.

As I was holding up different t-shirts on hangers against myself in the mirror, while rolling my eyes at my reflection, my phone lit up with a call: *Apollo Brock*.

I couldn't really decline client calls unless I was in a meeting with another client. Apollo, of all my clients, was the most demanding of my time. He had a tendency to call me up

all hours with ‘thoughts’ for the book. Sometimes I did get the feeling that I was his therapist and main confidante. He was paying me enough that I was kind of okay with it.

I threw the hangers onto my bed and picked up the call. I didn’t even get to say *hello* before he launched into it.

“I’m having ideas for my second memoirs. Can you make your way to my office, please?” His voice was as expectant and demanding as ever.

Rich people thought they were the center of the universe – and maybe they were. Wealth could buy a lot of things. Right now, however, a different rich guy was at the center of my universe, and I couldn’t drop everything for Apollo, as much as he might want me to.

It was best to take a ‘blunt but polite’ approach in dealing with the richest of the five Brock brothers. “Sorry, Apollo. I have a meeting with another client now.”

“Ah. I see.” He was silent for a moment. I could practically hear him flexing his fingers together in thought over the phone. “How much more would you charge for exclusive usage of your talents?”

I laughed. “I’m flattered. Unfortunately, I have a commitment to other jobs at the moment. If you want to talk about exclusivity further down the line, we can make an arrangement for when my other jobs have wrapped up.”

“Ah, no bother. Such a professional.” His drawl was slightly ominous in tone, but we had a good working relationship – light teasing of each other was acceptable.

“Why not voice record your thoughts and send them over to me? Then we can discuss them at a later time.”

“Unfortunately not, Luna. My genius requires an audience. Thus is the curse of it. I need someone there to hear them as – what do they call it – a rubber duck?”

Nice to know I was his *rubber duck*. That was just how he talked, though. Brushing off the offense, I continued. “Well, feel free to leave the thoughts with me in any way you can, if you decide to. Maybe try a real rubber duck. I’ll get back to you when I’m free, but it won’t be until tomorrow, now.”

He sniffed. “I’ll let you know if I still have the thoughts percolating then.”

Then the phone line clicked dead. That was Apollo: no *hello*, no *goodbye*.

The guy was surprisingly easy company, I’d discovered. Even if I was just his rubber duck, he clearly enjoyed entertaining and he had such a funny way of putting things that I couldn’t help but laugh at his tales, even the most sordid. I’d carried that tone over into his memoirs, which partially accounted for his book’s success. Whatever else you could say about him – and believe me, he had plenty of opponents and haters out there – the guy was compelling.

If Sylvester had been able to find out that I was Apollo’s ghostwriter, presumably at some point Apollo would find out that I was writing for Sylvester, too. I smirked thinking how funny it would be if Sylvester’s book found as much success as Apollo’s had, if I then ended up in a literary war with... myself.

More than likely, Apollo would have some objections. But I knew I was valuable to him. For some reason he needed an image boost, and I’d given him the best one he could’ve hoped for. He needed me.

Right now, I had bigger problems. I was running out of time to choose an outfit.

Who was I kidding? My wardrobe was an all-black assortment of band t-shirts, jeans, and jackets. There were a few dresses for when I had an occasion, but they rarely came around. I certainly wasn't going to wear a dress for Sylvester. We'd both know, then, that he still made my chest flutter with butterflies, even as my mind seethed with hatred for him and what he'd done. No, I'd just wear a generic outfit and think no further on it. I'd just made sure my make-up was *extra* nice. Extra... menacing.

I layered on extra-thick eyeliner, checked myself out in the mirror, then headed out with my little backpack of recording equipment.

I did all the actual writing separately, on my own. That was how I worked best. Meetings with my clients were essentially a series of conversations, like a Q&A. I'd dig deeper into the areas I could see potential in, and eventually, I'd have enough material to form a rough shape of a narrative. I'd then spend a few months perfecting it, and then, voila. A first draft would take shape.

As a first meeting, we wouldn't really get into the details of Sylvester's life. This meeting would be more about expectations, what he wanted from the memoir, and how the process would work. Since we were already familiar with each other, we could skip the professional overview of our own careers.

Getting out of the taxi at Sylvester's address, I rolled my eyes. The apartment block was ridiculously lavish, even from the outside, and since Sylvester's apartment was the penthouse, his apartment would be the most lavish of them all.

I climbed the stairs to the foyer. The inside was practically plastered with jewels, chandeliers, ornate frames, that kind of thing.

The concierge scuttled over. “Who are you here to see, ma’am?” His ridiculous faux-British accent made him seem like a caricature of a butler, or of someone playing a role in a murder mystery.

I hid my mirth behind a polite hand. “Erm, Sylvester Brock. He should be expecting me.”

“Ah, yes. I imagine he is.” With that cryptic statement, the concierge waved an arm towards the elevator. “You’ll know where to find him.”

Weren’t concierges supposed to give directions? Whatever. I did know where to find him. I got in the elevator, eyeing up the bronze busts that guarded the entrance. I did a double take at one of them: it was of Sylvester himself. I rolled my eyes and jammed the button for the top floor, then waited.

No one else joined me in the elevator as it sped its way upwards into air that was once occupied only by birds until humans had decided to build taller and taller buildings. My dad lived in the mountains, now, and luckily, I enjoyed heights. But there was something more unsettling at being at a great height in a manmade structure than there was on a mountain.

I stepped out into the landing, a little dizzy, approached the entrance, and knocked. Had the concierge not told him I was coming? I’d expected more from the exaggerated butler act of my welcome.

It was then that I noticed the noise. I frowned. From beyond the door, there was a rumbling of music and the

sounds of people laughing and talking. Loudly.

The door swung open, and beyond it was Sylvester, swigging from a beer bottle. “The invite said just come in, the door’s...”

Behind him, a party was in full swing. He trailed off as he realized who was at his door – a person who had certainly not received an invite to whatever this event was. Me.

“Did we... did we have our meeting this evening?”

“Yes.”

His eyes widened as he realized the schedule clash he’d made. “Oh, shit.”

I took a step back and shook my head. “It’s okay, we can reschedule.”

He held out his free hand to stop me leaving. “No no no. Come in? We probably won’t get much work done, but you’ve come all this way. Maybe it’ll give you some insight into my... life?”

It certainly gave me an insight into Sylvester’s life, that was for sure. The media were right about him: the biggest playboy of the bunch of them – them being the five Brock brothers – and the one who partied the hardest. This was before the other three of them, minus Apollo, had settled down, too.

Yes, I knew my Brock history. I’d been schooled in it by Apollo.

This party wasn’t a place for me. I had nothing in common with any of these people. Rich people, with time on their hands and more money to spare on a daily basis than I made in a year.

He took a step out of the door towards me. “Please, Luna? I’ll feel terribly if you go away empty handed.”

He sounded so earnest, I almost believed him. That earnestness had always been part of his appeal, too. He would be so guarded most of the time, but when he was genuine and open, you’d feel like you’d been let in on a secret.

I looked past him at the party. Despite my defenses, I was feeling just the smallest bit convinced. “I suppose it might be helpful for... networking...”

“There’s the spirit! Nothing brings the party quite like networking!”

One wink from Sylvester and I found myself almost automatically ushered into the apartment by him, blinking around at the lavish abode packed with people from wall to wall.

The door closed behind me and I was sealed into another universe.

He strode past me into the party. “What’re you drinking?”

“Bourbon.”

I expected Sylvester to slide off into the crowd, leaving me on the edge of the room awkwardly clutching my bourbon tumbler with both hands. Instead, to my surprise, he put his arm around my shoulders with the casual ease that he’d always had and steered me into the crowds at his side, picking up drinks for us as he went.

“Who’s your friend?” A nearby woman had backpedaled out of her own little circle and was eyeing me up in what seemed to be admiration. If I swung that way, I was sure she’d be my type. Smoking hot, short-cropped hair bleached grey,

and enough tattoos and piercings that it made her features difficult to make out.

Sylvester grinned. “This is Luna. She’s a...” He paused, realizing my profession – and my current link to Sylvester – was confidential. “She’s a musician. A really great songwriter.”

I was almost blushing. I flapped my hand awkwardly, as if to say *nah, not really*. At least I wasn’t the type to nervously smile or I’d really have bottled it. As it was, my natural stony face prevented me from being *too* awkward-looking in social scenarios. “Ex-musician. Nice to meet you.”

Sylvester steered us onwards.

I wondered if he’d sensed my unease. “Who are all these people?”

“Friends. Musicians, actors, producers... I don’t know. News anchors? I’m sure I’ve seen a news anchor somewhere. And one really popular accountant called Timothy.”

I glanced around the room, my voice dry. “Wow. Introduce me to that accountant guy. He sounds like a blast.”

“There’s the spirit!” He sounded more convinced than the previous time he’d said that.

In the hallway, I discovered the front room was only the atrium of the party. There was one room here that contained a full dancefloor, with a DJ whose decks vibrated the floor and the wall with bass. Yet another room seemed to be some kind of fetish orgy, from which I averted my eyes. There was a cabaret in another. And a relaxation room with glowing lights and gentle music, which I presumed was where the people who were too drunk or too drugged up went to chill out. I was

neither, but that room appealed to me more than any of the others.

Sylvester was watching me. “Your choice.”

“I think the, er, normal room back there was more my style.”

“Come on then. I’ll introduce you to some people.”

As we turned back into the front room, I was getting a familiar feeling. That of being the unpopular kid at the party, being ushered into a new, unfamiliar world by the one popular kid who’d taken a shine to me. As kids, that *had* been our relationship.

Sylvester introduced me to a bunch of people in the room. The names and faces began to escape me. They were all kinds of famous, each one more acclaimed than I, even the famous accountant.

After a few of these introductions, Sylvester looked over at the clock. “Oh! It’s time to set up for the bands. Will you be okay by yourself for a while?”

I was being engaged in conversation by Timothy the accountant on the topic of Black Sabbath, so I was quite content to be left to it. I waved Sylvester off. “Sure, don’t worry about me.”

The conversation tailed off after a while, but I was quite happy just chilling in the middle of the crowd, feeling not unwelcome, for once. Over the heads of the guests I could see a makeshift stage being set up, instruments being brought out, a drum kit, even. The whole lot.

And then, Sylvester took to the stage with a mic. I feared he was going to sing. But he was just introducing the acts.

“Alright, thank you everyone for coming here tonight. As always, I’ve got a roster of new, fresh bands for you to sample before they become big and famous. Remember, you heard ‘em here first!”

He introduced the first band and jumped off the stage, handing the microphone to the woman with cropped grey hair and piercings who’d checked me out earlier. Of course she was the frontwoman of a band. She certainly had the image.

It turned out she also had talent, too. She played the electric guitar while singing. The whole band had energy, but she had the most out of all of them. Her voice veered between screaming and singing so softly it was like a lullaby, and she pulled it off with style. The melody of the music brought it all together, so the whole thing wasn’t too offputtingly heavy.

Before I knew it, I was dancing along to the band with the rest of the crowd. The atmosphere here really was contagious. It had been so long since I’d seen a good live band, especially not one in such an intimate atmosphere like this. While Sylvester’s party was certainly very popular, it couldn’t rival the crowds you got at a stadium gig, and I was glad of it.

After the band had finished, I spotted Sylvester weaving his way through the excited crowd to me. I pretended not to see him coming until he rested his hand on my arm in greeting.

His arm lingered there after I’d acknowledged his arrival. “How are you enjoying the party?”

I nodded. “Quite well, actually.”

He pulled me in closer. “I’m glad!”

Once again, I was suddenly hit by the smell of his skin, the sweat from the crowded party and the lights, the mingling and intoxicating scent of his aftershave, clothing and hair products.

A combination of new and familiar smells that my body was reacting to, even as my mind would normally exercise caution.

I eyed him with more trepidation than I felt. “Are you?”

“Yes, of course! Hey, do you wanna see the rest of the apartment?”

“There’s more?”

He nodded, a wicked grin stretched across his face. Okay, so this was clearly a come-on, right? Show me the rest of the apartment?

The thing is, I wasn’t against it. I was having a good time, and my body felt invigorated from the live music and dancing. It was practically begging to throw itself against another body in the darkness – something I’d not done in a while. Sylvester was the best looking guy here, and I already knew that he wasn’t a *total* freak in the bedroom, so it was a safe bet.

I shrugged as if it was not an important decision at all. “Sure. Give me the tour.”

I wondered if I wasn’t perhaps deluding myself a little, convincing myself that I’d accepted Sylvester’s offer for purely practical reasons. But I was merely being carried away on the whims of fate – or of Sylvester Brock. I wasn’t sure they were all that indistinguishable from one another.

He led me through a locked door, which he unlocked with a keycode, and I found myself in a quite normal apartment setting. No DJ decks, no hundreds of people packed into a room, no dancing.

I turned to look at him as he secured the door behind us so that no one could follow. We were plunged into relative silence. We could still hear the noises of the party but they were so hushed they could almost be happening miles away.

My body was very aware that I had just become alone with Sylvester. My heart was racing as I looked over him: the slightly unbuttoned shirt that revealed his toned chest, the way he moved with such fluidity and strength, the confidence of his stance. How, when we made eye contact, it was like we were meeting each other for the very first time. How I wanted to impress him just as much as I wanted him to not think about me. How I wanted to have his body against mine, just as much as I never wanted to see him ever again.

Charisma had always radiated from Sylvester. He was enchanting in every way from his deep, smooth voice to the way he so comfortably wrapped his arms around me at the party to steer me through the crowds. But the years had only made his charisma more potent. He practically leaked power. And, though he had all the money in the world and could have any woman he chose, he had opted, this evening, to spend his time with me. Luna Black, who had never made a name for herself and never would.

He was staring at me in return, his eyes hungry and wanting. There was that sizzle again when our eyes met. It wasn't enough just to look at him. I wanted more and I could tell he did too.

I wanted him. He wanted me. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we?"

His voice was low and breathy. "Gladly."

Our bodies met as he pushed his hands into my hair and I wrapped my arms around his waist. He held my head still for a moment, his face an inch from mine. We paused there in that moment of heat and need as he looked over every detail of my face, as if he were checking I were still the same person he had once loved. I looked him over too. Age had changed him, but

underneath the slight lines and the maturation of his features, he was still the same boy I'd once fallen in love with. Who had been mine, almost as much as I'd been his.

Then our lips met, and all thoughts of our past and our present melted out of my mind. It was all one, it didn't matter what had happened, or what was going to happen, it just mattered that right now, Sylvester's tongue was pushing urgently against mine, and I was moaning into his mouth, and his warm, hard cock was stiffening and pulsing against my groin, where it met, even through clothed, with my own heat, my own desperate wetness.

Then, he scooped his hands under my ass and picked me up as if I were as light as I had been as a scrawny teenager, and he carried me through further into the apartment. I clung to his neck, but he held me firm with the tensing muscles in his biceps.

“Are you still giving me that tour?” I breathed the words into his neck, then dragged my teeth along the skin there, sucking at it, wanting to leave my mark on him.

He groaned at the pinch of my teeth on his tender skin. “Of course. Here's the... kitchen...”

At the word kitchen he sat me onto a countertop, next to a bowl of fruit. He plucked a bunch of grapes out of the bowl, took one and held it up to my lips. I parted them slightly to allow him to push it in, sucking on the tender skin until the fruit was enveloped by my eager tongue.

He teased his fingers up my thighs and across the crotch of my jeans. Even through the thick material I squirmed and moaned, then hastened to pop open the button and shed them. He helped me pull them off, and then he resumed stroking and caressing my hips, my stomach, the tender skin where my

thighs met my hips, getting closer and closer to my weeping slit.

He took another grape and fed it into his own mouth, then leaned his face into mine and passed it to me with his tongue, his lips closing around mine like he wanted to eat me whole.

I reached out to unbuckle his belt, but he pressed his palm against my groin and so I moaned and let go of the belt. His fingers teased my clit through my panties, which were sodden by now.

I tried again to reach for his belt but he shook his head. “Save it for the next stop on the tour.”

Before I had a chance to react, he swept me off the countertop and carried me outside to the balcony, deftly managed to push open the door with his elbow.

Out here, we could hear the noises of the party more coherently. It felt like we were doing something naughty, like we could at any moment be caught, though of course we could not be seen.

He set me down near the balcony edge, and I pushed him against the railing, his hands groping to lift my t-shirt while I finally removed his belt and his pants so I could hold what I’d been feeling through the layers of his clothing: his huge member, hard as a rock but far more alive, stirring to the touch as I squeezed and he moaned above me, stretching his neck back in pleasure as I squeezed and rubbed.

He removed my hand from his cock, took it, and led me through to the living room, where he unbuttoned and discarded his shirt, then stood almost nude, watching me, taking in every inch of me.

He practically purred, his voice low and full of desire. “You have an incredible body. I can’t believe you keep it so hidden.”

I smirked. “It’s not a universal opinion.”

He drew in closer, holding me tightly in his grasp as he unclasped my bra and let it fall away to the ground. “It is my opinion, and that makes it universal. You think if I told everyone at this party what to think, they wouldn’t follow suit?”

I smirked as he stroked his hand, and then his tongue, down my body from my neck to my thighs. “You think too highly of yourself.”

Into my skin, he growled the words as he continued to move with his mouth. “Everyone at that party wants to fuck you, Luna. But only I will tonight. You’re mine.”

A thrill ran through my body. “We’ll see about that.”

“We will.” At that, he took my clit with his tongue and lapped and flicked while he pushed three fingers inside my waiting, wanting hole.

I moaned and fell back onto the couch seat. He climbed onto the couch by my feet, continuing to dance his tongue around and around while his fingers thrust and almost filled me. I needed his cock if I wanted to be really full. But he was so deft – guitarist’s hands – that I was helpless just to his mouth and fingers combined. I cried out as an orgasm rippled through me, so intense and unexpected that I was bowled over with the sheer sensation. My legs spasmed around Sylvester’s head and shoulders, but he kept going until I placed my hand on his head, barely able to speak.

“You want more, do you? You want everything?”

“I want everything.” I opened my eyes to see his own devouring every inch of me, the wicked gleam in his expression that told me he wanted everything just as much as I did.

“The final stop on our tour, then.” He rolled off the couch, his cock big and hard and almost impeding his movement.

Then he slid both hands underneath my back and legs and hoisted me into the air, which I was glad for, as I wasn't sure I could walk after how hard I'd come.

He laid me tenderly on the bed, and sat straddling my hips as he ran his fingers over me like I was a masterpiece he had just painted. I grasped his cock, which was weeping with precum.

Gently, he removed my hand and instead slid between my legs until his dick was rubbing against my groin, teasing the entrance and grinding against my clit. “Are you ready?”

I was ready. “Yes. More than ready.”

His voice was commanding and teasing. “Look at you, so desperate for my cock. Was there ever any doubt you were mine all along?”

Not in that moment, no. I shook my head.

“Good girl.” He pressed his cock against me, and then he entered me, filling every part of me like I'd never been filled before.

I moaned. “Oh my god.”

Sylvester groaned, too. “Oh my god, you're so tight. Fuck.”

I was still riding the high of my previous orgasm – my body was in ecstasy. It wasn't going to be difficult to keep me

in that state.

He slowly started thrusting in and out of me, pressing a little harder each time and groaning as he was fully swallowed in me. I gasped and writhed, helpless and needy. I pulled him in close for a kiss, and he moaned into my lips, losing all control and speeding up his movements until our moans joined and became one around us, like we were singing together, singing the most natural and ecstatic song.

That feeling was rising again inside me, the one that made my body sing, too.

As I cried out, louder than before, and my body tensed and pulsed as the almighty feeling of pleasure rolled through every part of me, Sylvester groaned and swore and I felt him tense too, inside me, his cock held in place by my strong, contracting muscles, as he swore and groaned and emptied himself into me.

It felt so good that I found myself smiling. And then I laughed, my thighs spasming with the aftereffects of pleasure, my body threatening to push me over the edge yet again.

Sylvester emitted one last quieter groan, and then he looked at me smiling and he laughed too, and pulled out and slumped down on the bed next to me, until our laughter faded along with out panting, and we were left in silence contemplating the consequences of what we had just done.

SYLVESTER



Usually after sex I feel great. I'd give a cheeky wink to my mirror self and think, *you're the man, Sylvester*. I'd do a little dance in the kitchen while making coffee. I'd indulge in the blissful, luxurious nap of the wealthy.

I would *not*, generally, once the short afterglow has faded, then go immediately into a sort of minor existential crisis within my own brain.

Just be cool, Sylvester. You just hooked up with the love of your life, who is now working for your greatest enemy, having not seen her for twenty years. No biggie. Totally casual. Just a part of being free and easy and unattached.

This kinda thing happens every day. Not to you, maybe. But to someone. Somewhere.

I chanced a sideways look at Luna. She had a look on her face I imagined one would have if they'd just seen the impending death of the universe. Her breathing was getting faster, not slower. This wasn't helping my own stress levels.

"What's wrong with you?" That came out rude, but whatever.

She looked sharply at me, and then back into the middle distance. Her face was contorted as if in pain. "Ah, shit. I'm

such a fuck-up.”

Wonderful. I held up my hands in peace. “Woah woah woah, there’s nothing about sleeping with me that means you’re a fuck-up.”

She sat up, clutching the sheets to her chest as if she were suddenly ashamed to be seen by me. “Yes, there is.”

I was indignant. “Why? What’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know. That’s for your therapist to decide, I guess.”

When Luna wasn’t sure what to say, she turned to snark.

I rolled my eyes. “Gee thanks.”

Then her head snapped to face me, and her eyes were shining with something that looked a lot like hurt. “You have this way of making people feel shiny and special. But you don’t really think they’re special. You use them, and then drop them.”

I was cowed by the intensity of feeling I saw in her all of a sudden. My voice became soft. “What is this? Is this still about the tour?”

She looked away again, mimicking my tone. “*Still about the tour*. You act like that’s something I should be over by now. But you know what you need to be over something? Closure.”

I tried to catch her gaze again, but she wouldn’t hold it. “Luna... there were things going on at the time... Do you want to know why I had to drop you?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“You know that summer I was away? I wasn’t skiing. I was... I was called to the house of Emory Brock. He’d

managed to track down his illegitimate kids, all five of us.”

She made a noise of impatience. “I know the Brock history.”

“Sure. So you know that when we broke up, and when you were dropped from the tour... I knew what lay in my future.”

“So?”

“So... I knew there was an endpoint for everything. I knew you and the guys wouldn’t enjoy being dragged into all my family business drama like that. Do you remember the media shitstorm that followed us inheriting his company?”

It had lasted for years, and yeah, I’d seen how brutal it had been, even though I’d tried my best not to read anything in the media about it. The hurt had still been fresh. I downplayed my knowledge of it, though. “Yeah. Just about.”

“Yeah, well, would you have enjoyed getting dragged in that with me?”

“Sylvester Hart.” She corrected herself. “Sylvester *Brock*. Are you really fucking telling me that you broke up with me for my own good? That you devastated my music career so I didn’t get written about in a fucking... newspaper?”

“A bit. Not entirely. I didn’t know that was going to happen with your career for one thing.”

“Yeah, well you didn’t lift a finger to stop it.”

“How could I? I didn’t own one of the biggest entertainment companies in the world at that point.”

“Tell me you tried, and I’ll give you a point.”

I flopped back onto the bed in exasperation. She was right, of course. “...Fine. I’m a dirtbag. I’m not saying I was being a

martyr or anything. I knew *I* couldn't cope with having anyone dependent on me..."

"Dependent? You think I'd have been dependent?"

I sat back up and tried to correct my mistake. "No. No. I'm saying all the wrong words. I mean, couples depend on each other, don't they?"

She was staring into the middle distance. "They're supposed to."

"Right, and me and my bandmates depended on each other."

"You did, once upon a time. You're telling me that's why the rest of the guys hate you? You did that on purpose?"

"You might not believe me, but yes. It wasn't fun."

"I dunno. I read the accounts of it, sounds like you were having a *lot* of fun."

"Whatever. It was the decision I made at the time, and I didn't love it then, and I don't love it now, but I thought that was the only option."

She stood up and clambered out of the bed, turning on me in a sudden flare of anger. "Are you... are you insane? You could have *talked* to us. Explained things to us. Offered us the choice."

I stayed sitting in the bed, trying not to look at her nude form, though it was difficult. "It wasn't your choice. It was mine. I couldn't handle it, alright? I had too much on my plate. And feeling guilty about you, about the guys, I couldn't handle it. It's not that I didn't care about you. Any of you. You guys were my family. And you... I loved you, Luna. More than you'll ever believe. But it was too much. I wasn't even an

adult when I got the news, and I was barely an adult when I ditched the band. You can think whatever you like about me, but you know the truth now. If I ever made you feel ‘shiny and special’, it’s because I think you’re shiny and special. Thought. For fuck’s sake.”

She stared at me, then stormed out into the living space and started gathering up her clothes. “Yeah, well, you made a shitty choice. I need to get out of here.”

The door slammed behind her after she’d finished dressing. I considered running after her, at least to show her the quickest way to the exit, but I didn’t feel like receiving another earful of criticism from her. Instead, I slumped back on the bed and held my hands to my face.

After a few minutes, the sounds of the party reached me yet again. Oh yeah, that party that I was hosting, that I ought to get back to.

It was surely a sign of the apocalypse that I really didn’t feel like returning. All I wanted to do was lie sulking in my bed, wallowing in the doom and misery that I was feeling in that moment.

God, maybe I have been turned into a teenager again. Get a grip, Sylvester.

I shook off the resulting bad feelings from the sex-turned-argument and rolled off the side of the bed, forcing myself into action. I collected up the items of clothing I’d strewn across the place, sluggishly pulling them back onto my body, and shambled like a member of the undead in the direction of the loud music, talking, and laughing.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up with a fresh feeling of dread and groaned. What was it this time?

Then it all came back to me. Hooking up with Luna the night before, and our argument after. My life was suddenly complicated, and it was somehow all Apollo's fault.

Since we'd signed the contract, Luna and I were stuck together, unless she decided she'd rather pay the cancellation fee than have to be around me. We'd need to find some way of getting along.

It had always been music for Luna and me. That was what had brought us together, even before we realized we loved each other, before we had devoted ourselves to each other, before I had eventually had to tear us apart.

I'd never meant to shatter her music career like that. I pulled my laptop off the bedside table and searched her name and 'music'. There were a few results, but not a lot. Most of them were archive articles of small local interviews just before she'd been dropped from our tour.

She had uploaded some music onto a music-sharing site, though. In fact, as I scrolled down, I realized she'd been uploading demos for years and years. There were often gaps of a few years, but in general, this archive covered the span between the time we'd parted ways and now.

I braced myself and clicked *play*. Her voice, ethereal and a little scratchy, faded in over the top of the guitar melody. God, she was good. I'd forgotten how good. She may not have the knack for rescuing a career in the music industry, for networking and for self-promotion, but damn, she was a good songwriter, a good guitarist, and a good singer. Her voice had range *and* power, but the best moments, for me anyway, were

when she sang so softly her voice blended into the guitar part, working in harmony.

I lay back on my bed and let the sound wash over me. There was a certain level of talent that no production values could make up for, and there was a certain level of talent that didn't *need* any production in order to shine through. Luna needed nothing for her voice. But if she recorded in a studio, with a producer, her tracks would be *incredible*.

There was nothing I could do for her, not now, and especially since I'd been the one to scupper her career. I simply lay there and listened in melancholy, and nostalgia, feeling her emotions seeping out of the songs.

In real life, in her interactions, she was so spiky and guarded. It was only in her music that she let herself become raw and vulnerable. That had been part of her appeal to me, I guessed, as a teenager: that I was one of the only people to see that softness in her that she so carefully guarded. She was special.

It was important, somehow, to remember that the Luna back then and the Luna now were not too separate people. Though she was allied with my worst enemy, she'd gone on a long journey to get there. She'd had to survive. I should cut her some slack, let her in a little bit. That's what I'd had to do in the first place in order to bypass the numerous levels of defense that she put up.

If we were going to work well together, I'd have to drop my *own* defenses, first. I hoped it would be just as worth it this time as it had been when we'd first fallen in love.

LUNA



The night I slept with Sylvester, I went home, showered, and slept. I didn't cry. Anger stopped the tears from coming. It also bottled up that feeling deep inside me, where it would bubble away as it had done for decades. I needed it as my motivation. There was no point in turning to despair. Despair didn't help anyone.

When I awoke the next morning, my mouth was dry from dehydration, a headache just starting to form behind my eyes. I grasped around for my water bottle, chugged half of it, then located my glasses so I could see the world in high definition, let the details of it force my crusty eyes to awaken and hydrate.

When I was awake enough to bear the contact with the wider world that my phone invited, I checked for messages. No messages, but a voicemail from Apollo. I played it.

“I bet you expected I might have left some helpful thoughts here after my call to you last night. But you have been fooled. This is in fact just an invitation to join me in the daytime, whenever you are awake and free, as the thoughts that were in my brain last night still remain there, and it would be good to get them recorded and put down onto paper...”

The message went on, but I'd gotten the key point of it: Apollo wanted me to set up a meeting.

I wasn't awake enough to talk on the phone, yet, so I sent him a text.

Luna: *Hi, I got your message. How's 12 noon?*

Apollo *detested* the usage of '12pm' or '12am' to mean noon or midnight. I never wanted to listen to another of his linguistic rants again.

Apollo: *Perfect. I'll see you at my office.*

I showered once again for good measure, to get the smell of Sylvester *thoroughly* off my skin. Even then, his phantom scent lurked around me, if only in my imagination. There was something intoxicating about how he smelled, like he could lay possession to my heart and soul just by pressing himself against me, leaving his imprint.

But I was older now, wiser. I wouldn't be taken in by his charm. I could conquer my own feelings. Mind over matter.

In the back of the cab on my way to Apollo, I got a text from Sylvester. My heart started racing. I pulled the bandaid and opened it.

Sylvester: *Apologies again about our meeting yesterday. Can we reschedule for today? Anytime.*

It was just a professional message about our meeting. I was a little disappointed, but I knew it was for the best. From now on, things would have to be strictly professional.

Luna: *Sure. I'm just going into a meeting with another client now. I'll let you know when I'm done?*

Sylvester: *Perfect*

Apollo was waiting in his office for me, after I'd been approved by reception and escorted to the top floor by his armed security. It was quite a high-security affair, and security had been heightened recently since the extra attention Apollo had been receiving from the popularity of his memoirs.

I shut the door behind me. "Good afternoon."

He checked his watch. "Yes. A minute past twelve. I commend your ability to tell the time, unlike most of the population."

I smirked and started setting up my recording equipment. As soon as I was ready, he was sure to launch straight into some odd tale. I barely had to prompt anything out of him in our sessions. The stories just spilled out of him, detailed and witty. It was actually one of my easier gigs, which made it all the sweeter that I was getting paid so much for it.

I'd no sooner hit *record* then the door swung open behind us. One of Sylvester's lackeys, as I called them in my mind, for I didn't know what position in the company they actually occupied, entered the room.

Apollo looked up sharply. "What is it, Abigail? I said I was not to be disturbed except in the case of emergency. I hope you have an emergency for me."

Abigail was a tall, broad woman with muscles bigger than most men's. "It's an emergency, sir. The Briggs situation has gotten out of hand. Scenario D has occurred, just five minutes ago, sir."

I had no idea what they were talking about, but apparently Apollo did, because he leapt to his feet and screamed at the ceiling in a pitch I assumed, up until that moment, no fully grown man could possibly emit from his lungs.

Then, he picked up his computer monitor and threw it with great force against the far wall of the office, over my head. I ducked, tensing. I was in his warpath.

I felt a sudden firm pair of hands on my shoulder's – Abigail's. She pulled me to my feet and walked me backwards until I was nestled in a corner of the room. The fact that she knew what was happening here told me that Apollo had these freakouts frequently enough that it wasn't unusual.

I watched, shielded by a filing cabinet, as Apollo roared and smashed most of his office to smithereens. Abigail calmly watched. Anytime a piece of debris came near her, whether it be a folded sheet of paper or a weighty gold statue, she simply raised an arm to block it and it bounced off like it were light as a feather.

When Apollo was finished, he stood, panting, in the midst of the destruction. Then an eerie calm entered him – he stood up straight, arranged his face until it was creepily impassive, and smiled. “Would you be so kind as to deal with the situation, Abigail?”

“And when you say deal with the situation...” Abigail hesitated, raising an eyebrow at Apollo. “You mean...”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Apollo snapped as if whatever he was commanding her should be obvious. He shooed her out of the room. Then, fixing his gaze on me, he spoke calmly. “I find I'm not in the frame of mind I thought I would be for our meeting today. Perhaps we can take a raincheck?”

“S-sure.” I tried to sound unfazed by what I'd just witnessed, but I was clearly rattled.

He thrust my recording device into my hand. I assumed it had been destroyed in the chaos, but he had apparently been so

kind as to preserve it for me. “I’ll see you later, Luna Black.”

The way he always used my full name, or ‘Ms. Black’, always made me feel a bit icky, but following what I’d just seen, it positively made me shiver. I don’t think I even managed to stammer out my own greeting – I just left, letting the door shut of its own accord behind me.

In the elevator, I looked down at my hand. The little blinking red *record* light was still flashing away there. I stared at it for a moment before I realized what that meant. Whatever had just happened in there, I’d gotten it on tape. I quickly hit *stop*, as if someone might notice and chase me down, and slid it into my pocket.

* * *

LUNA: *I’m done with my meeting. Are you free?*

Sylvester: *Yes, I’m at my office. I’ll send you the address.*

I was slightly in a daze. Before I knew it, I was walking into Sylvester’s office, with little recollection of how I’d made it there.

Sylvester walked over to greet me, something like concern creeping onto his face. “Luna, are you okay? You’re always rather pale, but you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m – er – I – ah...” I was more rattled than I’d realized. The consequences of repressing most of my feelings for a number of years were coming back to bite me in the ass.

“Come on, take a seat.”

I didn’t move, so Sylvester brought one of the comfier padded chairs over behind me and guided me into the seat. I

sat there stiffly, my arms still clutching my small bag to my chest, protectively.

Sylvester murmured. “You’re tense.” He gently lifted the bag strap off my shoulder and slid the bag out from my arms, putting it carefully onto the floor next to my chair. His voice was so deep and soothing. “What happened, Luna? Did someone hurt you?”

I shook my head. I realized my breathing was slightly rattling. I didn’t feel like I could take in enough oxygen. Tears, stupid tears, sprung to my eyes, but my vision was blurry and I didn’t feel enough in my body in that moment to care about how embarrassing it was to cry in front of Sylvester.

“It’s okay. You don’t need to tell me. Let me play you some music while you recover.”

Sylvester sat on the floor next to my chair, so he was sideways on rather than facing me, and started scrolling through his phone. Eventually, he made a satisfied noise, and the speakers that surrounded the room started up. I noticed the opening of the first song immediately. He was playing the album *Low*, by David Bowie. “Any particular song?”

I managed to get the words out. “*Speed of Life*, please.”

“On it.” A few seconds later, the song changed to my request.

I focused on the instruments and synths in the music – it was an instrumental, no vocals, and I’d always found it relaxing, despite how odd a song it was. Eventually, blinking, I came out of whatever trance I’d been in. I was still fragile, but the music grounded me. Always had.

I looked at Sylvester, who seemed quite content just sitting on the floor by my feet and listening to the song, too. He

glanced up when he saw me looking at him and smiled – a warm, comforting smile that transformed his face so much that I almost felt we were both teenagers again, listening to music in his tiny bedroom, where we’d had to sit knee-to-knee on the bed as there wasn’t enough space on the floor for two people.

Except we weren’t teenagers, and I wasn’t in Sylvester’s home. I was in his gigantic office where he ran his gigantic entertainment business. We were no longer equals.

Still, he had done something nice. “Thank you.” It was difficult to say those words to him.

“No problem. Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Let’s get the meeting started.”

Sylvester sprung up from the floor. “Over here, then, please!”

He led me over to his desk, which was huge, just as the rest of the office was, and framed him with the light flooding in through the windows so he was a silhouette for most of the meeting.

I took him through the basics of how a ghostwriting memoir collaboration worked, how our meetings would be structured, and the schedule and timeline of my own part of the collaboration – the writing. He nodded and agreed to everything. In that way, he was very unlike Apollo, who’d had about a hundred questions to each tiny detail about the process, and many, *many* suggestions as to how we could tweak the process for optimum performance. Strangely, in the end, our working routine had turned out quite similarly to the one I initially proposed, but he had seemed satisfied that he’d dabbled in it, so I didn’t let him know this.

“At this point, we’d normally do personal introductions, but we already know each other, so... maybe we can ask each other any questions we want to know at this time?” I had a question in mind.

“Sure. I don’t know if I have any questions for you just yet. None that wouldn’t break your non-disclosure agreement regarding my brother, anyway.” Sylvester grinned as if he were joking, but there was an unusual seriousness in his eyes. Apollo’s memoir really had rattled him and his brothers.

I nodded. “That’s fine. You’re welcome to ask me questions at any time. Anyway.”

He tilted his head to one side. “Did you have any for me?”

“I have one, and you don’t have to answer it, if you don’t want.”

Sylvester’s smile twitched with a brief frown. “Go on.”

I tapped the table in thought. “What’s your deal with Apollo? Why are the rest of you at war with him?”

“Did he not tell you that himself? Was it not in the book? I suppose it wasn’t...”

“You read it?”

“Of course I did. We had a book club.”

I thought of the four Brock brothers sitting in a little circle with the book I’d ghostwritten, and it brought a smile to my face.

Sylvester caught it and smiled back. “Suffice to say, it was an unenjoyable experience, so I don’t think we’ll be having a second session. Don’t worry, we all agreed that whoever wrote it was clearly some kind of genius.”

I smirked. “Do your brothers know it was me? Winston, Jude, Forest?”

He nodded. “Don’t worry, they won’t come after you. They’re all busy with their respective wives and happy families.”

The way he said it was slightly bitter. I raised an eyebrow. “Do *you* want a wife, Sylvester?”

“Pfft. No. But as the last single brother I get to be snarky about how everyone else is married apart from me. Isn’t that the way?”

“As far as I know, Apollo’s single. Maybe you two will rekindle a bromance of some kind. Wingman for each other.”

Sylvester scrunched up his face. “Unlikely. Oh, yeah, I was telling you about the Brock drama.”

I nodded, keen to have some insight into the relations between my two best-paying clients.

“Once upon a time, all five of us were thick as thieves. We met when we were summoned to Emory’s huge and villainous mansion. There, he taught us his ways of business and life. We were so horrified by his personal ethics that we – the five of us – agreed we’d accept the inheritance when it came our way, and we’d use it to undo some of Emory’s wrongs. You know, worker exploitation, environmental damage, weird and probably illegal experiments, etcetera.”

“Yikes.” That hadn’t come up in my meetings with Apollo, that was for sure.

“Yikes is correct. You might say, *jinkies!*” Sylvester gestured to my face.

I realized he was meaning my glasses. “You like?” I put my hands under my face in a sarcastic pose.

He laughed. “They suit you. You don’t really look like Velma, either. Too much black. Goth Velma.”

I was annoyingly flattered by his comment. Of the *Scooby Doo* gang, of course most young girls wanted to be Daphne. I’d always admired Velma.

“Anyway...” Sylvester continued. “All five of us went our separate ways for the years until Emory died. RIP the crazy old man. Apollo seemed to still be on board with our plan to use our powers for good, right up until just after that initial press conference when he decided Emory’s ways of working were better for business, that business and making *more* money were his number one priorities, and that we were all softhearted delusional fools. He didn’t seem to understand how saying all of that to us would make us enemies...”

He laughed ruefully. “We each tried to talk him around, but he wasn’t seeing sense. Then, when we declared we couldn’t ally ourselves with him if he continued his ways, he got angry. *Very, very* angry. Swore his revenge on all of us. Then spent the next two decades subtly branching his company out into the areas ours were supposed to cover, so he was competing with us. Entertainment, medical science, technology... except ‘charity’, I suppose, as there’s not really a competition there.”

“That seems so childish, the way you say it.”

“It felt childish. I think he really thought he could just go against everything we stood for and we’d just... let him, and still accept him in our circle. Then, when we started funding things that actively stood against him, he vowed total revenge on us... personally. Started getting involved with my brothers’ partners, family, sending in spies and so on.”

“Wow.”

“I’m the last one standing who hasn’t been personally targeted by him. Which means, of course, I’m next. When I found out you were his ghostwriter, I did wonder...”

An odd look passed over Sylvester’s expression, and I realized what he was considering. That Apollo had hired me because of my connection to Sylvester, to somehow get back at him. But I didn’t feel that was the case, somehow. “I don’t think it’s breaking my NDA to say that... he’s never asked about the relationship between you and me. Maybe he doesn’t even know.”

Sylvester considered the information I’d given, stroking his chin in thought. “I did try my best to erase evidence, keep things on the down low. But he tends to know everything. I don’t know, it was just a suspicion. And I’m right to be paranoid after everything else that happened. I’m not, of course, suggesting that you didn’t deserve the pay or the work. The success of his memoirs proves your skill, don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” I looked at Sylvester – really looked at him. I’d known him very well, once, and I didn’t think he had lied to me now about any of the drama with Apollo. “Thanks for being honest. I know you’re suspicious of me, and you didn’t have to tell me all of that history... so, thank you.”

Sylvester blinked at me as if he were unsure how to react. An urge rose up inside of me and I acted on it immediately without thinking. I stood up, walked around to his side of the desk, crouched down and took his face in my hands. Then I kissed his firm and slightly chapped lips, breathing in the scent of his hair and his aftershave, for just a moment. I pulled away, leaving him looking just as nonplussed as he had before the kiss, but slightly more flushed.

I picked up my bag, turned around, and headed for the exit.
“See you next time! I’ll send a scheduling invite.”

Sylvester said nothing as I left, and I didn’t look back.

SYLVESTER



I watched Luna exit my office, the swelling in my pants taking a moment to fade as the ghost of her lips remained on mine, the scent of her shampoo and her skin still lingering around my desk space for a short while after she was gone.

As soon as I snapped back to life, I unlocked my computer and scrolled through the unread emails that had mounted up during the meeting.

I had a response from the film director who'd been stalling for years on their next movie which had been funded by my company.

Mr. Brock,

I don't think we're going to see eye-to-eye on this. Simply saying you have a timeline for the film's release does not make it so that the film can physically be made by that point in time. Therefore, it is arbitrary.

Eli Robinson

I groaned. Dealing with divas was part of my job, and indeed, part of the entire entertainment industry. But it was even worse when the diva couldn't at all be controlled. Eli Robinson was one of the world's most popular directors,

famed for cerebral action films with a surreal or arthouse edge to them. Each one went on to become a cult hit – and then, a cult classic. Eli was getting old, but she'd never lost her edge, or her stubbornness when it came to her art. And there was nothing I could hold over her in order to get her to make the film faster.

I tapped out a quick response.

Eli,

I understand you have your own ways of working that, admittedly, are beyond me. However, if you might share with me some of the challenges impeding your progress, perhaps I may be able to offer some assistance, even if just as a sounding board? My office and phone are open to you whenever you like.

Sylvester

Although frustrating, getting stuck into work mode was helpful on this day. I needed distractions, and my usual ones – parties, socializing, sex – weren't working. Perhaps I'd take a page out of Jude's or Forest's book and become a workaholic.

The fact that answering swathes of emails was currently preferable to sitting with my feelings should have been a warning sign of things to come.

* * *

MY NEXT MEETING with Luna was scheduled for a week after the first. It passed by peacefully with my new distraction of 'actually focusing on my job for once'. I didn't receive a response from Eli Robinson, but she tended to be quite slow

with her emails, then send two or three at a time in quick succession when she got around to it.

When Luna next arrived at my office, I was the absolute picture of an organized and hardworking CEO. My inbox was showing zero and I'd moved onto sorting through the spam and promotions emails that I never normally looked at.

I welcomed her in, and she started setting up her recording equipment. She was wearing her classic t-shirt, jeans and jacket combination that seemed to stir something in me. Maybe it was just Luna herself that stirred something in me. No, it was definitely Luna.

We'd barely had time to sit down when the office door flew open and in stormed Eli Robinson herself, in the flesh.

I stood up, unsure of what was happening but knowing I had to make sure Eli felt suitably welcomed. "Eli Robinson herself! What a rare and brilliant pleasure."

"I'm interrupting something." Eli said it as a statement, but she didn't seem embarrassed about it. "You asked me what challenges are impeding my progress. You really think that you, personally, can solve things that have been plaguing me for years? That I've spent *years* pondering every day?"

I arranged my face into one of apology. "I am so sorry. I only meant to offer my help if it might be useful to you. If it isn't useful to you at all, I can only hope you take my words in the way they were meant – as a gesture of solidarity with your process of working."

Luna was looking at me with an eyebrow raised. I ignored her.

Eli was grumbling into her scarf. Then she looked up at me sharply. "Okay. I believe you."

“Good.” I smiled, and waited for her to say something else. I wasn’t sure why she’d burst in.

“It’s the soundtrack, Mr. Brock. The film I envision... the soundtrack is so specific in my mind. Not the exact instruments or melodies, but the – the *feelings* I want it to evoke.”

I looked at her in surprise. “Why, Eli. You do know that I was first famous as a musician in my own right – before receiving the Brock family name?”

Eli shrugged. “Might’ve heard something about it. Figured you were crap.”

Luna was stifling a laugh. I shot her a warning look.

“Well, if you’ve not heard my old band’s music... perhaps I might give you some to listen to, see if it sparks anything for you? If not, I won’t be offended. But perhaps we can talk music sometime. I’m not only a musician, but a big, big fan of music. Maybe I can play you some things you won’t have heard before.”

Eli sighed a long, rattling sigh. “Fine. I’ll give anything a shot at this point. Even your music. Put it on a memory stick, will you?”

“Of course. Just one moment.” I raced around to the side of my desk where I stored things like CDs and memory sticks, and plucked one off the top of the pile. When I’d loaded a ‘greatest hits’ selection of my past music onto it, I handed it over to her. “You can keep that.”

“Gee, thanks.” Eli snatched the memory stick off me and dropped it into her vast coat pocket. She gave a wink to Luna, who she’d caught suppressing a laugh at her antics in my office. “Goodbye, Mr. Brock.”

“Bye, Eli. You can drop back in any time!”

The door closed behind her. I exhaled a sigh and sat down wearily at my chair.

“Who was *that*?” Luna’s eyes were lit up and curious.

I was surprised Luna hadn’t heard of her. I couldn’t be bothered to explain one of the world’s most famous film directors to her right now, though. I wanted to push Eli out of my mind and concentrate on my supposed ‘memoir’. “Film director. Just one of the many wonderful people I have to play nice with on a day-to-day basis. Sorry for the interruption, I did tell her she can visit my office any time, I suppose she took it literally. Shall we get started?”

Luna’s eyes still glimmered with amusement, but she pressed *record* on her device. “Sure. Let’s go.”

* * *

THE WEEK AFTER, I was getting set up for Luna’s next meeting arrival – which involved checking myself out in a nearby mirror no less than *five* times in the build-up – when I received a text from her.

Luna: *Sorry, need to cancel my appointment today. Feeling under the weather.*

Sylvester: *Good call not bringing your germs to me. Get well soon*

I was disappointed. I’d been looking forward to seeing Luna.

With the leftover jitters from waiting for her arrival, I decided to transfer that nostalgic rush elsewhere. Reed’s new band’s website had been knocking about in my bookmarks,

and I'd been checking every few days, as if staring at his face on the promo photos would unlock some key to the mysteries of my past. But there were no mysteries – I'd been a dickhead, and Reed hated me because of it.

Still, I visited the website once again, in a jittery and spontaneous state of mind. I clicked through to the 'tour dates' page.

He was playing in Chicago tonight. Well, I had a private jet and felt like making an impulsive decision. It seemed like fate.

I finished work early – I'd been so efficient keeping my inbox at zero, my employees had been eyeing me like I'd had a personality transplant – and went back to my apartment to change my clothes. I'd felt so out of place in Luna's regular bar. I certainly wasn't going to show up to a gig in a *suit* – however much I'd managed to tailor my suits so that they didn't look as stuffy as those of my brothers. A suit was a suit, you couldn't hide it.

Prepared as I'd ever be, I checked the private jet had been readied for my arrival and called upon my chauffeur to pick me up. Soon, I was being escorted from door to car to jet without even having to think about any part of the process. It was easy to follow through on a rash decision when you were rich. You just set the whole thing in motion then sat back and watched the chaos unfold.

In the same manner, I soon found myself incognito within the sizeable crowd who had gathered to watch Reed's new band. I enjoyed myself much more than I had at a gig in a long time – I was used to being spotted, but I'd managed to disguise myself well by dressing down and wearing a baseball cap.

But, only a few songs after Reed's band took to the stage, it seemed he'd somehow spotted me from all the way up there.

Into the microphone, he outed my presence to the entire audience. "Well well well, it seems we have an old 'friend' in the audience."

A spotlight slid onto me, blinding me. I held up my hands against the onslaught of the light.

"Sylvester Brock, everybody. Though you might know him better as Sylvester Hart, lead vocals of *Needlehead*."

Though I wasn't very well liked by fans of *Needlehead*, people still liked to know a celebrity was in their midst, so a roaring cheer rose up from the crowd.

"What do you think, guys? Should we let him sing with us for old time's sake?"

The crowd roared even harder.

"Sylvester, come up onto the stage!"

Before I could really decide, I was being pushed forwards by the crowd, and hoisted over the barrier by security. Just one blink and I was on the stage. Now *all* the lights were on me, and all the flashes of the cameras. It struck me how, instead of faces, all I could see stretching out as far as the eye could see was a hundred million smartphones held aloft, their cold metallic surfaces reflecting even more lights in my direction.

Reed thrust a microphone into my hand. He smirked at me unkindly, and I realized I was being set up to look like a fool in front of everyone. He was trying to embarrass me. He presumed I'd not touched an instrument nor sung a song in decades. Well, I'd certainly not played as much as I'd have liked to, but I knew my voice was still strong and I could just about strum my way through most of our hits.

I looked at the crowd, trying to see beneath their smartphone faces to the real, human faces hiding underneath. The more eyes I caught, the more comfortable I grew on stage. The tension of my silence was building. I was going to have to perform. I was going to have to prove Reed wrong.

When I finally spoke, I bellowed into the microphone. “Well hello, Chicago!”

Amazingly, the crowd went wild. They couldn’t have heard me even if I had bothered to say anything after that.

When they quietened, I almost had a genuine tear in my eye. “Thank you, thank you for my warm reception. This wasn’t planned, by the way, this was... honestly, probably an attempt for Reed to humiliate me in front of you all.”

Laughter throughout the crowd, confirming that most of the crowd were *Needlehead* fans, who knew about the drama leading up to the band’s split.

I grinned sideways at Reed, who shrugged as if to say, *maybe*.

“What do you say, Reed? Play one of our hits for old times sake?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer me, because the crowd screamed again.

He muttered into the microphone just loud enough for everyone to hear. “I guess that’s what we gotta do.”

We’d had a fair few hits in our time, but our most beloved single – not our most popular by chart standards, but the most beloved by fans – was a song called *This Needle* from our first album.

Reed played the opening melody on the guitar, and once again the noise of the crowd was all I could hear.

It was like muscle memory – or more like I was being possessed by my former self. As soon as it was time for my part, I jumped in with the exuberance of a much younger, much more rock ‘n’ roll, much *poorer* Sylvester – the Sylvester I’d been before all of the stuff with Emory and the inheritance.

The crowd were lapping it up. I was dancing about the stage, I took off my shirt and threw it out into the crowd, glad I’d made it a priority to keep up my exercise routine and remain buff well into my old age.

When the song ended, the crowd cheered louder than they had done ever before. Even Reed was smiling wryly as he shook his head.

Quit while you’re ahead. Into the microphone, I announced my departure. “Thanks to my old bandmate for being a good sport and giving me an opportunity to show off. Most of all, thanks to the diehard *Needlehead* fans out there for keeping the spirit alive. You probably hate me, and y’know what, I’m okay with that. Fair play, guys. Goodnight all!”

They may have hated me deep down, but in that beautiful moment they loved me. Their cheers were all I could hear.

I left the stage and found myself backstage. I’d automatically walked here. What was I gonna do, walk straight back into the crowd?

Maybe I’d be able to catch a quick conversation with Reed now I’d made myself the star of his evening. Or maybe he’d tell me to fuck off and ban me from any future gigs, which would be fair play.

I helped myself to a bottle of sparkling water and slouched onto one of the couches. After some time, the roar of the crowd indicated the band were done. Of course, the encore followed. Then, one final ear-splitting cheer, and Reed walked into the green room and folded his arms.

“Made yourself at home, huh? Don’t you have, like, twenty homes?”

“Twenty-three.” I winked.

Reed shook his head, but he couldn’t hide that wry smile that he’d had since we’d played together on stage just like old times. “You always were a fuckin’ charmer. Or were you the snake?” His sentences often sounded like lyrics.

Behind Reed, his new bandmates stopped at the entrance to the room, eyed us both warily, then turned away, muttering greetings and farewells: “Honor to play with you, Sylvester,” and, “Seeya in a bit, Reed,” and, “We’ll use the other room. Don’t mind us.”

Reed smirked. “They’re good guys. Bit newer than us old timers. Brilliant musicians.”

I nodded in agreement. “They’re all such good musicians these days, what’s up with that? Back in the day, you just needed an attitude and the possession of an instrument.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Times change.”

“They do. But not entirely. You wanted to humiliate me tonight, didn’t you?”

“I hold up my hands. My plan failed. You’re just as much as a crowd-pleaser as you always were.”

I stood up from the couch. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. Look, they ate it up tonight when we played together.

What do you say to chatting with me about the band? About *Needlehead*?”

He didn't seem convinced. “After all this time?”

“Yeah, after all this time. We're still popular and we've not made music in almost two decades. There's gotta be something salvageable there.”

“Yeah, we'll see. Fine. I 'spose I owe you a conversation after trying to pull a stunt on you tonight.”

“You're an honorable man, Reed.”

“Someone's gotta be. Not tonight, though. I need to get back to my bed. That does change with age, I'll tell you. The others'll be partying all night long if they can.”

“I'll fly you to New York, alright? All expenses paid. Whenever you want.”

“It's a deal.” He hung up his guitar and pulled his beaten-up old jacket around his shoulders. I could've sworn it was the same jacket he'd been permanently attached to back when we'd known each other.

Then, he left, leaving me sitting in wonder in the backstage area of a concert that I wasn't meant to be playing at, wondering if maybe following some of my impulses wasn't such a bad idea after all.

LUNA



By this point, I hated the taste of ginger. Since the nausea had started, I'd trawled the internet for countless remedies. Ginger tea was most recommended to cure nausea. It helped, a little, but its effects were limited to the time period in which the drinking of the ginger happened. This meant I had to be drinking it pretty much constantly to ward off that awful sick feeling.

I didn't really get sick randomly. I had a strong stomach, and presumably a good immune system. It meant that when I *did* get ill, it was normally catastrophic – horrible flus and viruses that had managed to bypass my body's defenses.

But this... this mild cloying nausea that had me stuck in my apartment for almost a week now. This was something else.

I'd had to cancel my meetings all week, so I'd had all week to sit with my thoughts. Even then, I'd avoided letting my thoughts stray in the direction of... the period I'd missed.

Instead, I'd also internet-searched the countless other reasons someone might miss their period, and tried to attribute the lack of a menstrual cycle this month to any possible other reason. I picked a new one each day and stuck with it.

But after a week of this, the possible reasons were running out. I wasn't underweight, or too overweight, though the years had certainly thickened out my curves a bit from the waif I'd been as a teenager. I wasn't on birth control, I didn't have any of the hormonal balances that can cause skipped periods. The truth was, as an adult I'd always been regular as clockwork until... now.

It's rare you find yourself praying that you're 'just' going through the menopause early. But that was how I found myself, grimacing as I forced down the ginger tea and looking up same-day delivery of pregnancy tests.

Was I really going to buy them? Buying them felt like giving more credence to the possibility that I could be pregnant than I wanted to. But if I did buy them, then if – when – they turned up negative, I'd be able to rule it out, and maybe then go to my doctor and get checked over.

It was incredibly unlikely. The only person I'd had sex with recently – in a while, actually – was Sylvester. We hadn't used protection, sure. It had been old habit for us. When I was a teenager, I *had* been on birth control, until they'd sent my moods wacky and I'd stopped them. We hadn't had to worry then.

But it was pretty stupid of me to fall into old habits carelessly like that. Even if I wasn't pregnant – which I definitely couldn't be – I needed to get myself checked for STIs. Who knew where Sylvester had been? If you trusted the media, he'd been *everywhere*. And I mean *everywhere*.

My finger hovered over the checkout button, five different brands of pregnancy test in my cart. That's how much sureness I needed that I definitely, definitely wasn't pregnant.

They arrived an hour later. The sickness was fading, as it had tended to do as the day went on – *don't think about morning sickness, Luna, Goddamnit* – and I greeted the delivery guy at the door with a feigned smile of thanks before grasping the package and retreating into the depths of my apartment.

I tore the brown paper bag open like a wild animal and threw them hatefully onto the couch. I stared at the little boxes. They were no good on the couch, I supposed. I needed to pee now, so best to get it over with.

I scooped them up and carried them to the bathroom, where I pushed aside the boxes of black hair dye to make room for them on the side. Then, trying not to think about what exactly I was doing, I took the tests one by one, and lined them up to wait for the outcome.

The first result showed up. *Positive.*

“Oh no. Oh no no no.”

And the second. *Positive.*

“Fuck no.”

And the third, fourth and fifth one after the other, in glorious synchronization: *Positive positive positive.*

I stared at them. “What the... actual fuck?! What the FUCK?”

It was lucky, really, that I lived alone. And that I didn't have a mother to tell me it was unladylike to swear like a sailor on a daily basis – just a nearly-mute dad who had never really policed any of my behavior.

“For fuck's sake.” I left the tests behind as I dressed and stomped through into the living room, where I slumped face-

down onto the sofa.

I could take a nap. Maybe if I took a nap, I'd wake up and all of this would have been a horrible nightmare...

I was abruptly awoken from my uneasy nap by a phone call. It was the special ringtone I gave clients' numbers so that I could answer with the urgency they required. I groaned and reached for my phone. *Apollo Brock*. That was a call I definitely couldn't avoid right now.

I pushed myself into a sitting position and answered. "Hello."

He was as emphatic as ever. "Luna! You are indeed alive."

I suppose it didn't matter if I sounded a bit croaky from the nap, since I was supposed to be sick. "Yeah, sorry again about cancelling our last two meetings. I promise as soon as I'm feeling better I'll reschedule them."

"Oh, yes, for sure. We have much to catch up on. But that wasn't my concern. I was worried about you, Luna. Are you quite alright?"

"I'm still not feeling great, but I'm sure it's just a bug or something."

His response was quick and sharp. "Are you sure?"

"Sorry?"

He said it more slowly this time. "Are you sure it's just a bug? There's not something you aren't telling me?"

The first thought my mind came up with was: *how does he know about the pregnancy?* I quickly realized that couldn't be what he was talking about. Plus... *pregnancy? What pregnancy? That's right.*

Then what was he talking about? Was he somehow suspicious that I'd had to cancel our last few meetings? The Brock brothers were a paranoid bunch – I guess they had the right to be. I hoped Apollo hadn't learned I was working with Sylvester just yet, though. I could handle it, but not today.

It was best to handle such situations with humor – with this particular client, anyway. “Don't worry, Apollo. If there's something I'm not telling you, I'll tell you.”

“Hmph. Is that a riddle?”

I could tell he believed me, despite his haughtiness.

“Fine. Get well soon. I'm practically bursting with ideas for the next book. But since you're bursting with germs and disease, they can surely wait.”

An hour later, a gigantic gift basket of various health products was delivered to my door. The card read, *For your good health and our continued collaboration. AB*

I looked up at the delivery guy. He looked the same as any other delivery guy – indistinct, somewhat scruffy, clearly in a hurry to be elsewhere. But I wasn't stupid. I knew how Apollo operated. He might consider me a friend, sure, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to check up on me. I smiled politely at the guy and gave him a little wave as I shut the door on him.

Well, Apollo would know that at least I was correct about being at home. On the plus side, I knew now he hadn't secretly installed any secret cameras in my place, as I'd once joked about with him. But he did, of course, know my address. I'd never given it to him.

I thought back to what I'd overseen at his office and gave an involuntary shiver. It was an odd job that put me on an equal footing with some of the wealthiest people in the city.

I needed their money, sure, but they all needed something from me, something a little different for each person. They needed an image boost, to impress their ex, to tell their own side of a previously one-sided story, or something more personal... to feel accomplished, to feel like their lives had a narrative, rather than being the same meandering mess of chaos as everyone else's lives were.

We were all the same deep down. I'd learned from my associations with the rich that there was no special secret. If there was a special secret, it was some combination of terrifying charisma, absolute conviction in one's own beliefs often at the expense of truth, and inherited wealth. If that were the X factor to being rich, I'd rather not have it.

SYLVESTER



I finally managed to book Luna in for the next meeting of my ‘memoir’. I still didn’t have an angle to work on the Apollo thing, and I was getting antsy that we hadn’t made much progress on the ‘book’, so I managed to persuade her to block out a whole day in her schedule for me.

I was waiting in my office for her to arrive when my phone lit up with a call. *Felix Hart*. My brother.

Happy to hear from him, I picked up immediately. “Hey, bro! How’s it hanging?”

“It’s, er, hanging, just fine.” Felix was always a little stiff on the phone. He didn’t like calls in general, actually – it was usually me calling him.

Realizing the situation was unusual, I frowned out the window. “Something up?”

“Hmm. Probably nothing.” He stutter-hesitated on the other end. “You said to call if I saw anyone... out of place hanging around the college, or outside my house or something, yes?”

“Yeah, I did.” For years I’d been communicating potential Apollo threat levels to my brother. Right now, of course, we

were at 'red'. I knew I was up next, and that family were fair game now, according to Apollo changing the rules on us.

“There’s been a few people sniffing around. Asking questions. Not just me, but *about* me, to my colleagues and students.”

Fuck. That was Apollo’s style, for sure. Gather as much information as possible. And if Apollo was sniffing around my brother, he was getting close to a secret Felix and I had kept our whole lives.

“I’m coming to visit.” There was no question about it.

“Are you sure? It’d be nice to see you, obviously, but I’d hate to disturb you...”

I smiled. Felix had always been the more retiring of the two of us. “Felix. I’m coming. Don’t worry about me. I’m always fine, right?”

“Sure.” Felix’s voice was warm, but I was never sure he was convinced when I said things like that. But it was necessary for our relationship that he let me convince him I could handle everything. That’s how it had always been for us.

Luna was arriving soon, but I needed to get to St. Louis, Missouri, where my brother taught poetry to college kids.

Then, in a flash, suspicion clenched at my throat. Luna knew Felix. Luna also knew Apollo. Luna and Apollo were friends. Had she told him something that had given him some clue, that had pointed at Felix as a potential way to get to me?

I didn’t have much of a chance to think it over, because Luna arrived while the suspicion was still fresh in my mind.

She set down her bag and looked at me curiously. “Are you alright?”

I looked her in the eye. “I have to go to St. Louis.”

“Oh. Okay.” She picked up her bag again, as if that were that and she was going to turn around and head home.

But I had questions for her. “You remember my brother, Felix?”

“Of course. The poet of the two of you. Always thought I chose the wrong Hart brother.”

“Ha ha.” I said it entirely without humor. “I’m gonna cut to the chase. Have you told Apollo anything about Felix – about my childhood – about when you and I knew each other?”

She was able to tell something was up, so she cut the snark. “No. He never asked. I don’t even know if he knows. That we knew each other back then.”

“Oh, believe me. He knows. He knows everything. Are you sure, Luna? Are you sure you never mentioned Felix, just in passing?”

“I’m fairly sure. Why would I? Our sessions, they’re not about me – it’s mainly just Apollo talking for hours and me writing it down. He doesn’t really ask about my past. It’s not my memoir we’re writing.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, holding my breath. Did I believe her? Finally, I exhaled, glancing away. I did. “Okay. Sorry. I just got a call from Felix that was a bit worrying. That’s why I need to go to St. Louis.”

“Why? What’s up?”

I considered not telling her. But part of me remembered that I’d made progress, recently, following my intuition. For some reason, my intuition told me to bring Luna in. To open myself up to her. And last time we’d met, she’d asked me

about Apollo, about our petty war. It wasn't exactly like it would surprise her. "We think some of Apollo's people have been sniffing around at the college where he teaches. I need to go there and make sure he's okay."

She nodded, understanding the situation. "Okay. Yeah. Of course. We can reschedule."

Again, another impulse rose up, and I rode it. "Do you want to come with me? Free day trip?"

"Oh, I don't know..." She thought about it. Then, with a memoirist's instinct, she asked me the question I'd been hoping she'd asked. "Why do you need to go and check on Felix? Is there something about your family that you think Apollo's going to uncover?"

"Yes. And I'll tell you all about it. For the memoir, obviously. But only if you come to St. Louis with me."

Luna smiled, mischief in her eyes. "Sure. How could I resist a mystery?"

* * *

NEXT TO ME, waiting for the jet to be ready for boarding, Luna had her face screwed up. "I'm not sure how I feel about this as an environmentally-conscious person."

I flashed her a smile. "Look at it this way. I'd be getting the jet anyway. You're technically *saving* the environment by coming with me."

She narrowed her eyes sideways at me, but I could see the little hints of amusement about her face that most other people wouldn't spot. "You really have a way of spinning things so they benefit you, don't you?"

“As if you’re not dying to find out what the big family mystery is.”

“Yeah, it better be worth it.” She folded her arms in even closer to herself. “When do I find out?”

“My jet’s pretty secure. So I’ll fill you in on the way.”

Luna’s face remained screwed up until we settled onto the plane and were well on our way. I decided to distract her from the havoc she was currently wreaking upon the environment by letting slip the little mystery I promised.

I looked over at her lazily, my fingers tapping on one armrest, the other hand swirling around a near-empty champagne glass. “What do you remember of my family?”

She looked up and met my eyes with her bright, intense gaze. She lingered for a moment on my arms, swirling the champagne glass, and on my chest, where I’d unbuttoned a few buttons of my shirt in the heat of the takeoff. Then she blinked herself out of it. “Well, I remember you, and your mom, and Felix. Nothing weird or mysterious-seeming.”

A smirk teased at the edge of my mouth. She was checking me out, even as I was trying to tell her one of my greatest secrets. *Priorities*. “What grade was Felix in?”

“I don’t like the way you’re grinning. Is it a trick question?” Luna’s eyes narrowed slightly in thought. “He was in the grade below us. About a year younger. I was always impressed by your mom’s stamina, having you and then immediately wanting another... you.”

I set down the champagne glass and leaned in. “I was obviously a charming baby. But you’re onto something there.”

She leaned back into her chair. “C’mon. This isn’t an episode of *Scooby-Doo*. What’s the deal?”

I teased the details. “Well, my mom didn’t immediately get pregnant after having me. In fact, she never got pregnant again after having me.”

Luna rolled her eyes. “So, what? Felix is adopted?”

I shook my head, smiling in a way I was certain was irritating Luna.

“Felix is... older than you? He got held back a few years?”

I shook my head again, grinning wickedly. I knew she was hating guessing, but I was enjoying it immensely. More dramatic this way.

She met my eyes and I saw it dawning on her. “You and Felix are twins?”

I nodded and clapped my hands together. “Which means...”

“Which means Felix... is Emory’s son too.” She blinked, her eyes widening. Then her gaze snapped to mine, serious and intent. “Sylvester, that’s huge. If Apollo suspects that... or knows that...”

“Then, what? I thought he was your friend? Surely he’s not going to somehow attack an innocent poetry professor trying to fly under the radar of the whole Emory Brock dynasty.”

Luna looked away. She avoided my pointed comments, but I could tell she was thinking them over. “How did this happen? And why?”

“Well, you remember my mom. She’s a smart woman.”

Luna nodded in agreement. “One tough cookie.”

“She obviously immediately realized that Emory was awful, as it turns out most of our mothers did after sleeping

with him, but she wanted kids and was happy enough raising them alone. But, as she grew more and more pregnant, she grew more and more paranoid that one day, sooner or later, Emory would be coming for his illegitimate kids. As it turned out, she was right, even if her paranoia was somewhat heightened by the emotions of pregnancy. When the doctors found out it was twins, she started making her plans. Raise them as brothers, a year apart. Fake the birth certificates. That way, she'd only had to lose one son if he battled for custody or whatever. A numbers game. And she did it."

Luna's expression was undergoing a steady stream of minute changes and twitches as she listened to the story. Then she looked me dead in the eyes. "Sylvester, I'm going to be sick. Where's the bathroom on this thing?"

LUNA



I lurched into the private jet bathroom and managed to slam the door closed behind me before I retched heavily into the toilet bowl. I could pass it off as flight sickness, but what had really made me nauseous was thinking about Sylvester's mom, carrying two unborn heirs of a multibillionaire in her stomach, already scared for their future.

Now I had a Brock heir growing inside me, too. However much I tried not to think about it, the physical progression of pregnancy day-by-day forced me to. The hormones probably weren't helping either.

Hearing the story, I'd felt a strong emotional connection to Sylvester's mom. Our circumstances were similar, though admittedly, hers were worse. Emory Brock was a disgusting old man with zero morals, and Sylvester was at least good-looking, my own age, and occasionally kind. But hearing her story, it was as if Emory and Sylvester were one and the same. A cursed cycle repeating itself, sparing no one from the pain of the Brock family line.

Eventually, when the sickness had mostly passed and my stomach was empty, anyway, I cleaned myself up and staggered out of the bathroom.

“Are you okay?” Sylvester was watching me with soft concern. “I wondered if I should come after you...”

“No, no. You made the right decision. Wouldn’t have been a pretty sight.”

“So you get sick on planes, huh?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t want us to dwell on the facts of my sickness, for obvious reasons, so I tried to remember where we’d been at. “Did you know your whole lives that you were twins?”

“From fairly young. My mom was the kind of parent who believed in being honest with kids. We didn’t ever believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy or whatever. She explained it in simple terms, trying not to scare us with the ‘threat’ that our biological dad might arrive one day and steal one of us away. But it was hard not to, in private, think of our dad as a kind of Boogiemán, and that one of us had to choose to be the braver one and get taken away if he ever returned.”

“You had a choice?”

Sylvester nodded. “It was pretty clear that I was the more outgoing twin, the more capable of handling stress. Felix is great, but, well, you know Felix. He’s reserved, not a fan of parties and attention. And I...”

“Love parties and attention.”

He grinned. But his cheesy grin masked something deeper in his eyes. A kind of loss.

I thought about it. If Emory had come for Felix, instead of Sylvester, then Sylvester would have been able to have his music career. He claimed to have ended things with me and his bandmates because he knew that the inheritance was upcoming. Which meant that, if Felix had gone in his place,

Sylvester and I would have stayed together, and the band wouldn't have broken up. It was a parallel universe I suddenly longed for.

In that moment, that was the first time I truly understood what Sylvester had given up when he had gone in his brother's place to be Emory Brock's official heir.

Without really thinking, I started to say something to that effect. "Sylvester..."

But Sylvester's eyes flashed suddenly and he sprang to the window. "Ooh, we're nearly there! You know, I've not seen my brother in an age. He doesn't really like travelling, and I don't like sitting through boring poetry lectures, so..."

Sylvester didn't want to talk about what he'd given up.

"Beautiful St. Louis." He stretched as if we had arrived at a premier holiday destination as we in fact stepped out onto the rainy runway of the airport nearest to the university.

I wasn't convinced. But I'd already earned more than my fair share of intel from coming on this trip. Plus, it would be nice to see Felix. I'd always liked him. He was like a less arrogant Sylvester.

In the back of the car ride to the university campus, Sylvester turned to me. "You might want to stay in the car while I retrieve my brother. If Apollo doesn't know you're working with me yet, he's bound to find out if he's having some of his agents keep tabs on my brother."

My first instinct was, *fuck Apollo, he's not the boss of me*. He kind of was, but he was a client, it was different. He wasn't my *only* boss. But the Brock brothers certainly were the highest paying.

The next thought I had was of the outburst I'd caught on record. For all I knew, the person Apollo was seething about had committed a crime as minor as daring to also work for one of his half-brothers. Maybe I'd be 'dealt with' by Abigail, the security guard, whatever that had meant. I shuddered.

"You won't miss much." Sylvester had maybe sensed my unease. "I'll just pop in and get Felix, keep an eye out for Apollo's agents, and then we can go somewhere more secure to chat. Honestly, he teaches *poetry*. There won't be anything interesting to see."

Even though I quite liked poetry, I kept my mouth shut. In truth, I was feeling both wary of Apollo, and still a little uneasy following my sickness on the jet. It would give me a chance to recuperate somewhat. "Sure. I'll wait in the car."

We pulled up at the impressive campus. Sylvester tapped on the windows before he left. "These are one-way. No one will be able to see in. Just taking full precautions, here."

Then I sat alone in the car. I waited, realizing I had been optimistic to think I would have a chance to 'recuperate' when alone. Instead, I was plunged back into my own thoughts. I thought back over Sylvester's story about his family, and everything he had sacrificed.

Did I forgive him for dumping me unceremoniously – both as a partner and as a tour support act – now that I knew? ...No. But I was a little closer to a point at which I might possibly *consider* thinking about forgiveness. One day.

I was almost glad when I was interrupted from my thoughts by the driver, who hadn't yet spoken, speaking up from the front of the car. "Miss. Do you know those people?"

I craned around to see who he was looking at. Two figures, a man and a woman, were examining the exterior of the car and drawing closer. Both of them were tall and broad, wearing sunglasses and casual attire. But when the woman stooped to examine our wheels or numberplate, her coat slid aside to reveal she was carrying a gun. At least one gun.

There was also something else more telling about her that I noticed: she was Abigail, one of Apollo's security team. She was the security guard who had been there to witness the tantrum that I'd witnessed, and who'd acted like it was nothing unusual.

Felix was right: Apollo's agents *were* sniffing around at his university. Or at least, they were at this very moment.

My mind flashed between a few possibilities of what I could do next. I decided, rather rashly, to step out of the car. I didn't like the idea of one of them getting any closer and banging on the window.

I closed the door behind me. "Abigail?"

The two agents took a step back and surveyed me. Then the clouds of Abigail's confusion parted and her eyes focused. "Ms. Black? What are you doing here?"

If they'd been watching Felix, and they'd found our car, they already knew Sylvester was here, so there was no reason trying to hide it. I could only spin it the best way I possibly could, hoping to avoid Apollo's wrath.

"I'm here with a client." I didn't mention him by name, due to the non-disclosure, but she would easily guess who I meant. "I'm writing his memoir, and a... family member lives in this area. We visited to write the parts about his family history."

Abigail nodded slowly. “Hmm.” She exchanged eyes with the man in the dark glasses. “I’ll be seeing you around, I’m sure, Ms. Black.” And then, they turned around simultaneously and walked off.

I watched them leave. Then I got back in the car.

Amazingly, I didn’t think that had gone too badly. I think it looked good that I’d been honest with them – well, nearly honest.

Another half-hour passed before Sylvester arrived back at the car with Felix in tow. I smiled to see Felix, all these years later. If Sylvester looked like a cliché of a billionaire, Felix looked like a cliché of a poetry professor: scruffy blazer with an artful tie, books literally tucked under his arms, circular wire glasses slightly crooked. Though they were twins, they were not identical – in fact, Felix had more the craggy look of a rock star about him than Sylvester did. Sylvester had always looked more like a male model in a photo shoot, pretending to be a rock star.

Sylvester opened the door and ushered Felix in – there was plenty of space for all of us.

“Luna!” Felix cried, and my heart instantly warmed. “You look exactly the same as you did when we were teenagers.”

I laughed and extended an arm so I could hug him as much as the limited space allowed. “I hope slightly different. I was a late bloomer.” I was referring, of course, to my chest.

Sylvester was smirking behind Felix as we parted. “I’m fairly certain he’s not looking there.”

I didn’t quite understand the remark.

Felix let out a little laugh. “It’s true. Sylvester and I swing different ways.”

I grinned. What did you say when someone came out to you? “Congratulations.”

Sylvester jumped in the car and shut the door behind him. He started updating me on the developments. “I’m ninety percent sure that the people Felix has seen were Apollo’s agents. If I were a hundred percent sure, I’d have more of an idea of what to do next...”

I interrupted somewhat smugly. “Well, you’re in luck. Because I am one hundred percent sure.”

Sylvester boggled at me. It was satisfying. “Why?”

I smirked. “Some of his agents came sniffing around the car while you were away. I recognized one of them: Abigail, from Apollo’s security team.”

My smirk faltered as I realized I’d possibly just broached my non-disclosure. Did this mean I’d chosen a side – had my gut chosen for me, before my brain could back it up with caution about remaining impartial?

If anything, in the Brock brothers war of Sylvester versus Apollo, if I had to choose a side, I chose Felix’s. An innocent bystander. If Apollo was out to harm him, which both seemed to suspect, then I’d given the information to protect Felix. Not to side with Sylvester.

Sylvester was still somewhat vexed. “What happened?”

“I had to decide whether to stay put and risk them discovering me, or leave the car and say hi, basically. I figured the latter made me look less suspicious. And I have a plausible reason for being here – I’m writing your memoir, and we came here to visit your brother.”

Sylvester nodded. “Good. That’s good. I’m glad nothing bad happened to you. You didn’t think to text?”

“What would you have done? Come sprinting over here to knock them out?”

“I could have done.” He frowned, then changed the subject, speaking to everyone. “Okay. I was going to bring us somewhere secure to talk. But if we know for sure that Apollo’s sniffing around here, I don’t want to take any chances. Felix, you said there’s a break in study coming up? You can get your last lecture covered, do the rest remotely?”

Felix nodded. “Yes, but... where will I go?”

“You’re coming to stay with me. To New York.”

“I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

Sylvester shrugged, but his mouth was a hard line. “Not really. I’m not letting that bastard do anything to you.”

* * *

AFTER SWINGING by Felix’s book-cluttered apartment and helping him to quickly pack a bag, we were back on the private jet.

Felix was sat opposite me, nervously sipping a glass of champagne Sylvester had insisted on being brought out to ‘celebrate’ the occasion. I’d politely declined, citing my travel sickness, but thinking again instead of the growing Brock lifeform in my belly.

Turns out Felix was a shaky flyer, too, so we travelled back mainly in companionable silence. Occasionally Felix would murmur the words of a poem he was reading in one of the twenty books he’d insisted on packing. I let myself drift off into a nap, the words of his poetry the background to my peaceful sleep.

When I woke up, we were landing, and I was ushered into the back of a car with the two twins before I was fully awake again. We were, apparently, on the way to Sylvester's apartment.

I liked the feeling that I was 'along for the ride', an integral part of whatever adventure had just unfolded, but I was somewhat worried that Sylvester was doing what he always did: assuming I *wanted* to spend my free time gallivanting about with him, that his adventures were more important than any others. He was often correct, though. My years with Sylvester at my side had been some of the most exciting and eventful, as well as, in the end, the most painful.

My phone buzzed with a call from my dad. Our calls were one-sided, since he was a man of very few words, but he liked hearing my voice, anyway, so he would often call me just to hear me talk. It wasn't that he *couldn't* talk, it had always seemed to me more that he had no interest in doing so. Perhaps he felt he had nothing to say, or perhaps he thought in music rather than words, which is why he could compose a symphony quicker than he could ever speak a whole paragraph, even on a topic he was really interested in.

I didn't pick up, but I planned to call him back when we arrived at the apartment. I left Sylvester and Felix settling into Sylvester's apartment and ducked out into the hallway.

My dad picked up after a few rings. "Hello."

"Hi dad." I kept my voice cheerful, even though I was a bit tired and nauseous, still. "Any particular reason for the call, or just a check-up?"

He didn't say anything, which meant it was just a chat. My dad had never been a wordsmith. His language was music. With anything else, he was like a fish out of water. When I

was growing up, people had often thought my dad was unintelligent. The thing is, he was *very* intelligent. He'd just never seen the point in chatting. He called because he said once that hearing my voice was like music to him – it was the only small talk he cared for.

I gave some vague updates on my work, aware that I could be overheard by Sylvester or his security quite easily out here. I certainly wasn't about to tell my dad about the pregnancy right now. Eventually, we said goodbye, and I made my way back to Sylvester's apartment.

Inside, I was met with the vision of all four non-Apollo brothers, swiveling around to stare at me when I entered.

I'd not met Winston, Jude or Forest before. It was weird how they all slightly resembled each other, and Apollo. That was probably a silly thing to think about brothers. But it was strange, the way it had happened: how they'd all had different upbringings, never known each other until adulthood, really.

Winston folded his arms. "Ah, the famed memoirist. Back to write some more slander about our personal lives, huh?"

Sylvester thumped him on the arm. "Leave it. It's her job, alright?"

Sylvester was staring with such venom at Winston that Winston held up his hands and backed off. "Alright, alright, sorry Luna. Welcome to the family."

Sylvester thumped him again. "Don't say that! That's weird!"

Winston cackled and made his way to the fridge as if he lived here.

Not too keen to make my introductions to the other Brock brothers who must universally despise me, I spotted Felix

standing out on the balcony and made some quick excuse about needing fresh air.

Outside, Felix looked up when I closed the door behind me.

I met his gentle eyes. I knew he was much more of an introvert than Sylvester's half-brothers. "Don't worry. I'm avoiding the Brocks too. You don't need to chat if you need a moment's peace and quiet."

To my surprise, he shook his head. "No, it's okay. It's good to see you. You never make me feel particularly overwhelmed or stressed, anyway."

"Unlike them." I smirked.

"Yes. Exactly."

I joined him standing at the balcony edge, staring out across the city. For a moment I stood in silence, letting the slight breeze wind around my hair. After a day of private jets and hire cars, it turned out I did need the fresh air.

It was Felix who broke the silence. "I'm glad you are back in touch with my brother. Or, are you?"

I smirked. "Remains to be seen." But the fact that I didn't say outright *no* meant my opinion had changed quite a lot from when we'd first reunited in the dingy basement bar all those weeks ago.

"I understand why you might have mixed feelings. But you were always a good influence on Sylvester. Out of all his girlfriends and friends, the only time I ever saw himself act really like... himself, was when you were around. He loved you very, very deeply."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. It moved me that Felix thought I was a good influence on his brother. As for the love... it was complicated. "Thanks."

"I don't expect you to forgive him for what he did. But, for what it's worth... I saw all the pain that he went through during those last years with you and the band, before Emory died. He had a really tough time. I think the selfish thing for him to do would have been to keep you all close to him. Instead, he destroyed his entire support network, apart from me and our mom, to try and keep you all safe. He might have been misguided. But he was a stupid kid, really. Not quite a proper adult yet. And it tore him up. It really did. Like I said, he loved you very much. More than he loved his band. If you can believe it."

"Thanks." I was repeating myself. I needed to say something meaningful back, but I wasn't quite ready to process what he'd said just yet. "I mean it, thank you. I'll keep it in mind. I mean, I'll have to think it over some other time, it's been a long day."

"Yeah, I understand." Felix glanced inside, where the brothers were still gathered in a conspiratorial circle. "Hey, I'm gonna try and slip in and get a coffee. You want one? You can stay out here, have your turn of peace and quiet."

I nodded, grateful, and waited while Felix went to fetch the coffee. They'd have less to heckle Felix about than they did me. I certainly wasn't Winston's favorite person, and I doubted Forest nor Jude particularly loved me, since all of them had read Apollo's book. I did feel a little teeny tiny pang of guilt as I waited on the balcony, but it was still teeny tiny. It was my job, like Sylvester had said. And I didn't know everything was a lie.

I'd believed Apollo. And now, I supposed, the world had too.

Felix and I drank our coffees in peace. By the time we went inside, the Brock brothers had thankfully gone home, and we could breathe more easily. Felix retired to bed. The coffee had done little to wake him up, and he was going to look over some student essays before finally sleeping for the night.

Sylvester and I were then alone in the apartment. I wasn't quite sure why I'd stayed for so long, except there hadn't been much of a reason to leave, and everything had been quite exciting, what with the appearance of Apollo's agents or spies or whatever they were, and the new revelation of Felix being Sylvester's twin.

Sylvester walked over to the corner, where his guitars were propped up. I was surprised he even still had them. He'd not made music in years, to my knowledge. Still, when he tapped on the side of one of the guitars and looked up at me, it was like we were teenagers again, when music was fresh and magical and not yet linked to money and failure and loss. "Wanna play?"

I found myself nodding. "Sure."

We tuned our guitars and settled on a song, one that wasn't too romantic, one that didn't remind us too much of our feelings, past and present.

Despite our careful song choice, as Sylvester's voice started up, the low hum of it, and as I joined in with mine, harmonizing and taking over for some parts of it, I felt my chest beating fast, and my chest growing warm. The melding of our voices together was beautiful. It always had been – it had been one of the big losses of our break-up, that I'd never

found another whose voice quite complimented mine like his did. I wonder if he'd found the same.

When the song ended, our gazes lingered on each other. His hair was slightly mussed up from the length of the day, and he didn't look quite so picture-perfect as he usually did. It was sexier. He felt more like the man I knew.

I set down my guitar gently and crawled over to where he was sat. Then I took the guitar out of his hands, and placed it to one side, before swinging my knee over his lap and perching there, stroking the loose strands of hair from his face. It all happened so naturally, it was like there weren't twenty years since we'd last been close.

His hands lifted to cup my face and pull me closer. He kissed me, softly and slowly at first. I melted into it, wrapping my arms around his shoulder and pushing my torso against his. He breathed shakily into my mouth and kissed me more firmly, more intensely, his fingers teasing the back of my neck and my scalp so that my skin lit up with pleasure. Then he pulled back, and I looked at him with curiosity.

“Do you forgive me yet?” His voice was surprisingly vulnerable, even a little shaky. Music opened us both up, emotionally raw, always had done.

Luna of the past twenty years wanted to say: *no, never*. But Luna of the present was more closely linked to teenage Luna before she had been let down by the world. I wanted to say: *yes, of course I forgive you. I'm sorry for everything that you went through to try and protect me from the world. If you promise you'll never make a choice like that for me again, put yourself through needless pain, I'll stay by your side. If you want me at your side.*

But I was both of those Lunas, not one or the other. What I said was a vague middle ground. “We’ll see about that.” I hated how coldly it came out. I wanted to offer Sylvester something back for what he had given – his secrets, his protection, and perhaps, his heart all along. “I want to.” My voice had dropped to a whisper. I was scared to say the things I held in my own heart. “I want to, but I need some time.”

Sylvester nodded, his face close to mine, his lips slightly parted. His eyes skittered over every part of my face, my shoulders. “You can have all the time in the world. I’ll wait.” His fingers teased at the straps on my tank top, somewhat hesitantly.

I bit my lip and nodded, exhaling from the tension. He unhooked the straps over my shoulders and ran his fingers lightly over the exposed skin of my shoulders, where I was sensitive. I hummed a small moan. He leaned forwards and brought his lips to my neck and I gasped as he sucked and nipped at the skin there, flicking his tongue over my sensitive musician’s ear, where he knew I was especially defenseless. I moaned again, louder.

Then, realizing where we were, I pulled back from Sylvester’s embrace, even though I wanted to press myself harder against him. “Your brother...”

“I know him, he won’t be leaving that room again until morning. He sleeps like a log. If you’re worried, we’ll hear him at least two minutes before he’d get here. He’s slow when he’s sleepy and he’s at the other end of the apartment.”

It was good enough for me. I nodded, and reached out to unbutton Sylvester’s shirt. He’d already undone the top buttons and removed his tie and jacket, but he still looked too much like someone’s accountant dad for my liking.

In fact, he *was* a dad: the father of my unborn child. Whether I liked it or not, we were linked, biologically, by the life growing inside of me, unknown to Sylvester. We'd always been linked in mind, body and soul, when we had been together, except at the end.

In moments like this, when I could forget my grudge, being close with Sylvester seemed almost more natural than breathing.

SYLVESTER



When both of us partially undressed, I laid Luna back across the collection of blankets and cushions in the music corner of my apartment and teased my fingers across her body. She reached up to pull me in close for a kiss, but I shook my head, teasingly, and skimmed my fingers across her breasts, her tender nipples. She gasped, then moaned when I squeezed the soft flesh of her chest with both of my hands, then started exploring downwards with one hand, pausing when my fingers reached the smooth skin of her hips, and her inner thighs, dancing around the area where she was warmest and wettest.

In the dim light, she looked so beautiful, blissed out and partially nude, like a classic painting. Her eyeliner was smudged into a shadowy blur that usually highlighted the sharp intensity of her eyes – on this occasion, instead, her eyes were unfocused, except for when she would study my form, sweeping her dark eyes across my chest, to my groin, and back to my face. She smiled, and I leaned in to finally grant her the kiss she so wanted.

As our lips touched, and I felt my dick stiffen between my legs, I let my fingers dance across her pussy and clit, circling and tapping and pushing until she moaned into my mouth,

breathing heavily, unable to uphold the required coordination of the kiss.

I pushed into her with my fingers, moving my tongue down to flick across her clit, and her muscles clenched around me as she cried out. I tugged with my fingers, reaching her g-spot, and she moaned even more loudly.

By the time I was done with her, she was laid on her back, thighs twitching, looking up at me in a slightly sweaty daze, entirely undone. I loved to see her like that – for all the harsh layers of her defenses to have peeled away, leaving bare the woman I was in love with, had always been in love with.

I knew that, now. The intensity of my feeling was so strong I was surprised I'd managed to hold it back all these years. But I realized now that, if I hadn't, it would have destroyed me.

I hoped it still wouldn't.

* * *

I INTENDED to make sure that Reed followed through on the promise he'd made at his band's concert. To that end, I'd set a variety of my assistants calling him daily until he had scheduled a visit.

The day had now arrived, and I went to meet him off the private jet, having confirmed with the staff that he had boarded at the other end. He struggled off the jet wearing an oversized hiking backpack, looking for all intents and purposes like he was about to go into the woods, not stay for one night at my luxury apartment.

I grinned as he approached. "You made it."

“Couldn’t exactly not come, could I?” He was grumbling, but I could tell it was in good nature. He was remarkably similar all these years since we’d parted. “Just exactly how many people have you got employed to wipe your ass, eh?”

“None.” I winked. “They do it for free.”

“Y’always were a freak.” Reed clapped me on the back. It was nice – I’d missed this. “C’mon. Let’s get this over with.”

We went back to my apartment for coffee before deciding what to do with our day.

“Fuckin’ hell.” Looking around the swanky apartment, Reed, predictably, had a similar look to Luna’s when she’d been on the private jet. They shared a disgust at wealth, possibly stemming from being stung by me in the past just before I’d become extremely wealthy.

“Yeah, yeah. Let me know when you’re done shuddering at my hideous wealth and good charms and I’m sure the coffee will be ready by then.”

We drank coffee on the balcony and made small talk. The kind of small talk Reed and I had used to have, which was a kind of lazy banter, insulting each other back and forth.

My phone pinged with a message from Luna – a reply to one I’d sent earlier checking in with her.

Luna: *Yeah, I’m good thanks*

Luna: *Got home safely etcetera*

Luna texted how she talked – fairly abruptly. I smiled to myself.

Reed was curious. “What’re you smiling at? Who’s that you’re texting? One of your bimbos?”

“No.” I put my phone down. “It’s Luna, actually. I think you know she’d object quite strongly to being called a bimbo. Especially one of *my* bimbos.”

Reed put down his coffee. “You’re in touch with Luna again?”

I smiled. I knew that’d get his attention. “Yeah, only recently. It’s a long story.” Did I feel bad for slightly using her as a pawn in my plans for Reed? Not really, no. It wasn’t as if that were one of the main reasons I was messaging her – it just happened to be a nice side effect.

“Dang. She forgiven you?”

I shook my head. “You know her better than that. I’ve got trials to undertake before she’d even think about forgiving me, I’m sure.”

“That woman knows how to hold a grudge. Damn, I miss her. Tried to keep in touch, but you know what she’s like. Hard to pry the thoughts out of her brain.”

I nodded. I knew exactly what he meant. Before he could ask any more questions, I stood up. “Alright. We’ve got a whole day. Anything you want to do in New York City, we can do.”

Reed kind of groaned. “I’m not a tourist. Honestly, if yer looking to convince me to get the band back together, or something like that... let’s do the whole nostalgia trip. Hell, let’s get out all the old concert footage and spend a day watching it. See if it sparks anything.”

My heart warmed. I’d not thought of that, but now that he said it, that was exactly how I’d like to spend the day, too.

“Hang on, then. Let me order in the popcorn. And we can get takeout for every meal.”

“Perfect.” Reed sighed. “I’m dead tired after that tour. If you tell me I can do part of the reunion concert sitting down, I’m in. Being a frontman’s a hard job. When you’re not out of your mind on drink and drugs and whatever had *you* going back in the day.”

“Hey. It’s a hard job being that cool, too. Don’t you go comparing now.”

* * *

AS PROMISED, we spent the day watching old *Needlehead* concert footage, everything we had in the archives. There was even footage in there of a bunch of our practices. We saw everything – the arguments, the love-ins, the musical breakthroughs, the brilliance, and the horror. My heart lurched every time I saw myself acting up. I knew I’d been playing it up, trying to drive everyone away, but it had hurt to do it, and it didn’t hurt any less watching it back.

Reed noticed I was wincing and paused the footage. “Hey. You safe?”

I exhaled. “I don’t know if you know what was going on back then. Why I, um, acted so badly.”

“Oh, I’m not a fool, old friend. As soon as the news came out, I knew exactly what you’d been doing.”

“What? The news about Emory? What exactly did you think I was doing?”

Reed rolled his eyes. “You’re not some great mastermind, you know. You’re transparent, especially to me. Me and you, we’re so alike and so different, we can see right through each other. That’s why we always argued so much.”

“Huh.” I’d never thought about it that way.

“Anyway, I saw immediately what you’d been doing. Dumping Luna, pushing her away, pushing us all away... you didn’t want us around when the shit hit the fan.”

“Luna thinks I see myself as a martyr. I wanted to protect you guys, sure. But I also couldn’t bear to see you all dragged into something. I barely had enough energy to go on with the Emory inheritance plan as it was. It was overwhelming.”

“Honestly, I don’t blame you for that. I’d have done the same thing. Well, similar.”

I was suddenly frustrated. “Then why not talk to me for all these years?”

Reed shrugged. “Well, partly because you were right: association with you was pretty dangerous for a while there. And again recently, what with all this press on you an’ the brothers. And partly, I was hurt that you’d never confided in me. I’d have kept your secret. I’d have helped. And sure, I wanted to stay out of that particular limelight just as much as you wanted to keep me out of it. I’d have understood.”

I was struggling to comprehend, much like I had with Luna’s response. “So it’s not what I did... it’s that I didn’t confide in you? I didn’t let you in on what was happening?”

Reed nodded. “That the case with Luna, too? You been talkin’ about those times?”

I nodded, slowly. “Except she says she’d have stuck with me. If she’d had the choice.”

“She would have done. She was damn loyal. And she’d probably have been torn apart by that media circus. I don’t judge you for what you did. I’m still allowed to be annoyed about it, though.”

I didn't quite understand, but I maybe never would, entirely.

At the end of the day, Reed announced it was time for him to get an early night's sleep. He had rehearsal early tomorrow, and he'd probably be leaving before the time I was usually awake.

"Go on, Reed, tell me. Will you consider giving the *Needlehead* reunion a go?"

Reed smirked, then he nodded, slowly.

I punched the air in excitement.

He smiled despite himself. "Slow down there, old boy. We've got to get the others on board too."

"That won't be hard. They always listened to you."

"Jealous?" He raised an eyebrow mockingly.

"Maybe a little, back then. But it was because you always had the best opinions. Hard to fault you, or them, for following your leadership instead of mine. Mine was... chaotic."

"Chaotic lives make people chaotic. Not your fault. Not all of it. But I'll tell you, I was on the fence about it until I heard you're back in touch with Luna. If she's giving you another chance... then I guess I may as well, too. I can hold a grudge pretty well, but Luna always outdid me there. I'm not about to try outlasting one of her's."

I pulled Reed into a good old fashioned hug. "Thanks, buddy. I'll try and make sure you won't regret it. I won't be repeating any of my old antics, that's for sure."

Reed clapped me on the back, then pulled back and looked me up and down. "We're older now. I'm not sure your body could take a single one of your old antics these days."

“Speak for yourself. I’m just as young as I was in *Needlehead’s* prime.”

Reed chuckled, held up a single hand in *goodnight*, and padded away to his bedroom.

I slept soundly knowing the grizzled rock veteran, my old best friend, was in the room next door. My life could get pretty lonely at times.

Actually, it was lonely most of the time. I’d lost what I’d had of my relationship with Luna, my camaraderie with my bandmates, with whom I’d spent almost all of my time for years. I barely got to see my family between our various obligations – either my mom and Felix or my Brock family, who were all just as busy as me. I held so many parties because I could make sure there were people around on my terms. I craved company. It had always been one of my flaws.

The next morning, I woke just in time to say a last goodbye to Reed.

When the door closed behind him, I was surprised to find tears pricking my eyes. I wiped them away. I had more napping to do, and then I’d be contacting the rest of the gang.

LUNA



I'd managed to put off meeting with Apollo for as long as possible, for some valid and for some dishonest reasons, but it was time to face the metaphorical music.

Luna: *Hey, I'm feeling better now. When would you like to schedule a meeting?*

Apollo: *Today*

Apollo: *Pretty please*

Luna: *Thanks for the 'please'. Okay, sure. When are you free?*

Apollo: *Whenever. ASAP. See you at my office*

Hmm, these texts were shorter than his usual. In fact, it was unusual for him to not immediately call me after receiving a text. Despite the rushed vibe of his texts, he can't have been that busy if he wanted to see me immediately.

Or... he had to see me very urgently, for some reason.

I didn't like that feeling.

Since our last meeting, in which he'd had his destructive outburst, I'd been getting a worse and worse feeling about Apollo Brock. It wasn't just that I was spending more time

with his archnemesis. It was also the time he'd clearly spent someone to spy on me when I was ill, when he'd sent the delivery to my door to check I was home, that I was as ill as I claimed to be. It was seeing his agents in St. Louis at the university, watching over my childhood friend Felix Hart, Sylvester's brother.

All of those things... plus the truly chilling recording of his outburst I'd listened back over a few times.

And what he'd said at the end of the recording: *Would you be so kind as to deal with the situation, Abigail?*

I didn't know what that meant. But, according to Sylvester, this guy had been part of a plan to *kidnap a child*. My good faith in Apollo Brock was wavering, and for very good reason.

But for this meeting, I had to pretend like nothing had changed. Like Apollo Brock and I were still friends, in the context of a client-freelancer relationship, anyway. That we could still make the little jokes we'd always made at each other's expense, that both he and I had enjoyed, bringing a levity to our work meetings.

When I arrived at his office's reception, I had a surprise.

The receptionist scanned my ID, then she looked up at me. "He's requested you meet him in the boardroom, today."

"Oh? Do you have any idea why that is?"

"He said he's bored of the meeting that's ongoing in there and could use the company. He called it the 'bored room' when he asked me to send you there."

"Did he... spell that out for you?" It wasn't a joke that made sense spoken aloud without explanation.

The receptionist didn't bat an eyelid. "He did, miss."

I made my way to the boardroom, escorted by two members of Apollo's security. I was pleased to see neither of them were Abigail, the only one I knew by name, who I had seen when visiting Sylvester's brother Felix in St. Louis. I wasn't sure what Abigail had reported to her boss, but I supposed I was about to find out.

When we reached the boardroom, one of the security guards held the door open for me. I was immediately hit with an influx of sound from the other side: the loud sounds of a lot of people squabbling.

Indeed, as I stepped inside, the sight matched the assault on my ears. There was a large table in the middle of the room, which was largely unoccupied. Almost everyone in the room was instead standing around the edge of the room, engaged in various small arguments. The only person sitting at the table was Apollo Brock himself, slumped across the table surface looking almost as if he were napping.

He sprung into life as the door shut behind me, the noise alerting him to my presence. "Luna Black!" He gestured eagerly for me to sit down next to him at the table.

I couldn't have sat any further away: I wouldn't be able to hear him at all, if I did. I sat, and looked around. "What is going on here?"

"Meeting of the board. Did the receptionist...?"

"Yes, I heard about your good joke. Well done." I said it without a hint of humor, but he was used to my sarcasm by now.

It usually delighted him, but he seemed distinctly miffed. "Ah, good. Well, they're all occupied with... whatever they're doing. Arguing. I figured I may as well use this time wisely,

and get a bit of recording done for my second memoir. What do you think?”

“Erm, sure.” It was an odd setting for a meeting, in the middle of tens of people yelling, but I supposed there was no reason for me to decline. Except... “I’m not sure my recording device is gonna be able to filter out all of the arguing...”

Apollo strummed his fingers on the table. “Ah yes. Good point. Well, I think I can take a little break. I’d hate for any of my potently charming words to become lost to this... drivel.” He gestured around at the arguing people.

I looked around and smiled sympathetically. Suddenly, someone caught my eye. She was the only person who was standing but not actively engaged in an argument with someone else directly: she appeared to be listening to what was going on, trying to keep her ears in all conversations.

She was also, looking around, the only person, male or female, who was not wearing a suit. She was wearing a full-length black sparkly dress with a sequined corset bustier, and long black gloves. She looked more like she was here to provide entertainment of some kind – burlesque or singing – than to be participating in a board room meeting.

Even eerier than that, I kind of recognized her from somewhere. Her face was familiar, her stance, her smile...

She was looking back at me, so I glanced away. I didn’t like the look of that smirk. In general, it was unpleasant when anyone at Apollo’s company took notice of me. I didn’t know exactly what kind of person he employed, but I was getting the idea that they were all likely less than reputable.

“C’mon, Ms. Black. I doubt anyone will notice my absence for a little while.” Apollo stood, and I followed him to

the door.

I exhaled in relief when it shut behind us and we were alone in the corridor. I hadn't realized quite how overwhelming it had been to be sat in the middle of that chaos. I wouldn't have lasted too long in there before having to leave, anyway, I realized.

We went next door to Apollo's office, where I set up my recording device and declined the offer of a drink of any kind.

"Alright, I'm set up." I looked up and forced a smile.

Apollo was stroking his chin, looking distinctly unhappy.

"Er, Apollo? What would you like to talk about today?"

He continued to stroke his chin, then slammed both hands down on the desk and leaned in as far as he could across the desk. "Abigail said she ran into you in St. Louis."

"That is correct." I struggled to keep my cool. The recording device glowed away reassuringly. If he murdered me right now, at least maybe there would be recorded evidence of it. Maybe someone would find it and take it to the police.

"I'm going to cut to the chase. You're working for my brother, Sylvester, correct?"

I nodded.

It was interesting how Sylvester was so stern whenever anyone referred to Apollo as his 'brother' – he always corrected to 'half-brother'. Whereas Apollo seemed less keen to put distance between them. He certainly was pre-occupied with his biological half-brothers. The majority of his first memoir had been tales of them, more so than of him. What had showed of Apollo in that memoir was largely the voice of the writing and the way the stories were *told* – he hadn't

actually appeared in that many at all, apart from in sharing his opinions of how his brothers could have behaved better.

He leaned back into his chair. “I presume that Sylvester found out you were the author of my memoir, tracked you down, and begged you to write his, too?”

I nodded. “Actually, he wanted to pay me to not write your second one. But I declined.”

“Did he, now?” Apollo smiled, then, a broad and horrible smile that took up most of the lower half of his face. I realized with a sinking feeling that I’d just given him a ‘win’ – he now knew categorically that the book had achieved both jobs: getting the world on his side, *and* pissing off his half-brothers.

But this looked good for me, at least. If he was planning on eviscerating me somehow, maybe that I’d not taken the money to desert him would give me a slightly less violent gutting.

“That’s very, very interesting.” The grin was slowly fading off Apollo’s face – not because he seemed any less gleeful, but because I imagine it takes a lot of effort to sustain such a gruesome smile. “Well, I certainly have some inspiration for the next chunk of my memoirs. I’d like to talk a little about the families of my half-brothers.”

While a lot of his memoirs had centered around the misdeeds of Sylvester, Jude, Forest and Winston, they had steered clear of family stories, which I had thought made it quite tasteful, as takedowns went. I was wary of dragging the families of all considered into the picture for this book. But I was getting the distinct feeling that, if I disagreed, Apollo would simply find some way of making me write it anyway. Or he would just hire someone else in my place. There was a clause in the contract that allowed him to do that without

having to pay a cancellation fee – I’d lose all the money I needed to pay for my dad’s orchestral surprise.

So I nodded. “Whenever you’re ready.”

He began: “The families of my brothers are quite curious in themselves. Of course, each of their biological mothers came across our shared father, Emory Brock, at some point in their personal history. And an odd assortment of characters they are...

“Jude Brock’s mother is a reclusive mathematical genius who no longer leaves her house. It is rumored she harbors, in her home laboratory, the code behind all of Emory’s major inventions for the period of time in which they were romantically involved. Jude was an only child, which accounts for his selfishness and lack of social skills...

“On the other hand, Forest Brock was conceived during a *threesome* Emory Brock had with a couple of tree huggers during his short-lived ‘environmental’ phase. His parents named all of their children after different types of tree. ‘Forest’, unfortunately, was the *location* Forest Brock was conceived in. They later spun that story into something more wholesome, something about Forest being the eldest which made him the forest that held all the trees of the family together... Of course, having hippie parents who praise everything you do has given Forest Brock an overinflated sense of his own intelligence and skill when it comes to computer science, which is why I had to extend *Brock Industries* into the technology realm, a realm formerly occupied solely by *Brock Technology*, in order to make sure there was some decent competition out there...

“Winston Brock’s mother is a particularly interesting tale. She purposefully conceived a child with Emory Brock, hoping

to blackmail him out of some money. When he declined, she resentfully raised Winston to adulthood. Then, when he inherited one-fifth of the Brock businesses, she would periodically hit him up for money, until he eventually cut her off...”

I listened as much as I could to Apollo’s tales of the Brock families. And it was interesting, for sure. I just couldn’t help but focus on how little of Apollo’s own story there was in this memoir. One book focusing on his brothers was fine, but the critics were going to claim him overly preoccupied with his brothers if he spent another entire book talking about them. We needed something about Apollo himself to keep the readers interested. I needed more of his story.

When he slowed to a natural pause, I took the opportunity to ask my question. “What about your mother, Apollo?”

He wrinkled his nose, looking at me in disgust like he’d forgotten I was there at all. But it was my job to ask questions. “What about her?”

“Well, you’ve told all these wonderful stories of how your four brothers came to inherit the fortunes of your father, Emory... the story might feel a little incomplete without yours, too.”

Apollo’s lips moved side to side, like he’d chewed on something bad and was trying to get the taste out of his mouth. “I don’t think anyone will care about that. Will they?”

“I think your first book being mainly tales of your brothers lives worked well... for one book. But the readers who are eagerly awaiting your next one are going to be disappointed if it’s just more of the same.”

“But more of the same is great, if the ‘same’ was successful, surely?”

“Not always, in the literary world... I think people will want a slightly different angle. You can keep all of the stories about your brothers, because you do tell them so well... It’s just you might want to consider telling some of your *personal* stories, too.”

Apollo was staring sullenly down at the table. “I’ll think about it. Not today, though.”

“That’s okay. All in your own time. Shall we continue?”

He looked up abruptly. “No. You’ve spoiled my train of thought now. We shall continue this some other time. I suppose I must return to the ‘bored room’ and call an end to that dreadful meeting, put everyone out of their misery.” He stood up. “Come. I’ll get someone to escort you out of the building.”

It all happened before I could really protest. Really, there was rarely any point in protesting with Apollo. Even now, all I’d asked was a gentle question, and I was being escorted out by another of Apollo’s armed security.

As I was led past the boardroom, which Apollo resignedly threw open the door to, I caught another glimpse of that woman. This time I caught a glimpse of her from her side angle, her profile. With a sudden realization, I knew who she was. I’d seen that profile before: it was on an album cover. *Priscilla Lamb*, a recording artist from the 70s – a contemporary of David Bowie’s, in fact.

She’d vanished in the late eighties, while she was still at the height of her powers. No one had known where she’d gotten to. She wasn’t presumed dead, so the music world had

assumed she was still around somewhere, just lying low, hiding out from the scrutiny of the media, maybe. But there was no reason why she should have been. Her last album had had amazing reviews, and her reputation untarnished.

Then, she'd gone, never to be seen again.

Until I'd caught her eye in that *Brock Industries* board room, a glittering dress in the middle of a sea of drab suits, smiling at me with an almost knowing look in her eyes.

What was Priscilla Lamb, infamous for disappearing without a trace at the height of her career, doing at Apollo Brock's board meeting?

* * *

AFTER BEING DEPOSITED in Apollo's reception after that weird meeting, I walked outside somewhat wearily.

I needed to cool down and compose my thoughts, so I didn't immediately hop into a taxicab. Instead, I went for a slow, meandering walk away from Apollo's offices. I pulled out my phone and searched the name 'Priscilla Lamb'. It brought up hundreds of articles about her disappearance, theories about why or where she'd gone, highlights from her stellar career.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and kept thinking. Had Apollo wanted me to see her for some reason? Or had he just not really cared what I saw, since I'd signed the NDA? Had he wanted me to go and tell Sylvester who I'd seen, which would then lead to some chain of events through which Apollo would *know* I'd been passing secrets to his half-brother? Was that what all of this was about?

I was so deep in thought that I didn't notice I was being tailed by a car with darkened windows until I stopped to throw a wrapper from my handbag into a bin.

The car stopped right next to me, parallel on the road.

I eyed it sideways and kept walking. The car surged forwards and then stopped again when I halted. Then the back door swung open and out came an older woman wearing a huge grey woolen trench coat, the collar covering half of her face.

I braced myself for whatever was to come. Then, as the woman drew closer to me, I realized it was the film director from Sylvester's office.

She was walking towards me with her hand outstretched. "Eli Robinson."

I took it warily. "Luna Black."

"I know who you are." She said the words ominously, but they were then followed by a grin that spread from one side of her face to the other, like a greying Cheshire cat. "You're the soundtrack to my next film."

"Um. Am I?"

"Yep, kid. You're a star now, etcetera, etcetera. Now if you'll get in my car, I'll discuss terms and conditions, and you can sign the contract."

I frowned. I'd not heard of this woman before meeting her in Sylvester's office, and I'd never been interested in providing soundtrack to any film. It just wasn't my thing. When my music career had fallen through, friends and family had suggested a bunch of things like that: composing for adverts, for television, for film. Or music tutoring or joining a choir. They'd been well-meaning suggestions, but they only

drove home how I'd missed out on my real dream, and how anything else I did that was tangentially related to music would only be a shadow of what I'd actually wanted.

And, since I was already being constantly bossed around by two rich people already – Sylvester and Apollo – I didn't exactly take kindly to yet another rich person jumping out of a car and ordering me around.

There was a question I needed answering before I could say anything else. "Sorry, but where did you hear my music?"

"It was on the memory stick Sylvester Brock gave me. Amongst all of his band's drivel."

I frowned. Had Sylvester done that on purpose, as a gesture – one I definitely didn't appreciate – or had he already had my music on his memory stick, and accidentally given it to this Eli Robinson person?

If he'd done it as a gesture, he had to realize how empty it was, compared to destroying my music career for good twenty years ago, before I'd even really started. An offer of a film soundtrack, of all things, did not even go part of the way towards making up for that.

But I liked the idea of Sylvester already having my music on the memory stick, for some reason. Listening to it, realizing what he'd missed out on... I liked the thought, even if it was bittersweet, and hurt my heart a little bit to picture.

I shook myself out of it. "Sorry that you were misinformed, but it must have been a mistake that it was on Sylvester's memory stick. I'm not a musician."

"That wasn't your music then?"

"Well, yes, it was. But I'm not a professional musician. I'm a writer. I don't... make music for films, or for anything

else.”

“Well, you should. I’m telling you. I’ve been stalling on my film for years because I never found a musician I thought could create the right vibe for the film. Until I heard yours. The film in question, it’s going to be... mysterious, kind of natural, dark in places and light in others...”

I wasn’t really listening. “Sorry, but it’s really not my thing. I’m flattered that you liked my music.”

“I more than liked it, kid.” Eli was staring at me in disbelief. The car, her car, hovered in the background, waiting for her return. “It relit the fire in me, the fire of filmmaking. It’s been out for a while. But your voice, combined with your melodies... they were just what I needed. You’re saying there’s nothing I can give you to consider it?”

I wasn’t thinking clearly. I’d had a stressful few days, I was overwhelmed, not to mention pregnant, and I’d gone on this walk to gather my thoughts, not to mess with them. I literally couldn’t add anything else to my plate right now, or everything would come crashing down around my head. “Sorry, but no. I hope you can find someone else suitable.” And then, since Eli seemed to be in a state of shock, I took the moment to make my exit. “Good luck. Bye.”

When I was a few blocks away and sure I wasn’t being followed by Eli’s car again, I called my own cab. I needed to get home. I needed to rest.

In the back of the car, I thought about Priscilla Lamb again, and how Apollo had given long, rambling explanations of each of his half-brother’s parentage, besides the obvious shared factor of Emory Brock as their biological father.

Could Priscilla... could she be Apollo’s *mother*?

I did the math quickly. Apollo was roughly in his mid-thirties. He'd been the youngest half-brother to be called up to inherit Emory's businesses. That would put his birth date around the time of... the late eighties. Around the time Priscilla Lamb had disappeared from the public eye.

It didn't make any sense, not yet. It was just a silly theory. Possibly it was nothing at all, and I was just paranoid after a long day.

Maybe it hadn't even been Priscilla Lamb. How could I really know? The memory of her profile image had faded now, and I couldn't be entirely sure she was who I thought she was. It could just be a lookalike.

Still, I'd keep an eye out for more evidence. For some reason, I was starting to think it would be helpful to have some ammunition against Apollo Brock in my back pocket.

As for Sylvester, I had all the ammunition I'd ever need: I was carrying his child.

SYLVESTER



When Luna had barged into my office and laid down the law, I knew I was in for an interesting day. “Don’t make me regret breaking Apollo’s non-disclosure agreement.” She’d sat down heavily on the chair opposite me, arms folded, as if she was already regretting what she was about to say.

I immediately put my computer to sleep. Whatever this was, it was going to be far more interesting than paperwork and emails, I could just tell. I flexed my fingers together and leaned my chin on them, an obvious display of keenness. “Go on.”

She sighed, avoiding my gaze for a moment. “I didn’t want to break the NDA. I’m not choosing sides, or anything.”

“Aren’t you?” I interjected, my palms dropping to the desk. It irritated me that she was still keeping up this act of impartiality. We were childhood sweethearts. We’d slept together, numerous times in the past few months, and kissed, for god’s sake. I’d apologized for all my misdeeds. Apparently, that wasn’t enough to put me slightly ahead of my literally evil half-brother in terms of the Luna rankings.

Luna dropped her hands onto the desk and leaned urgently forwards. “Let’s not argue about this now.” She took a deep

breath and continued. “I’m going to share a piece of information with you, only because it’ll drive me mad not to share it otherwise. But I need your word – your solemn word, Sylvester – that you won’t use this information for anything against Apollo unless you have my agreement.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Whatever. I obviously need to hear what’s got you so riled up, so I agree to your terms.” She did seem like she was almost exploding to contain whatever it was she had to share with me, so I sat up a little bit straighter and listened as she spoke.

“Fine. Okay. When I was last at Apollo’s office, he was in the middle of a board meeting. At the back of the room was a woman I thought I recognized, but I didn’t click who it was until I saw her from the side. It was the exact side profile of Priscilla Lamb, from her self-titled album. Priscilla Lamb, Sylvester. Am I seeing things, or do you think that was really her?”

I took a moment to consider this unusual tale. “Priscilla Lamb? Priscilla Lamb was in Apollo’s boardroom?” A giggle forced its way out, despite trying my best to seriously consider what Luna was saying.

Luckily, Luna smiled back at me. “I know it sounds crazy, right? But I swear to god. It was her. She was wearing a glittery black dress. Purple lipstick. That funny smile she does, y’know... so iconic. It was absolutely her.”

I was still forcing back hysteria. “Or Apollo has a thing for her and he’s cloned her from DNA left behind when she vanished.”

“That’s the thing. She looked obviously older than when she disappeared. Like she’d aged well, and clearly kept herself looking good, but she clearly had new lines on her face.”

I sobered and let it sink in. “What on earth do you think he’s doing with Priscilla Lamb in his boardroom? He can’t have kidnapped her back in the eighties. He would only have been... being born then...” I trailed off as I had a bizarre thought. Or was it? Was it bizarre?

Luna was nodding. “That was the only possible theory I could come up with. He was – he was talking about all of your mothers – sorry, NDA – but when I asked him about his own, he closed up and ended the session. That’s what made me think of it. But it would kind of... align, wouldn’t it? Am I crazy? Did he ever talk about his mom, back when you weren’t enemies?”

I shook my head. “No. Never. He was just as cagey back then. He’d listen to us tell all our family stories, alright. But he’d never share any of his own. If we asked him, he’d react like you saw – shut down, back off.”

She met my eyes. “This is so... weird.”

“It is. But thank you for bringing it to me. This really could be something useful. And even if it isn’t, we got a good laugh out of it.”

“Remember, if you do want to use it, you have to run it by me first. I don’t wanna get gunned down by your brother just because you decided to make a jab at him about his suspected biological mom’s music career, or something.”

“Of course, of course. Luna, you do know I would never do anything to put you in harm’s way? Never.”

She blinked. “Hmm. Maybe I do know it. A bit.”

I smiled. “Come on. Let’s go and celebrate. Then later, you can collect DNA from Apollo and Priscilla.”

“A DNA test?”

“A DNA test.” I grinned and held out my hand for her to take.

Like two thieves running off into the night, she took my hand and we ran for the door, out into the city.

* * *

SOMEHOW, I managed to convince Luna to take me back to her terrible regular bar, the dingy basement rock bar where the unconvincing modern-day punks played pool and discussed terrible nu-metal.

I wasn't exactly going to take her to one of the swanky places I *normally* took dates in order to impress them. I knew with Luna, it would do the opposite, and I didn't want to ruin things when they were going so well.

Besides, and this is top secret information: I too was bored of those swanky places. The past few years, I'd found myself longing for the kinds of places we'd frequented as teenagers, and then on the first tour, before the band had gotten too famous to go to places like this.

First, Luna had insisted on dressing me in appropriate clothing. I assured her there was no need: I still knew how to dress like a normal person, even if I never got the chance in my day-to-day life of being dressed like a wealthy CEO.

I went into my walk-in closet, picked the most ludicrous fancy dress outfit I could, and walked confidently out in it as if I thought this was what the average person wore to a dive bar. Luna burst into laughter seeing me in what was essentially a cowboy outfit. I cackled and quickly darted back into the closet to change into something *actually* appropriate. Essentially, the only clothes I had that would suit Luna's bar

were my old tour clothes – black leather, ripped jeans, faded tees.

I checked myself in the mirror. It wasn't quite right – my hair was still coiffed like a businessman. I couldn't go full grunge with it. I'd look ridiculous doing so, approaching middle age. But I managed to artfully arrange my hair into something that an aging rocker who was now a dad or a schoolteacher might wear, as a compromise.

Luna's eyes sparkled to see me in the clothes, although she played it off by making some comment about how I was stuck in the past. Either way, she continued to hold my hand as we made our way to the bar, and she kept holding it as we walked in through those swing doors, seemingly unashamed to be seen with me. That was something. That was something, for sure.

Luna insisted on ordering drinks, so I took a seat in one of the booths to the side of the bar, which were slightly more private than most of the tables. It was still early, and so the bar wasn't as populated with rockers young and old as it had been when I'd first visited Luna here. I admit, I'd been slightly disappointed not to get recognized by a *Needlehead* fan that time I'd visited – I may be older and a lot richer, but there was still a following for our music out there.

Luna returned from the bar holding two drinks, and slid one to me before settling into the booth next to me. I took the opportunity to wrap one arm around her, and she didn't resist, or even make a sarcastic comment about it.

We sipped at our drinks. I looked around the establishment. "I can see why you like this place."

"Oh yeah? Why?"

“Well, it’s a no-frills, authentic feeling dive bar. You can barely tell it’s here from the signage outside, so it’s got that mysterious feel to it, like it’s letting you in on a secret. And obviously, it attracts a music crowd, what with the memorabilia, the jukebox selection and the attire of the bar staff. In short, this bar is like... the bar version of you. Authentic. Mysterious. And passionate about music.”

“Hmm.” Beside me, Luna seemed a little speechless.

“Speaking of the jukebox... would it be really cheesy if I went to queue up some *Needlehead* songs? I’m obviously feeling quite nostalgic.”

Luna blinked. “Go for it.”

I slotted some spare change into the machine and queued up a whole album of my songs, then scurried back to our booth like I’d committed a crime. A crime of arrogance, perhaps.

When I returned, Luna was looking at me very curiously. Her eyes were a mixture of soft and intense. She took my hand and pulled me in close, and planted a gentle, curious kiss on my lips. Warmth flooded me, but I was also perplexed. “Are you... alright?”

“Hmm. Yeah.” Her eyelashes fluttered as she looked from my lips to my eyes. “I forget, sometimes, how well you know me.”

I slid my arm around her waist, squeezing the soft flesh there, then threading my hand up the back of her shirt, lightly grazing her skin with my nails until she gasped and pressed her hand into the crotch of my pants.

Things were getting hot and heavy. I wanted it, obviously, but I wasn’t keen on getting arrested for public indecency. “Er, Luna...”

She pulled away, and, seeing my reticence, held her fingers to her lips. “Wait one minute.”

She darted over to the bar, had a word with the barkeep, and in one moment she was back, brandishing a key.

I boggled at it. “What on earth...”

Luna smiled coyly. “I just asked if I could show you around. There’s a teeny tiny room they have here for intimate gigs. I said you’re a musician.”

“Luna Black, you mischievous... Did you say which musician?”

She shook her head. “No. You’ve got as many haters as you have fans. And I’d hate to get barred from this place just because it turns out the barkeep has read Reed’s memoir.”

“Oh yeah. Reed’s memoir.” I thought about it. “Wait. Did you write that?”

She looked shifty for a minute, then smirked again and held her finger up to her lips. “Do you want me to answer that, or do you want to follow me into the unoccupied room at the back of the bar?”

I hung my head in faux petulance. “The unoccupied room at the back of the bar... obviously...”

Luna grinned and pulled me to my feet. Then, keeping my hand clasped in hers, she wove us through the collection of small, circular tables past the bar and through the doorway that led to both the toilets and, apparently, the room for small gigs.

We stumbled through the corridor to the locked door at the far end. Luna slid the key into the lock and turned, then wiggled it around a bit until the door jolted open and she

almost went flying with it. I caught her and steadied her, and she locked the door behind us, so it was just Luna and I.

The room was tiny, as rooms for gigs went. The small stage could maybe fit two or three people cramped in together, but definitely not a drum kit. As for the audience, it could probably fit thirty people, standing, but there'd be some spilled drinks. Definitely for intimate gigs only.

Speaking of intimate gigs...

Luna turned to face me, her face flushed, excitement glittering in her eyes. For a moment, we undressed each other with our eyes. I took in her untamed hair, her delicate neck, the shapely form accentuated by a fitted tee and skinny jeans. Then, we decided that each other were far too dressed, and began to tear at each other's clothing indiscriminately, slowing just a little to fiddle with buttons and clasps.

Then, when we were undressed to each other's liking, we pressed our bodies together. Her skin, soft and pale, against my rougher, more tanned torso was heavenly. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders to pull her as closely into me as I could. Her pussy glanced against my thigh – it was dripping wet, and I pushed my thigh against her until she moaned. My rock hard cock was resting against her hip, the little friction there giving me tantalizing jolts of pleasure.

I replaced my thigh with the palm of my hand, grinding against her arousal. I pressed my lips against hers. She bit my lower lip and kissed back, until she couldn't hold in her cries anymore and threw her head back, thrusting against my fingers.

“*Fuck.*” I could barely contain myself, she looked so fucking hot and desperate in the dim light of the small underground room.

Her eyes snapped open, catching herself in a moan, and met mine. “Fuck me.”

“You sure? You’re ready?”

“I’m ready.” Her voice had urgency. She fumbled in her discarded bag and flicked a wrapped condom at me, which narrowly missed my head, and both of us giggled.

“Over here.” I directed her to sit on the edge of the raised stage while I pulled on the condom, then flicked at her nipples and scratched lightly at her inner thighs until she was biting her lip, dripping onto the stage and begging for me to enter her.

She practically reached out and pulled me towards her by the cock. I steadied myself on her hips and thrust into her. “Fuck fuck *fuck*.” She felt amazing. As always, it was going to take a mental effort to not let go and empty myself into her right now. She squeezed tightly around my cock with her muscles, pulling me further in, and moaned as I thrust deeply into her, grunting as I tried to hold at bay the part of me that just wanted to take my pleasure now, now *now*.

But there was a larger part of me that was concerned about her pleasure, too. So I held off, though each painfully blissful stroke and pump spiraled me closer and closer to sweet, delicious oblivion. And if I opened my eyes long enough to see her writhing and contorting in pleasure beneath me, her big dark eyes fluttering open to meet my own, I was going to come.

I pressed a kiss onto her mouth, her neck, her chest. I lightly bit her nipple, and she cried out, scraping her fingernails down the skin of my back and clenching around me, holding me, supporting me in a way I’d never felt before.

Then she let out a string of quick, high-pitched moans that descended into a longer, deeper moan and the orgasm rocked through her insides, taking me along for the ride. I groaned and emptied myself inside her, grunting as her thighs spasmed around my hips, squeezing everything that I had and taking it for her very own.

Everything with Luna felt so perfect and natural: even when we handed the key back in and ran out into the street cackling like two teenagers once more, joking about Apollo and attempting to hail a cab to take us to a bed somewhere, anywhere, at my apartment or hers.

LUNA



It was hard not to think about my own pregnancy while going undercover to retrieve DNA samples of Apollo Brock and Priscilla Lamb.

I thought about Apollo's descriptions of the four Brock mothers: the reclusive genius behind a lot of *Brock Technology's* code methodology, the hippie couple who'd invited Emory in to share a sexual experience, the mother who'd purposefully conceived to try and extort money, and Sylvester's mom, who had feared that one day Emory would come for her children and had gone to great lengths to cover up the fact that she had birthed twins.

Which of these mothers did I most want to be like to my own kid? Sylvester's, I supposed. Although being a reclusive genius did sound quite nice, my dad already had that role in our family. No, I wanted to protect my child. I wasn't quite sure who from, just yet. From Sylvester? From Apollo? From the whole media circus that followed the Brock lineage around?

It was easy to get a DNA sample from Apollo. However, trying to catch another glimpse of the person I thought was disappeared recording artist Priscilla Lamb proved difficult. This meant that I had to schedule a *lot* of meetings with

Apollo. These left me so exhausted that Sylvester and I weren't able to make much progress with his own book.

I was surprised to find myself missing him. I shouldn't have been surprised. Things between Sylvester and me had been getting quite hot and heavy, as well as emotional, in turns.

Meanwhile, the film director, Eli Robinson, was plaguing me with messages through all kinds of media. I had voicemails, texts, emails, letters... I wouldn't have been surprised if a missive had showed up via carrier pigeon.

While I was somewhat flattered, despite not being interested in soundtrack work, I also really didn't have time to fend off the continued communication by the film director.

Deep in my heart, I wondered: *what on earth does she see in my music that makes her so desperate to use it for her film?*

I knew that I liked my music, but I had long resigned that I would ever find many others who agreed with me. Likely I was biased, since I was myself. For so long now it had just been a hobby, albeit one that I already had a failed career in, which had always loaded it with difficult feelings. I had persisted, nonetheless, but I could only sing and make music as long as it was *strictly* a hobby.

This offer of a film soundtrack was like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gave me some validation that my music was decent. But on the other, it told me that my music wasn't good enough to stand on its own, only as a soundtrack to something else, something *better*. It was like a reminder that I was good, but not good enough. That's the message I'd been receiving for decades now, loud and clear, and I was tired of it.

Frankly, I felt I'd rather be terrible at something than be almost-but-not-quite-good enough at it. At least being terrible at something, you didn't have hopes and dreams, aspirations and expectations. At least the disappointment was with you all along, rather than coming heaping down in one big crushing mass.

Eli's messages were needling at me. Each time one hit my inbox, or my voicemail, it flashed into my brain: *not quite good enough*.

Plus, the way that Eli Robinson had gotten my music in the first place was still bugging me. Had Sylvester put it on that memory stick by accident, or had he thought misguidedly he was making a gesture towards me? If the latter, I would be furious at him for thinking that could ever make up for how he'd skewered my career. As it was, I existed in state of Schrodinger's fury about the whole thing – I wasn't sure whether or not to be furious about it, so I was instead just confused whenever it resurfaced in my brain.

Really what I needed was to ask Sylvester, but the question would open up more questions from Sylvester than it would answer for me. I didn't want to talk any more with him about how I'd been a failure, about how he'd abandoned me 'to protect' me, about how he was a martyr and I was just the collateral, or whatever it was.

So I blocked all the Eli Robinsons that I could, and tried to focus my mind on the task I'd been given by Sylvester: prove a link between Priscilla Lamb and Apollo Brock.

Luckily, I was to have my chance soon. At yet another meeting of Apollo's, I caught sight of Priscilla when I excused myself to the bathroom during a meeting in his office. I had to do this a lot more frequently than usual due to the progress of

my pregnancy, and it provided me with a good opportunity to scope out potential sightings of Priscilla.

On this occasion, it was handed to me perfectly. When I walked in, she was at the mirror, holding a tissue in one hand and a lipstick in the other. It appeared she was touching up her make-up.

I stood stock still in the doorway, surprised and unsure what to do next. She turned to see me and gave me one of those iconic smiles, which left me with no doubt this was definitely, *definitely* Priscilla Lamb. She was older, of course, but there were some things you can't fake, and that iconic smile was one of them.

I forced my legs to move into one of the little bathroom cubicles. Inside, I stood there holding my breath and listening out. She was holding a tissue and perfecting her lipstick – this was the perfect opportunity to get a DNA sample.

A sound of the tap running, and then high-heeled footsteps in the direction of the exit. A scuffle as she dropped the tissue in the swing-bin. Then, the door closing behind her on her way out.

I barreled out of the cubicle and made a beeline for the garbage can. I didn't want to fish my hand in through the swing lid so I removed the entire thing. There, sitting atop a pile of other tissues and likely unsanitary things, was a white tissue marked with the signature deep purple of Priscilla Lamb's lipstick.

Hunching over the bin, in case there was hidden CCTV in the bathroom, I used the tongs and small glass jar Sylvester had provided me for the DNA samples to swipe the tissue out of the bin and secure it in my possession.

Now to see if the tests came up with anything interesting.

SYLVESTER



“*H*ave you opened them?” Luna burst in through my office door.

I was hunched over my computer on the far end of the room. By ‘them’, she meant the results from Apollo and Priscilla’s DNA tests. I’d texted Luna as soon as they’d dropped into my inbox, and she’d gotten here in record time. “No, I was too nervous. I waited for you.”

“Come on, then, let’s look.”

Luna was impatient, but then again, she had been formidable enough to be able to get samples of both Apollo and his suspected mother without being caught. It was impressive. She’d always been impressive to me, of course.

With Luna leaning over my shoulder, I opened my inbox and double-clicked the email, the subject which read: *Test results for Sunny Badger and Prissy Sheep*.

Oh yeah, we’d given them codenames, just in case. Sunny Badger and Prissy Sheep had given us quite the giggle when sending off the DNA samples to the laboratory.

The words popped up, comically big across my full screen:

Prissy Sheep was not a maternal match for Sunny Badger.

“Damn.” My heart sunk. I’d been so hoping that we’d found something useful here.

Luna felt similarly. She pushed herself off the back of my office chair and paced over to the large window. “Ugh.”

“Yeah, I feel you. Still, there’s got to be something behind the Priscilla Lamb thing. I have faith that you’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Luna turned to face me. “Your leads didn’t turn up anything?”

“Nada. Whatever the reason Priscilla Lamb disappeared, she’s done a good job of it. And I can’t find any connection between her and Apollo – or more likely Emory, since she vanished before Apollo was born, cross-referencing the dates.”

“Hmm.” Luna looked back out of the window. “I don’t have any more theories. But I will do some more digging.”

“That’s the spirit.” I flashed her a cheesy grin intended to lift her spirits.

She rolled her eyes, which indicated to someone who knew her well that her spirits had indeed been lifted, just a little.

I had something else in store for her, as well – a surprise. “Now that you’re here... how do you feel about reuniting with *Needlehead* later today?”

Her mouth actually dropped open. Then she caught herself, smirked, and wisecracked: “Why, are they coming to finally murder you, after all these years?”

“Ha ha.” It wouldn’t have been unlikely if one of ‘em had decided to kill me, all those years ago. But it would have been Reed, the most strongly principled of all of them, and he’d have murdered me in some kind of ‘fuck-you’ symbolism to

the music industry. I hoped he wasn't planning on doing that at our reunion gig – if the rest of the guys agreed to it. “No, we're discussing a reunion concert.”

“Seriously? You think Reed's gonna agree to that? I'm surprised you even managed to get him to come to a meeting. Come to think of it, he's probably gonna no-show.”

I wagged my finger. “You underestimate the power of my charisma, Luna Black. Reed has RSVP'd definitely, and he's going to be trying to convince the others along with me to put on a reunion concert.”

“Sure, your charm is quite something. But Reed, really? He hates your guts. Hated your guts.”

I nodded. “Yeah, he did. Maybe he still does. But I managed to get him to agree to meet with me. Wanna know what swung him in my favor just slightly?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“I mentioned that you and I were on better terms these days. He was always a fan of yours, all of the fellas were. And I think they'd really like to see you.”

Luna narrowed her eyes at me. “You're inviting me along so that my presence will convince them to do the concert? Out of, what, nostalgia?”

Err, guilty as charged. That was *one* of my motivations, yes, but it wasn't the main one. “Okay, I'd be lying if I didn't say partially yes. But mainly, I think they'd just really like to see you. They sounded excited when I mentioned the idea. And if you've not seen them for a long time, either, I thought it'd be nice for you to reunite with the members of *Needlehead* who *hadn't* fucked you over. What do you think?”

She shook her head, but I could tell I'd won her over, too, at least slightly. "Fine. But if they ask me what I think of you, I'm gonna tell them I still think you're a piece of shit. Just in case you're bringing me there to manipulate them."

I grinned. That was such a Luna answer. "Fine by me. I'm sure they'll most happily agree with you on that count."

* * *

I'D BOOKED a large practice room for the reunion with the band, plus Luna. It seemed appropriate. Plus, I made sure it had a drum kit and a few spare instruments in case we got along well enough that we wanted to celebrate with a quick practice, see how much we still knew or had forgotten.

I nervously sat in a chair in the middle of the room, feeling a little lost. Unlike usual, I didn't really have anything planned to say to the guys. What I'd learned from reuniting with Luna and Reed was that the people I really cared about didn't really want anything flashy or rehearsed from me. All they wanted, apparently, was honesty, and to be let into my life.

I was glad when Reed turned up first. He took one look at my face and howled with laughter. "You look like you're gonna shit yerself. Or have you already?"

"Ha ha." I smirked. "I'm nervous. Sue me."

"If I was gonna sue you, I'd be loaded by now. Not my style."

Reed's inane – and occasionally very intelligent – banter eased the edge from some of my anxiety. So by the time the rest of the band members arrived all at once, in a little wary huddle, some of the tension had left my shoulders.

We made polite greetings, but the room was still tense and uncertain.

Then the door opened and Luna stepped through, peering around almost comedically. She was met by a total onslaught of greeting from the guys. The air was filled with cries of “Luna!” and “Lulu!” and “Loopy Loop!” amongst other nonsensical nicknames that I didn’t even remember the origins of.

Luna grinned and waved around, fist bumping each of them, then allowing herself to be pulled into a huddle of sweaty rock men. I hung back, letting her have her moment with them.

And the tension in the room had disappeared.

LUNA



I was spending an increasing amount of time reading conspiracy theories online about Priscilla Lamb's disappearance, hoping for some small clue that would unravel the whole thing for me, while listening to her entire discography of music in the background.

But I wasn't really a detective. I was a writer, professionally, and a musician, as a hobbyist. I didn't really know what I was looking for. A link to Emory Brock would have been the most helpful.

I investigated everyone she was known to associate with at that period of her life, and none of them had links to Emory either.

Due to this burning curiosity, I was still somewhat overworking myself, splitting my time evenly between Apollo and Sylvester.

Apollo's sessions for his second memoir had become even more rambling and chaotic. Any attempts I made to steer the conversation were met with a monologue even less on the topic than his original rant, so I stopped asking questions.

I was worried he had sensed a change in my demeanor – that I was now more invested, somehow, in uncovering things about Apollo than I had been during our first book. Hopefully,

if he had noticed that, he could chalk it up to the pressure of success following how well-received our first collaboration had been in the book charts.

During one such session, a long monologue comparing the various failings of his brothers, during which he was assigning ratings to various qualities of theirs – ‘ugliness’, ‘stupidness’, ‘boringness’ – in an effort to produce a ranking of which of the four of them was the worst, we were interrupted by a knock on the door. *Praise whoever is at that door.*

Apollo stood up, seeing who was there. This was odd, since he would usually lazily yell, “Come in!” and stay seated, barely paying attention to his visitor at all. I instinctively swiveled around to see who it could be.

Of course, it was Priscilla Lamb at the door. She was black and sequined, as usual, but this time in a jumpsuit that fitted tightly around her bust then flared out into the pant legs. Her black hair was artfully curled around her ears and shoulders. She smiled at Apollo, and then at me, with that iconic purple semi-circle of her mouth.

Apollo headed towards her, not looking at me. “Wait here for one moment. I just need to speak to my... visitor.”

Had he been about to say ‘mother’? Surely not... the tests came back negative.

Out loud, I made it sound like no big deal. “Sure, no worries.”

The door closed behind the two of them. Without really thinking about what I was doing, I stood up and crossed the room, taking my recording device with me. As quietly as possible, I opened the door an inch, so I could look and

hopefully hear outside. I'd claim I was needing to use the ladies room if anyone caught me.

I spotted them both. They'd moved further down the hallway, and Apollo was facing away from me, but I could catch snatches of what they were saying. Maybe the recording device would be sensitive enough to pick up more than I could hear with my ears, if I could stay quiet and still. I stuck it out through the gap in the door, and listened as hard as I could.

Apollo sounded exasperated. "*I don't think that's a good idea...Mother, you keep saying...shouldn't make hasty decisions here...*"

I couldn't piece it together, exactly, but I'd *definitely* heard the word 'Mother'.

Priscilla laughed a lot, and threw her hair over her shoulders like she had in the old music videos of hers I'd been watching. "*My darling boy...trust your Mother, hmm?...like the good old days...knows best, and I always do...*"

Then Priscilla's eyes strayed over her son's shoulder to meet the one eye I was using to peer out through the door, and I felt an electric jolt of fear run through me. I quickly, quietly, closed the door and took my seat again, placing the recording device back on the table, wondering what it had heard.

I waited, convinced I was done for, until Apollo returned back.

He entered through the door, grumbling incoherently under his breath. His attention wasn't on me at all, which was a good sign. He sat down heavily in his chair. "Apologies for the interruption. I find myself sadly not in the mood to continue with our memoir anymore today."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't, so I stood up. "Um, that's no problem. I hope everything's alright... And we can reschedule for another day, no problemo."

No problem. I was clearly nervous. I hoped he was distracted enough not to notice. I picked up the recording device, turned it off, and departed as quickly as I could. My pulse was racing and I was keen to make my rapid exit from the building, to the outside where I could breathe easily.

But as I was being escorted by a member of Apollo's security, a hand reached out from a doorway and grasped my shoulder. I cried out a sound of surprise, something like, *aaahh!* The security guard and I spun around at the same time. Seeing who it was, the guard nodded and departed, leaving me at the end of one arm of Priscilla Lamb.

She retracted her right-hand claw, nails glittering purple and extended in the dim red light of the corridors. She smiled, that iconic smile again. It held no hint of malice, but it wouldn't – it was her signature smile, perfected over decades of music. Apollo wasn't the greatest actor, could never hide his moods when he was in them. But Priscilla, on the other hand, radiated artifice.

Then, with one of those purple fingernails, she beckoned to me, and backed off into the room behind her.

As if entranced, I followed.

The door shut behind me, and we were almost in darkness.

"Luna Black." Her voice came, sultry and purring. "I've had my eye on you."

I cleared my throat. "I've seen."

"Do you know who I am, Luna Black?"

I couldn't decide whether to admit it. I suppose knowing that she was a famous recording artist was slightly less suspicious than trying to figure out if she was Apollo's mother, so I went for it. "You're... Priscilla Lamb. Right?"

A laugh of delight erupted from Priscilla's vocal chords. "Why yes, dear! I can tell I'm in the presence of a real music buff. You know, no one has recognized me as long as I've been in this building?"

Did that mean... she had been in this office building for over *thirty years*? It didn't bear thinking about.

Out loud, I decided to go with flattery. "You're iconic. I knew who you were straight away."

"I've done some digging into you, too, Luna Black. It seems you're quite the musician yourself. Though it seems your ambitions were crushed rather early, getting dropped from your boyfriend's tour and then dropped by your record label, hmm?"

It stung to hear it told to me by a stranger. That conversation normally only happened inside my own head. "Yes."

Somewhere in the room, a light switch was flipped. One by one, dim lights lit up all across the room. It was vast, vaster than Apollo's own office. As the lights came on over a mixing desk and a glass-paneled box in the far end of the room, I realized this was a recording studio.

I couldn't hold in my amazement. It was genuine. "Woah."

Priscilla, lit up dramatically from the side, nodded in appreciation, that silky smile still across her lips. "It's a shame about your career. So much promise..."

I looked away. Stupid tears had stung to my eyes, and I wasn't interested in letting anyone see them.

“You know what would reinvigorate anyone's music career, however dead?” She paused, but didn't wait for me to respond before continuing. “A duet with an icon of rock and pop who hasn't been seen for over three decades. That'd certainly get people talking.”

I looked at her and laughed. It was a bitter laugh, and in reality I was choking back sudden tears, but it really was a ludicrous thing for her to say. “Is that what you want from me? A duet?”

“Maybe. It gets boring in here with just my own voice, my own instruments. I'm not saying *let's release a single* just yet. But maybe you'd like to have a little... sing-song with me before you go. Unless you have somewhere to be?”

I didn't really have anywhere to be. And as much as I was repelled by this whole Apollo-Priscilla situation, a musician doesn't pass up a chance to sing with an icon of the seventies and eighties. Especially one who vanished mysteriously many years ago and hasn't been sighted until now.

And so, I nodded. “Yeah, okay. I'm not as good as you, though.”

“I'm sure you're better than Apollo.” Priscilla winked, and walked over to the mixing desk, gesturing for me to enter the recording booth.

I did as she said. I almost expected the doors to seal around me and the glass box to start filling with water and sharks or something. Every instinct of mine was screaming at me to get out, with the exception of my curiosity, which had forced me to stay.

But there was no water, no sharks. Just Priscilla Lamb, a predator in her own right, I supposed, with her shark claws and twinkling eyes. She joined me in the booth with her guitar. “I’ll play. You sing harmonies. Okay?”

I nodded, not quite sure that this was really happening and not some really bizarre dream.

“One of mine, first. Do you know it?” She played the opening bars of *String Man*, one of her hits from the early seventies.

“Yeah, I do.” I think I knew the words to all her songs by now, so often had I been playing them over and over again while searching rabidly for intel on her online.

She looked delighted. “Excellent. Let’s go.”

She played, and we sung. It took me a verse to get the harmony right, but I’d always enjoyed singing harmonies, and when I got there, our voices sounded positively *good* together. Her rich, deep tones, with my airy light harmony.

When the song finished, Priscilla clapped with so much genuine joy and delight in her face that I warmed to her, and clapped along.

“That was marvelous.” She clutched her chest, looking off into the middle distance like she was reminiscing about a past live performance. How long had it been just her in this recording studio? Not three decades, surely? “Now. One of yours?”

I stammered a bit. I hadn’t been expecting that. “You... you know one of mine?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t be fair if we sung all of mine, now, would it?”

Legendary recording artist Priscilla Lamb had, for some reason, learned one of my songs and invited me here to sing it with her. I was now fully convinced I was hallucinating. Maybe Priscilla had in fact filled the booth with water and sharks and piranhas and such, and I'd passed out while drowning into this weird fantasy land where she was starting to play the opening bars of *my song*.

She stopped. "Oh, you take the lead on this one, of course. I'll harmonize."

I blinked and nodded, stupefied. But as she started up again on the opening bars of my song, I felt the peace settle upon me that always did when one of my songs was played. Usually, it was me playing it. But it was a nice experience to not have to think about the guitar, to instead just get ready to sing the vocal part, to be able to focus all my attention on just one instrument: my voice.

I sung. And Priscilla played. And Priscilla sung, too, heart-wrenching harmonies that blended perfectly and contrasted perfectly with my usual vocals to the song. It gave it even more resonance than it usually did. This was a song close to my heart, about the loss of my mother, though it used enough metaphors that it wasn't so obviously schmaltzy.

At last, my vocals finished, and it only remained for Priscilla to play out the rest of the song. I found I was shaking, overcome with the situation.

When Priscilla finished, she turned to me and tilted her head to one side. "My dear. Are you crying?"

For some reason, I didn't feel like hiding the fact that I was crying from her. I simply nodded one moment, and the next moment I was being pulled into her warm embrace. Those

long fingernails curled around my shoulders, but in a way that felt warm and protective, and not menacing.

She was nothing like my own mother, who had died young, on the surface. But my mom had been a musician and an artist, and in her own way, she had disappeared mysteriously. One day she had gone climbing in the mountains and hadn't come back.

For years, I'd made up stories about how she was still out there: she'd been picked up by a hot air balloon, she'd fallen through a portal into another dimension, she was living with a secret tribe in the caves.

Eventually I accepted that she was gone, that she was dead. That it was just me and my dad, and that was how it always would be.

Priscilla was nothing at all like my mother. Except, in that moment, letting myself cry in her arms, I felt something oddly comforting – maternal, I suppose – emanating from her. She had me entirely under her spell.

Before I left, she said, as if guessing at what I was thinking: “I won't tell Apollo about this. Don't worry your little head.”

SYLVESTER



*M*y eyes felt like they were gonna pop out of my head. “You sung with her?”

“Yes. Why is that the part you’re focusing in on?” Luna seemed somewhat defensive about the odd circumstances under which she’d ended up singing with a legendary missing recording artist in a recording booth at the topmost floor of my arch nemesis’s office building.

It was, of course, categorically insane that that had happened. For some reason, though, Luna was offended by my perplexed exclamations. I didn’t want to upset her, even if I was confused, so I tried to tone it down. “Okay, sorry for focusing on that part. You wanted to tell me about... the part where you heard Apollo calling Priscilla *mother*?”

Luna nodded, exasperated. “Yes. That’s what I’ve been looking for, isn’t it? A clue for you about the whole... Apollo thing?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. That is quite odd, considering we tested their DNA and it came back as a negative match.”

“Is there a chance there wasn’t enough of her DNA on that tissue?”

I shook my head. “No. It would have come back ‘inconclusive’ if that were the case. No, there was enough there to tell with absolute certainty that those two are not related.”

“Okay, so, if they’re not related by blood... perhaps she’s his adoptive mother?”

Something wasn’t adding up. “I don’t know... are you sure he wasn’t saying, like, *motherfucker*, or saying it in a sarcastic way, y’know?”

Luna shook her head. “No. Apollo’s a lot of things, but he’s hardly subtle. If he was being sarcastic I’m sure I’d have been able to tell. But you can listen in for yourself.” She held up a small device – the same one she used to record our meetings – and pressed play.

There was a muffled scuffling sound for a moment, presumably of Luna snatching the recording device, and then two voices faded in.

Apollo’s irritating, smug voice was first. “*I don’t think that’s a good idea...Mother, you keep saying...shouldn’t make hasty decisions here...*”

And then laughter from a deep, feminine voice, and: “*My darling boy...trust your Mother, hmm?...like the good old days...knows best, and I always do...*”

Luna clicked the recording off. “I hoped the device would have heard more than I did. But that’s about all I heard, too. I don’t know what they were discussing. But they do seem to have some kind of familial relationship.”

I was still staring at the recording device. “You’re a menace with that thing, huh.” My voice was soft and

contemplative. I was thinking over everything, trying to figure out what we were missing.

I wasn't smart enough to put the puzzle pieces together. But if any group of people could, it would be my brothers – the Brocks that weren't my nemeses.

I met Luna's eyes. "Can you send me that recording? Is it okay if I take it to my brothers to see if they have any idea? I think it's time we bring them into the fold."

"Sure. Can I come?"

"I don't see why not. In fact, I'll summon them here."

I was kind of making a habit of summoning my brothers to my office, these days, but I'd never claimed to be a low-maintenance relation. And when they'd heard Luna's story, and about the DNA test results, and finally listened to the recording for themselves, none of them would dispute that it was a puzzle that merited summoning them.

Jude's arms were folded. He was staring at the recording device like it was some kind of alien artefact. "Something definitely is fishy, here."

"Yeah, this is... odd." Winston delicately snatched the recording device and held it up to his ear, pressing play.

Luna gave him one of her brilliant glares. "You won't hear anything else. I've listened to it through top-of-the-range sound equipment. I've deconstructed the audio. Nothing else can be heard." She really was unintimidated by wealth. I supposed that's why she'd made a good memoirist for Apollo. He had many other ways to be intimidating, though, as she was now learning.

"This Priscilla Lamb... you say she was famous?" Forest was still stuck on the pop culture reference.

I clapped him on the back. “It’s okay, buddy. I know you’re a bit behind on the cultural front.”

“Shut up.” Forest smirked. “I’m thinking. I think I’ve got something.”

“Go on, share it with the class.” Winston returned the recording device to Luna so he wouldn’t get his head bitten off by her again.

We all quietened to listen. Forest really *was* our brains, at least when it came to this kind of thing.

“Do you three remember there was that odd clause in the will... a Brock relative we could never locate? *Cissy Brock*.”

Jude nodded, his eyes widening. “I do. I’d forgotten the name. It’s been so long. *Cissy Brock*. Good memory, Forest. You reckon Cissy Brock is... Priscilla Lamb?”

Forest shrugged. “It’s the best lead we have so far – both for the identity of Cissy Brock, and for the reason Priscilla Lamb is hanging around at Apollo’s headquarters.”

I vaguely remembered something, but not what the clause in the will had said. “Errrrr, sorry guys, but I don’t remember this clause you’re talking about. Enlighten me?”

Thankfully, Winston nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I hate to say it but I’m with Sylvester.”

“Of course you two don’t remember. Too busy getting your legs over at that time.” Jude grumbled, but it was good-natured.

Forest had it almost memorized, of course. “It was something along the lines of... *in the event one of the Brock heirs is found out to not be a true biological son of Emory*

Brock, his portion of the inheritance shall be instead designated to Cissy Brock.”

It was kind of coming back to me. “Right, right... and we had to take those DNA tests. Which we all passed, by the way, including Apollo.”

Forest shrugged. “Yeah, but it could easily have been faked. No one in charge of Emory’s estate could find a Cissy Brock who might ever contest the will, so it wasn’t exactly as if the stakes were high.”

I looked over at Luna. She was practically vibrating with excitement. I grinned, and addressed the brothers. “Let’s give some applause to my companion Luna Black, who deserves credit for this very fascinating Apollo discovery.”

The brothers applauded, some in a slightly sarcastic manner. They were likely still sore about the memoir, and, fair enough. Luna practically blushed all the same, not that it was visible through her pale foundation. But she looked away, and I knew she was embarrassed at the sudden acclaim.

“Alright, but what now?” Winston was a man of action. Well, a kind of lazy man of action.

Jude had an idea brewing already. “I suggest we do our own DNA test. We know Apollo isn’t Priscilla Lamb’s biological son. Now it’s time to find out if he was really Emory Brock’s.”

“Yeah, but... why? We can’t exactly contest the will decades later. We’d get laughed out of court. Plus the business is basically unrecognizable from what Apollo inherited.”

“Yeah, but there’s some kind of mystery here. Don’t you want to find out more?” Forest looked excited at the prospect.

Luna, too, was quietly thrilled. “I’m with Forest.”

“Alright, fine. But you might not be so happy when you realize you’re going to have to get his DNA again... time to schedule yet another meeting with Apollo, *Ms. Black...*”

Luna recoiled at my impression of Apollo, and I grinned. “Alright, Brock Brothers Book Club, roll up your sleeves and let’s get some DNA...”

* * *

THE *NEEDLEHEAD* REUNION rehearsals were going well, and we’d finally come to a stage at which we had to decide whether to proceed with a concert.

I posed the question to the group, and looked around at them. There was an odd and mischievous expression on all of their faces.

Reed stood up, spokesman for the common man. “We, the collected non-Sylvester members of *Needlehead*, have only one condition for agreeing to the reunion gig.”

“Go on. I’m listening. You have me at your mercy.”

Our drummer, Pete, spoke up. “We want Luna to support.”

I beamed. “I’m on board with that. Of course I am. She’ll be thrilled to be asked, deep down. I’m not sure she’ll agree... but it’s gonna be better coming from you than from me. Can I call her here to ask her?”

The suggestion was met with whoops and hollers. The band wanted to make things up with Luna almost as much as I did – maybe exactly as much. I’d lost a girlfriend, and they’d lost a best friend.

Sylvester: *Hey, are you free?*

Luna: *Err, I could be. What for?*

Sylvester: *I'm at band rehearsal. The guys wanna see you. Come by?*

Luna: *Sure. If the guys want to see me. Send the address*

I slid my phone away and announced to the boys: “She’s on her way.”

They immediately started putting their heads together, trying to figure out the best way of asking her, with the most likelihood of her saying *yes*.

By the time she arrived, they had planned a surprise. As soon as she walked in through the door, the three of them launched into a loud cacophony. Pete played a beat on the drums. Reed was doing a guitar solo that wasn’t a solo and didn’t fit with the drums or with Mark, who it turned out had a newfound passion for rap.

He rapped for a long time about the band’s history with Luna, and how it was a great shame that they hadn’t toured together, and would she now join us for our reunion gig?

By the time the godawful song ended, I was shaking my head, but also biting back a grin, waiting to see what Luna’s reaction was before I could relax.

“That was awful. Really, really terrible. Like a much worse *Limp Bizkit*.” Luna grinned, and I could see she was genuinely happy. “How could I say no?”

LUNA



*M*y dad called me the morning after I'd received the news about the *Needlehead* reunion concert, and I had plenty to update him on. He was silently happy to hear that I'd accepted the gig, despite my reservations of how things had gone down with *Needlehead* in the past.

My dad had been disappointed alongside me when it had all happened. He'd composed at least five songs around that time that were full of the doom and heartbreak I was feeling. He had an unusual way of showing it, but I always felt supported and understood by my dad, even if he didn't do the traditional parental supportive things like pep talks or advice or emotional conversations.

He'd always just accepted me how I was, and I was grateful that I'd not had tons of expectation on me like some of my schoolmates had. Instead, all of the expectation and disappointment had been my own. Maybe that was worse, in a way, but I'd never fault my dad for it.

After updating him on the *Needlehead* concert, I remembered the other news that he might be interested in. "Oh, and this film director accidentally got hold of some of my songs and has been messaging me frantically, daily, to try

and get me to lend my music to her upcoming film. Eli Robinson, I think her name was, I've not heard of her, anyway. She won't move forwards with the film until she's found the right music, and apparently, the right music is *mine*."

My dad made a noise on the other end of the line. "Eli Robinson?"

"Yeah, you've heard of her?"

To my amazement, he spoke again, in full words. "*Bridge of Unease, Indigo Street, Three Women and a Squat...*"

It took me a moment to realize he was listing off film titles. Films by, apparently, Eli Robinson, the woman who had been begging me for weeks to let her use my music.

The fact that my dad, who rarely spoke or showed any interest in speaking, was listing off all of the titles of her films told me two things: one, that this woman was quite famous, and two, that my dad was really, really into her films.

He was still listing titles. I let him finish, pleased to hear his voice other than the *hello* at the start and *goodbye* at the end of a call.

"You really like this director? You think I should do it?"

"Yes. Yes yes *yes!*" He sounded excited.

I was amazed. "Okay, sure, dad. For you. Anything. I'll meet with Eli, hear what she has to say."

After the call had ended, I did something I should have done a while back: searched Eli Robinson's name.

I then realized what a colossal mistake I'd almost made. The entire first page of search results, besides links to Eli's website, Wikipedia entry, and impressive IMDB resume, were articles like '*Top 10 Contemporary Film Directors*', '*How Eli*

Robinson Single-Handedly Revolutionized and Popularized the World of Avant Garde Film and *'Eli Robinson's Record Breaking Award Wins'*.

Oh, so she was like... a *big deal*.

I unblocked Eli's number and sent her a single text.

Luna: *Okay, I'm willing to talk.*

I immediately received a response.

Eli: *GREAT. WHEN R U FREE*

I laughed at her caps-lock text style, and sent her a list of dates, checking my calendar. Of course, if something came up with one of my clients short-term, I'd need to postpone things with Eli. It seemed like she was keen enough she'd wait.

* * *

THE BROCK BROTHERS were still waiting on the sibling test results to come back, and I was obliged to keep up appearances with Apollo. Therefore I found myself at yet another meeting for his second memoir, which seemed to be dragging on far longer than his first had.

The material I had for his second book was plentiful but increasingly worthless. He'd resisted all of my attempts to steer him in any direction, and mainly was going off on wild tangents about, for example, how stupid Sylvester's hair was, or how much he hated Forest's glasses. While it was hard to disagree with the stupidity of Sylvester's hair, this wouldn't make for great reading material compared to the explosive claims of his first memoir, which I was increasingly beginning to realize had been a fluke.

As I sat once more in his office across from him, listening to him describe in great detail a chandelier that Emory Brock had in one of his mansions, a switch flicked in me. I'd finally had enough.

"Apollo." I'd interrupted him, so he went silent and stared at me. "Sorry to interrupt... it's just I'm not sure we're really getting to the heart of your story, here. You said you'd think about telling some more personal stories... such as your own family history. Did you think about it?"

Apollo remained silent, glaring across the table at me.

I figured this was just his usual sullenness, almost teenage-like for such a... grown man. So I continued. "For example... how was your upbringing? What was your family like? Your... mother, for example?"

Apollo muttered something under his breath. I couldn't quite tell what it was. But it almost sounded like: "*Always about my Mother...*"

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

Apollo's eyes flashed in my direction, and he pushed his chair back from the desk, abruptly standing up. "Alright, that's quite enough for today. Once again, I seem to have lost my train of thought. I'll be calling upon you again soon, I'm sure, Ms. Black. Security will see you out, as usual."

Jostled down the hallway by one of Apollo's security guards, I realized I was getting at something of a sore spot for Apollo.

Then, the security guard melted away, leaving me suddenly stranded in the building alone. I was rarely alone, except when visiting the ladies room. Then I realized I was not alone. The eyes of Priscilla Lamb were shining towards me out

of the darkness of her recording studio, beckoning me without needing to gesture.

I followed her into the room, and the door closed behind us. Once more, we were in almost complete darkness. Priscilla was just a silhouette with glittering eyes and glimmering nails, sharp.

Her voice came out accusatorily. “You’re poking around.”

“I’m... poking around?”

“Yes. In my son’s head. Trying to prod out things about his upbringing. His family. Why?”

I realized with a cold chill that she’d somehow been listening in. There was no way Apollo had had time to talk to her in the few seconds between being escorted out of his office and beckoned into Priscilla’s.

What’s more, she had called him *my son*.

“I’m writing his memoir. That’s part of my job.”

“Hmm. I suppose that makes sense.” Priscilla walked around, her heels clacking slowly and thoughtfully on the tiles. “Then I’ll ask you as a friend. Stay away from the subject of Apollo’s upbringing. His family. If you know what’s good for you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Was she giving me a friendly warning not to get on Apollo’s bad side? Or was she threatening me on her own behalf to stay away from the topic?

“I’ll see you again soon, Luna Black.”

She walked up to me until she was so close I was forced to back away. She kept walking, and I kept backing away, until I was practically falling into the arms of the security guard waiting outside Priscilla’s door to escort me out of reception.

Outside in the chill of the clouded-over day, I felt an odd combination of feelings rising up. Maybe it was the hormones making me crazy, but I felt so many things at once I felt like I was going to explode from it all. I felt lonely, scared, disappointed, excited... it was too much. There was a pounding in my head and my stomach that felt like a chant – that spurred me on to do something I didn't think I would do.

I burst into Sylvester's office, uninvited, as I had taken to doing. Except this day I burst out into tears, and the words that burst out of me were: "Priscilla Lamb knows I'm onto her. And I'm pregnant, Sylvester. I'm pregnant with your child."

SYLVESTER



*T*he words no uncommitted man of any age wants to hear: “*I’m pregnant with your child.*”

The scary thing was... I didn’t really mind.

Luna was staring at me. Some kind of shock had halted the flow of her tears. She managed to force out a sentence after a few moments. “Why are you – why are you smiling, Sylvester?”

I shrugged. Was I? Was I smiling? “I don’t know.” I grinned. Oh yeah, I was smiling. “Well, what did you want me to do? Cry?”

She seemed close to being lost for words. “I mean, I don’t know... smiling just seems like the worst reaction, somehow.”

I didn’t really understand her reaction to *my* reaction at all. I tried to explain why I was fine with the news – which was difficult when I didn’t know why she thought I shouldn’t be. “So you’re pregnant with my kid. I take it you’re telling me because you want to keep it. Then, why the hell not? Your good genes will balance out my awful Brock ones, probably. The kid’ll be a gifted musician. What’s your problem, then?”

This seemed to only shock Luna further. “Sylvester!”

“What?” I really didn’t get what was happening here.

She threw up her arms and started pacing, occasionally glancing over at me then looking pointedly away. “How can you – how can you treat this so lightheartedly? I don’t even know what we’re doing, I don’t even know if we’re in a relationship, or if you love me, or what... and you’re absolutely fine with the fact that I’m carrying your future son or daughter inside my body? Right now?”

I held up my hands. “Alright, alright, no need to make it sound like a David Cronenberg film. I understand that you seem to be having some conflicted feelings about the knowledge of your pregnancy, yourself.”

She waved a threatening finger at me. “Don’t go all therapist on me, Sylvester...”

I tried a charming grin. “I’m happy to discuss your feelings, if you want. But so far you seem to be furious that I dare smile. You’d have been less bothered if I’d... abandoned you forever, or cast you into the fires of Mount Doom or something, wouldn’t you?”

Luna’s face registered a little flicker – either at my Tolkien joke, or at the knowledge that she was, maybe, projecting her feelings just a little onto me. Then she settled back into that grim intensity. “What exactly are you thinking that’s making you... smile? I don’t get it.”

I laughed in incredulity. “I don’t know. It’s nice, isn’t it, babies being born? Babies are cute, they’re fun... and I care a lot about you, I love you, Luna, so it’s just nice to know that the world is gonna have another one of you, I guess. Does it really need to be that complicated?”

Luna had gone even paler than I’d thought was possible for her, which was very pale indeed. “Did you just say you loved me?”

I folded my arms in challenge. “Yeah. Yeah, I did! Are you gonna have some objection to the concept of ‘love’, now, as well as the act of ‘smiling’?”

She shook her head, growing a little quieter. “No. No! It’s not that. It’s just that you throw this all about so easily. If it’s that easy to accept that I’m pregnant, tell me that you love me so casually, was it that easy to cast me off? And will you do it again without a second thought?”

I watched as she looked down at her feet. I couldn’t believe after everything she still thought that I somehow had thought so little of her that leaving her hadn’t been the most painful thing I’d ever have to do. Was her self-worth that low? Or her estimation of me?

“Luna. Please. It’s easy to love you because it comes so naturally to me. It always has. It was hard, harder than I could ever have imagined, forcibly parting from you all those years ago. That was hard because it was unnatural. Because I didn’t want it.”

She glanced up, trying to discern what I meant. “You want... me? You want... the baby?”

“Like, I think there needs to be a bit more of a discussion about what ‘wanting the baby’ actually entails, because it’s quite a bit more complex than that. But, abstractly, yes. I want you. I want the baby. God, Luna, how could you even think I wouldn’t?”

“Because you never say. You’re so easygoing about everything. It’s natural to you, but nothing comes that naturally to me. I feel like I’m wrestling with my feelings *all the time*, whether it’s good or bad. I’ve second-guessed everything I’ve ever done.”

“Maybe I never say. But you never ask, either. It takes two to tango, Luna.”

She looked absolutely frazzled. “I need to go and think. And have a lie down, probably.”

I didn’t want her to leave. But she really did look like she needed a rest. I was jittery, too. The news was bouncing around my brain like a hyperactive puppy, and I couldn’t seem to settle on exactly how I felt about the whole thing, except: *wow!*

I held up my hand as she turned around to leave. There was something else Luna had said before blurting out about the pregnancy. “Luna. Before you go. Priscilla knows that you’re onto her? What does that mean? Has she threatened you?”

Luna stopped, seemingly only just remembered that aspect too. “I don’t know. No. Not really. It was more of a threat ‘if’ I were to keep prodding Apollo to open up about his family history.”

“I don’t like it. I’m worried about your safety. Will you wait a few minutes while I organize a security team to-“

“No! No, I’m sorry, I just need to... I just need to go before I say anything else without really thinking it through...”

I kind of nodded, uselessly, and stood watching as Luna’s quick footsteps made their way to the exit.

I sat down at my desk, the news still sinking in. I was going to be a father. To Luna’s child. Why wasn’t I worried, or scared, or... any of the things my brothers had been upon finding out they’d accidentally brought another Brock into the world?

I meant what I'd said to Luna, about how it was nice that there would be another mini-Luna in the world – I'd thought it best not to mention a mini-Sylvester just yet, lest she fully lose her mind. There was maybe also a part of me that glowed with a secret warmth to know that Luna and I were linked together in parenthood. That our possibly misguided sexual activities had formed something greater than our parts – a new life, a little Brock-Black baby. I wasn't sure we'd be going with the double-barrel for the kid's name, if I had a say in it.

Did she want me to have a say in it? She claimed I'd not said anything, but neither had she. Perhaps she wanted to raise the kid on her own. Maybe she wanted to give it up for adoption. She'd not said that she wanted me to be with her, or to parent our child together. She was just as cagey with her feelings as she'd claimed I was. Dumping her and dropping her from the tour had led to her sealing her feelings away so deep inside I wasn't sure even she knew what she felt. But I'd be there when she was ready to talk.

I idly clicked into my emails for a little distraction. I'd completely forgotten we were waiting on the latest set of test results. But there it was in my inbox: *Test results for Sunny Badger, Tree Badger, Beatles Badger, Churchill Badger and Pussycat Badger*. More expert code names for myself and my siblings. Though the Brock brothers had been far less amused by them than Luna and I had when we'd sent off the first set of test results for *Sunny Badger and Prissy Sheep*.

“Sibling test match results:

Pussycat Badger a match for Tree Badger, Beatles Badger, Churchill Badger.

Tree Badger a match for Beatles Badger, Churchill Badger, Pussycat Badger.

Beatles Badger a match for Churchill Badger, Pussycat Badger, Tree Badger.

Churchill Badger a match for Pussycat Badger, Beatles Badger, Tree Badger.

Sunny Badger a match for nil.”

Holy shit. Holy shit.

Apollo wasn't even related to us. He wasn't our brother, or even our half-brother. He was... just some guy. Some guy who'd been terrorizing us for over a decade now.

I forwarded the tests to my actual brothers and sat back in the chair reeling. If Apollo wasn't related to Priscilla Lamb or Emory Brock, then where the hell had he come from? Who was he? And why had Emory thought he was his son – or was this some weird part of Emory's plan, too?

I suspected the only people with the answers to that were Apollo and Priscilla themselves. And since Priscilla had warned Luna off, it seemed unlikely they'd be offering up those answers anytime soon.

My phone buzzed on the table. I expected it to be one of my brothers, but the name lit up was: *Luna Black*.

I frowned, my warning bells ringing. I scrambled to pick it up as quickly as I could. “Luna?”

“Hi, Sylvester.” Her voice sounded odd. Somewhat muted. “I'm headed back to your office.”

“Um, okay, cool. Why?”

“I didn't make it home. My neighbor called me saying there were some people in my apartment tearing the place apart.”

My heart started racing. It could only be Apollo or Priscilla – for whatever reason, they must have now decided Luna was enemy, not friend. I suddenly surged with anger. “How dare he? I’ll go over to his headquarters myself and give him a piece of my mind.”

“Please don’t, Sylvester. I just want us to... figure out what to do, together, okay?”

I took a deep breath. I wanted to smash Apollo’s face in, obviously, but I supposed I’d gone decades without doing that. I could wait a little longer. And Luna was coming here, for safety, to me. Luna, who was pregnant with my child. I exhaled again, trying to calm away the anger and the injustice of Luna being targeted. “Okay. I’m sorry for all of this Luna. I’ll wait for you at my office.”

“Sure. Thanks. I’ll be there soon.”

The line went dead. I held it to my ear for another moment. Since I couldn’t vent my anger upon Apollo, it turned inward.

Had I had *any* positive impact on Luna’s life since re-entering it? I’d accidentally gotten her pregnant, which she didn’t seem thrilled about. I’d gotten her to see the truth about Apollo, which had ended up in a complicating of her best client relationship so far. If I destroyed another career of hers, I wasn’t sure how I’d live with myself.

It had seemed so easy when I approached her at the start. She was in league with Apollo, and therefore she was immoral, just like him. Black and white thinking had been just enough to stave off the guilt about how I’d treated her in the past, but it hadn’t lasted long.

I slid my phone into my pocket and made my way down to reception so I could meet her in and whisk her to the relative

safety of my office.

After pacing restlessly in reception for a minute, I went to stand outside by the drop-off point for taxis, hoping to see her car from a short distance.

Why was I worried? Luna could handle herself.

The thing was, I couldn't deal with myself if anything happened to her.

I hoped to hell she made it back here safely.

LUNA



“No.”

After I’d arrived back at his office, trying to hold it together, Sylvester had suggested finding me somewhere to hide out from Apollo and Priscilla, assuming the raid on their flat had been their announcement that we were no longer on good terms.

Sylvester looked surprised by my sudden firmness. “No? I’d go with you. Felix, too. You wouldn’t be alone.”

Being alone wasn’t really my problem right now. Okay, maybe it was part of it. But I didn’t want to spend god-knows-how-long in some impersonal safehouse. Especially not when I could use the time more wisely.

I took a deep breath and tried to explain my feelings calmly, rather than shutting down. “I appreciate the offer, really. But I don’t want to go to one of your... billionaire retreats in the countryside.”

“I understand your reservations, but where else would we go? I have houses all over the place, and so do my brothers.”

Suddenly, I had it. “I know where we can go. Somewhere I actually don’t mind being stuck for months on end.”

“Where?”

“My dad’s. He’s the sole porter at an empty warehouse in the Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina. There’s no one around for miles. A helicopter comes and brings food and supplies once a week. Besides that, there’s nothing. Besides the occasional lost hiker.”

Sylvester didn’t look convinced. He didn’t look unconvinced, either. “Are there... facilities? Is it comfortable?”

I rolled my eyes. “It might not be up to your usual levels of luxury. But yes. The house my dad gets to stay in rent-free has a bunch of empty bedrooms. It used to be a five-man job until they whittled the role down to only one person. And my dad was the only person antisocial enough to want to take that job alone.”

“You do realize you’re pregnant, right? And we’ll be in the middle of nowhere?”

I hated to admit it, but he had a point. “With all your money and your hundreds of houses... can we just... hire a doctor to come with us?” It was a crazy suggestion. *Hire a doctor*. Who did that? I guess rich people did. I’d put up with doing rich person things if it meant I got to spend some quality time with my dad. I needed to tell him I was pregnant, and I wanted to do it to his face.

Sylvester, amazingly, seemed to be on board with the plan. “Okay... okay, sure. I can do that. I’ll have to double check with Felix and the band...”

Wait a minute. My eyes widened. “The whole band?”

“Well, our concert’s soon. We had a few weeks of rehearsal scheduled starting in a few days.”

I thought about it. “I guess there’s space for them. If Mark and Petey don’t mind sharing, or something.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. We all shared a bed sometimes on tour. If it’s only two-to-a-bed that’ll be positively luxury.”

“Okay. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... fine. Last question: how are we going to get there? I’m not sure there’s a runway for your private jet up in the mountains.”

Sylvester thought about it for a moment, and then his eyes lit up with a singularly demonic glee. “My brothers are always saying that I use this to show off, when I could just use a car... but this is actually the perfect use case for it. How else are we going to get from New York to a mountain in North Carolina?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

A grin spread across his face. “Helicopters. We’ll get there using my helicopters.”

As it turned out, he wasn’t joking. He had a fleet of helicopters that *Brock Entertainment* used for news reports. I hated to admit it, because it seemed so *dramatic*, but it was going to be our best bet. The warehouse even had an out of use landing pad.

I called my dad. “Erm, unusual request, but how do you feel about housing me, the entirety of *Needlehead*, and Sylvester’s poet brother Felix for an indefinite amount of time? Starting, possibly, today? Or tomorrow? We’d be arriving by helicopter. I know this is a lot to spring on you, and I can explain more later...”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Luna. I miss you. Yes.”

And the plan was made.

I went to let Sylvester know that we'd received the go-ahead. We had to start gathering everyone together now, checking that they were on board with the plan. But Sylvester was sitting on his desk chair by the window, his chin in his palm, staring moodily out over the city.

I approached cautiously. “Is everything okay?”

He glanced at me and then his eyes flicked away. He rarely looked so uncomfortable as this. When he spoke, his voice was unusually flat and monotonous. “Luna, I'm so sorry for fucking up everything up in your life again. I don't know how to fix it. I don't fix things by leaving, I don't fix things by staying with you... Whatever happens, being tied to me is a curse we can't break.”

I didn't know he felt like this. I knew he'd gone to efforts to separate us when he knew he'd be taking over the business, when he'd found out he was Emory Brock's son. But I didn't know it went as deep as it did – that he considered himself a curse to be around. I'd never thought of him like that.

I perched on the edge of his desk, looking him over carefully. “Sylvester, you aren't a curse.”

“I'm not? Sure seems like I am.”

I shook my head. “No, you're not. You were put in a shitty situation too young. You've been trying to protect other people your whole life. But it's not your duty to protect everyone. I was the one who got involved with Apollo in the first place. I wrote his memoir, remember? That's my bad, if anything, for not seeing through his lies. And for... I don't know, blindly going where the money was. You didn't put me in that

situation. I arrived at it of my own accord, thank you very much.”

Sylvester met my eyes again. “Thank you, Luna. You are very kind.”

I smirked. “I don’t often get that said to me. I’m told it’s the resting bitch face.”

Sylvester scowled. “Who said that? I’ll have them know, it’s resting... *nice* face.”

“I don’t think that’s a comeback I’ll be using in the future. But thank you. And thanks for... trying to protect me. But I’m okay. I can handle myself. Maybe I can even try and protect you a little.”

Then, Sylvester patted his lap. “Come here.”

I stepped over to him and swung my leg over his lap until I was perched there, our bodies close and facing each other. He took hold of my hips to secure me in place.

Into his lips, I whispered: “You said I was yours. Are you mine, Sylvester Brock?”

He nodded, eyes hungry, licking his tongue across his lips. “If you want me to be. Then yes. Yes. *Yes*.” He pushed his hands under my shirt, skimming across my skin, and pressed a kiss into my neck, and then my earlobe, and then back onto my lips.

I kissed him back with everything I had. I was getting wet, despite the urgency of our situation, despite the fact that we had to coordinate however many people into a helicopter and flee to the mountains...

I giggled a little breathily and pawed his hands off me. I didn’t want him to stop, ever, but we had things to do. “We

really need to make our plans. We'll have plenty of time for this while we're stuck in the mountains together. Infinite time, almost."

"Mmhm. I like the sound of that." He nuzzled his face into my neck, causing shivers to go up and down my spine. "You'll be pleased to know I've hired a doctor. My brother Winston."

Winston – who hated me for writing Apollo's memoir? "He really wants to come and hide out in the mountains with us? Does he know I'm pregnant?"

Sylvester shook his head. "He gets bored in the city. And I think he's worried one of us will fall off a cliff and have no one to tend our injuries. Besides, his wife's a photographer, and Max is on summer break."

There were more people? I couldn't help but sound a little exasperated. "Max?"

"Their kid. I think he's ten? Eleven?"

"They know this isn't a vacation, right?" I was concerned about there being a child with us for this trip in which we were ostensibly hiding out from a crazed billionaire who had it in for all of us.

If I really thought about it, there was a deeper concern lurking. I hadn't been around kids much, and I wasn't really sure if I was a 'kid' kind of person. I was sure I'd love my own, of course. But I had been worrying that I lacked that... motherly instinct. Kids hadn't been in my plans. My plans had only gone so far as funding an orchestra to play my dad's compositions, and then dying alone. I'd learnt it was worse to have ambitions than not.

What if Winston's kid hated me? What if *my* kid hated me? What if all kids hated me, and I realized that in the remote mountains, that I was making the worst mistake of my life?

But Sylvester grinned in that disarming way of his and my ice cold heart melted just a little. "It kind of is a vacation."

"You're excited?"

"Why are you so miffed every time I'm happy instead of miserable?"

"Sorry." I meant it, genuinely. "I'm glad you're happy, of course. And it does make me feel better about things. I guess I wish I could feel more like you about everything. It's just feeling like one thing after another at the moment. Since that book with Apollo went viral, everything from there had just... spiraled."

"Do you regret it?"

I thought of him referring to the 'curse' of knowing him. I didn't know how to get it through his thick head that I didn't think of him as a curse at all. Even when he'd dumped me and dropped me from the tour. I'd been pissed at him, sure. But I didn't think he was *cursed*.

I stroked my hand down his cheekbone, his sharp jawline where the stubble grated pleasantly against the back of my hand. "No. I don't regret any of it. Because it brought us back together. How could I?"

"Exactly my feeling." Sylvester smiled with relief, then a little mischief crept into it. "I'd have you write all manner of books filled with lies and slander about me if it meant you got to stay here in my arms like this."

I smirked. "I could do without the lies and slander, personally."

“Oh good. I did mean it, but I was kind of hoping we could do without the slander.”

Needlehead and Felix agreed to accompany us to the mountains. All of them, I think, were glad to be getting out of the city. For an extrovert, Sylvester had sure surrounded himself with a bunch of introverts. I guess that’s what you got for being an *artiste*.

I hung out at Sylvester’s apartment while he and Felix packed. My own apartment had been ransacked, but Sylvester had sent a team of his security staff to go and pick up some things for me.

When they arrived, I ran to meet them at the door, scouring the bags and boxes they were carrying for the one thing I really cared about. I breathed a sigh of relief when the last guy into the hallway rounded the corridor holding my most prized object.

“My guitar!” I held my hands out for it like I was holding my arms out for a baby or puppy.

Behind me in the apartment, Sylvester chuckled in amusement, and helped his security team put down the boxes. “People are gonna think you’ve moved in with me.”

I strummed happily at the strings of my guitar, pleased it had been undamaged in the ransacking. “Except we’ll be hidden deep inside the mountains. Maybe we’ll disappear forever, like Priscilla Lamb.”

Sylvester pulled a face. “No thanks. Imagine being locked up with only Apollo for company for over three decades. I’m surprised she isn’t *more* insane.”

We didn’t know exactly what Priscilla had been doing all this time, but it did seem like she must have kept herself pretty

hidden since no one had seen or heard anything from her since she had disappeared.

Felix padded into the living room. “C’mon, guys. Go and get some rest. If we’re getting up in the middle of the night, we’ve still got time to get a few hours of sleep in.”

Sylvester nodded and held out his hand for me to take. He led me into my bedroom, where he’d brought the boxes of my clothing that they’d retrieved. I sorted through them for some kind of nightgown while Sylvester entirely disrobed beside me. Seeing him naked still did things to my innards that I couldn’t explain nor control. I must have looked for too long because Sylvester wagged his finger mischievously. “Now, now. Don’t be looking at me like that. We’ve been told we absolutely, absolutely must get some rest. And we wouldn’t want to upset Felix now, would we?”

I gave up looking for clothing to wear and launched myself at him across the room, pulling him onto the bed. He wriggled in my grasp like a fish out of water, even though he could definitely overpower me if he wanted to. Eventually, though, we were sensible enough to switch the lights out and get some sleep. I slept peacefully for a few hours in Sylvester’s warm, safe embrace until our alarms went off. We promptly got up, grabbed our bags, and went outside to take a car to our next location.

All of us gathered, in the dead of night, at Jude’s house in the suburbs. He had the biggest garden, and his daughter Olivia was apparently excited to see a helicopter, since she’d heard so much about them from Uncle Sylvester. The helicopter was already waiting when we arrived, and the whole family came out, adorably in their pajamas, to wave us off.

I watched Sylvester greet Olivia and take her on a quick tour of the helicopter. He had such an ease with kids. He had such an ease with everyone, I supposed. Watching him make Olivia laugh, I could see he'd make a really good dad, if he decided he wanted to coparent this kid inside me. I wished I had the same faith in me as a mother.

Jude fixed me with a firm look before I boarded. "You stop him from doing anything ridiculous, won't you?"

I smirked. "I mean, we're flying in a helicopter to hide out in the Blue Ridge Mountains. But if anything more ridiculous than that crops up, I'll let you know."

Jude smiled. "You look after yourself too, Luna. I look forward to getting to know you better after all this drama is over."

Besides him, his wife nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! And we're looking forward to hearing you play at the concert. We'll be watching remotely if Sylvester keeps his promise and sets up a little viewing camera for us."

Despite the Brock brothers' wealth and status and privilege, I could tell that the four of them meant a lot to each other. It was nice to see. All I'd known about the three of them – Forest, Jude, Winston – before was what Apollo had told me, and what they'd categorically said was almost entirely lies.

All of us – Winston's family, *Needlehead*, the twin brothers, and me – bundled into the helicopter and waited in anticipation. I don't think any of us, minus Sylvester, had ever spent any time at length in a helicopter.

Winston shook his head at Sylvester, buckling Max, who was vibrating with excitement, into the seat between him and

his wife, Monica. “I can’t believe you’ve talked us all into using your damn helicopter again, Sylvester. Any excuse.”

“Well, it’s too late to back out now! Everyone ready?”

The assorted mumbles from all of the passengers in the helicopter could not hope to reach Sylvester’s own level of excitement. But ready we were. The blades started to spin, followed by an ungodly noise that we thankfully had ear protection from, and then... we were off.

It was a long journey, but it was kind of beautiful watching the twinkling lights of the cities below as we passed overhead. And then, when the light came up, we all got to watch the sunset from the best possible view.

We stopped twice on the way to refuel, once at Dulles International Airport near Washington D.C. and once at Charlotte Douglas International Airport before heading into the mountains. At each place, we got out to stretch our legs, nothing more, before traveling onwards.

It was nice to leave civilization behind, as the ground beneath us became less and less buildings and more and more forests.

In the distance, the Blue Ridge Mountains rose. They held a real magic – whether it was the mystical blue color of the peaks, or the vibrancy and diversity of the forests surrounding them. The sky above was a beautiful ombre, the blues and grays meeting the yellows and oranges of the still-rising sun.

I don’t think there was one person on board who didn’t stop and stare, awestruck, at the sight of the mountains.

We flew closer and closer, and then we could see the warehouse where my dad worked. As promised, there was a helicopter landing pad on the roof. I couldn’t remember for

what purpose the warehouse had been built, only that it had been dormant for years and now required constant security to ensure it didn't get taken over – by humans or by wildlife. Wildlife here could easily reclaim and overpower a human-built structure.

Then, as we were about to land, I spied my dad – just a small speck, dressed in head-to-toe blue like the color of the mountains, waiting for our arrival.

When we landed, I lunged out of the exit and ran into my dad's arms. It had been way too long since I'd seen him. I'd visited here before, but it had been a very long journey that involved too many different modes of transport.

He held me tightly and stroked my hair. "Luna."

"Dad." I mirrored his greeting. "Thanks so much for letting us stay."

His head perked up over my shoulder, and we parted ways. He waved a hand and spoke up a little: "Sylvester!"

Wow. Was that a more excited greeting than his for me? I'd try not to be offended.

Sylvester came forward and embraced my dad too, both of them clapping each other on the back. I'd kind of forgotten how weirdly well they'd gotten along. Sylvester, who couldn't shut up, and my dad, who barely spoke a word. It was funny watching them hug – Sylvester looked a foot taller than my dad. We weren't a tall family.

Then everyone was off the helicopter, and our luggage was being brought out, and the helicopters were taking off again.

I reached out for Sylvester, feeling a sudden pang of... something like emotions. Goddamn hormones. "Share a room with me, will you?"

Sylvester's face melted from his charismatic charm to a softer, more private glow, just for me. "Of course. Do you want to go and claim one of the rooms together?"

I nodded and let him take my hand and pull me away towards my dad's house, away from the small crowd of people. I'd been here before, so I verbally directed Sylvester to the choice of rooms, even as he led the way. We deliberated for a minute before selecting the biggest, since we'd be sharing.

In the room, I closed the door behind me and then, to the surprise of both of us, melted into his arms. I didn't cry, but my shoulders shook a little. Exhaustion, possibly. Hormones, probably.

His voice hummed into the top of my head, where it was buried underneath his chin. "Hey, what's up?"

I shook my head and mumbled into his chest. "Everything." It was muffled by his shirt.

The thing was, Sylvester made me feel safe. His arms around me were a protective barrier to everything uncomfortable that we had yet to deal with. With his sunny optimism, I did feel like I could face things, rather than burying my head in the sand.

"I'm here for you, Luna. Whatever you're feeling, whatever you want... if you want to talk about it, if you want to... I don't know. Whatever you want, whatever you need, just let me know. I will try my best to fulfil it."

What did I want? What did I need? I was mixed up, so far from knowing what it was I was lacking. Perhaps I was just overwhelmed. And honestly, who wouldn't be? Pregnant, hiding in the mountains with a rock band and a couple

billionaires from another billionaire who wanted to destroy all of us. This wasn't exactly a normal life.

I felt a yearning. There was something I did want from Sylvester. I didn't dare put it into words, not in my own head. It remained, then, something abstract: a longing for solidness, for safety.

I relaxed further into him. "I love you." My words were muffled into him even more than before.

But he squeezed me just a little tighter, so I knew he had heard. "I love you, too."

To know that, whenever I wanted, I could have his arms wrapped around me like this, at least for now... that would have to do.

SYLVESTER



*A*s ever, understanding exactly what was going on in Luna's head was a mystery to me. She was a complex woman, and if I ever tried to guess what was going on in there, I'd always get it wrong. I just hoped she'd keep opening up, a little bit at a time.

I parted just slightly from her. Her eyes were shining – she hadn't cried, but she almost was, and it was a heartbreaking sight. Her eyes met mine. They were soft in that way they weren't usually, apart from when we were intimate. My chest glowed with warmth and I instinctively moved my lips to meet hers. She inhaled from me like I was the air she was breathing, and then pressed back with more urgency.

When we surfaced for air, I lay back on the bed with her and stroked her hair. She was less tense than she had been when we'd arrived and was even smiling softly into my chest as she curled up on me, her eyes closed.

I stared up at the ceiling. I needed to broach a difficult topic and wasn't sure how she was going to take it. "Can we tell everyone? About the pregnancy? Winston needs to know anyway, since we're intending to use his standby doctoring skills... and everyone else will find out at some point, I'm sure. We're about to be living in close proximity for a while."

To my relief, Luna did not mind. “Sure. Let me tell my dad first. I’ll tell him tonight.”

I kissed her forehead. “Thank you.”

She looked at me in slight wonder. “For what?”

“For not being currently, actively horrified at the idea you’re carrying my child.”

She grinned. “I’ve got plenty of time to be horrified, don’t you worry.”

* * *

THE NEXT DAY we all gathered to discuss the situation we were in. As the uniting factor between everyone present, I felt compelled to address the group.

“So here we are, in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Some of us are rehearsing for a gig, some of us are hiding from my half-brother Apollo, some of us are just... along for the ride, I guess. There’s some overlap in those groups, of course.

“Now, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I don’t plan to stay in the mountains forever. At the very least our concert is in a month, and I’d rather not have to fly all the way to New York and all the way back.

“We don’t need to come up with anything now, but I’m just throwing this out to the group... we do need some kind of plan for how to get out of this situation. As it stands, I’m next in line to be targeted by Apollo. He firstly sent his agents to watch my brother, Felix.”

Felix gave a shy little wave around at everyone.

“Felix and I have agreed to let everyone here in on the truth. The reason Felix had to go into hiding is because, although he is my brother, he’s also my twin. His biological father is Emory Brock. My mom managed to fudge the records so only one of us would get looped into Emory’s drama if he ever came back into her life, and she had very good foresight to do this.

“Then Apollo came for Luna. She pried a bit too much into his family history, including meeting his supposed mother, Priscilla Lamb. Now, we tested her DNA, and she’s not actually his biological mother. Neither is he our biological half-brother. Huh, I guess I should stop calling him half-brother. Non-brother? It doesn’t matter.

“I don’t know if you all know this, but Luna is pregnant...”

I paused here, for the various reactions of surprise, congratulation, and nonchalance (the last one was Winston, who was playing it cool).

“Hence, we need to get Apollo off our back. There’s a clause in Emory’s will that if one of his heirs was found to not be related to him, that Priscilla would inherit the business. It’s obviously too late to contest that now. But, while we know that he’s not Emory’s son, he doesn’t *know* we know. So I wonder if we could send him a warning, get him to back off. Like, *we know you’re not really Emory’s son, so don’t come for us.*”

Winston shook his head. “It’s not a bad idea, but that’s not how Apollo works. He’s not going to read a warning and be like, ‘*oh, fair enough, they’ve got me there*’. If you want him to listen to you, really listen, you need to send him a message.”

I frowned. “I was going to send him a message. I just said that.”

Winston slow-blinked at me like he couldn't tell if I were joking or not. "No, I mean, *send him a message.*" Ah, I understood now. "Think about it. What does he like best? In my opinion, he loves drama. He loves to make a scene, to be theatrical. You need to drive that message home by speaking his language. I don't know how, exactly. What have we got to work with? Forest's good with technology, Jude is... strong...?"

I looked around the room. "Well, we do have access to an entire mountains-worth of musicians. Can we send him a message... in music?"

"The reunion gig." Luna suddenly stood up. "The reunion gig. It's receiving so much hype in the press. It could rival the popularity of Apollo's memoirs. He likes things to be big and flashy."

"What are we going to do? Write a song that says 'Apollo we know your dad isn't Emory Brock', and sing it at the concert? Send him a video?"

Winston seemed to like the idea. "Deliver him some kind of invitation. Make it vague and ominous. If we match his style, he's more likely to listen to us. We've gotta reel him in. It's ridiculous, of course, but Apollo is ridiculous. And, Sylvester, sorry to say, but out of all of us you're the closest to him in the ridiculous stakes. You're the only one who could deliver a message to him in this way."

"Err, thanks. Or no thanks. Is it a compliment?"

Luna patted my head. "I think you should take it as one, sweetheart."

I knew she was patronizing me, but I liked having my head patted and being called *sweetheart* in public. So I just smiled

like a lazy cat that had got the cream.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Reed and I sat down to figure out the lyrics for the song. We needed to deliver a message to Apollo, but subtly enough that only he would be able to decode it – because we'd be pointing him in the right direction with our invitation.

After an hour or two of banding about lyrical ideas, with numerous notepapers spread out across the warehouse room we were inhabiting, Reed marched out of the room. I heard him calling for Felix, and a little conversation in the hallway.

“Felix, we really need you in here. We're writing the lyrics for the song. Please come and sort out your brother, he's doing my head in. You're a poet. Please, please help us make this song lyrically good while containing a secret hidden message? Please?”

Felix came into the room chuckling, followed by Reed who looked relieved. He looked at the scores of abandoned lyrical ideas. “You never were much of a wordsmith.”

I scowled. “Yeah, well, you can't sing for shit.”

He smiled, good-naturedly. “That's why I'm a poet, and you're a singer. Come on, let me see what you've got.”

Felix looked over our notes, howling with laughter at certain parts of my scrawled handwriting and bringing highlights over to Reed to giggle at together. Was it me, or was there a kind of... thing between those two?

Oh my god. It all clicked into place. My brother and my bandmate. I knew Felix was gay – he'd come out at college, while I'd been on tour – but as far as I knew, Reed had always

seemed asexual, never interested in anyone. This was the first time I'd ever seen him like this: leaning in close, giggling, lingering gazes into Felix's eyes... oh my god.

When I looked up, they were staring at me.

"Cat got your tongue?" Reed raised an eyebrow.

Maybe they wanted to keep it private. I should try subtlety for once. I owed them both that much. "N-no, just, erm, thinking about lyrics." I wasn't sure if that was subtle enough, considering I usually just blurted out whatever was in my head.

The two of them looked at each other. Felix was giving Reed a look like: 'should we tell him?' And Reed shrugged. It seemed the consensus was not to broach it with me just yet. They probably thought I'd lose my mind, as I kind of had each time one of my Brock brothers had fallen in love and settled down.

But things were different now. Back then, I had felt like singledom was a beautiful prize that must be preserved, and that to settle down was to end your own life and become part of something worse. Except, with Luna... when I imagined settling down with Luna, I imagined everything becoming better. I could finally see what my brothers had seen in the idea of marriage.

Maybe, because my heart had always been with Luna, I'd subconsciously decided that if I couldn't have her, I didn't want anyone. All these years of dating around, never really feeling that much interest in anyone, and scorning the courtships and marriages of my brothers, was really just a cover for the fact that I'd lost the love of my life, and was never going to get her back.

Now, I did have her back. My delusions were revealed for delusions. Underneath it all, I just wanted to be with Luna. I should probably tell her that.

I stood up abruptly. “I need to go and talk to Luna. Can you two work on the lyrics for a bit?”

“Sure.” Reed turned away from me, entirely focused on Felix, anyway.

I went to find Luna. She was in one of the smaller rooms in the warehouse, playing her guitar. I waited for the song to end, smiling at the soft glow on her face that only occurred when she was playing music or having sex with me. I was very happy to be on par with music in her mind.

When she finished, she looked up at me and smirked. “Dear lord. I thought you were some kind of frightening mountain specter. Why are you staring at me like that?”

I closed the door behind me.

“No, really, why do you look so weird?”

“Luna.” I struggled to find the words, now that I was here. Funny, since I’d been struggling with the lyrics, too.

“You’re freaking me out.”

“Just, chill, okay? I’m trying to figure out what to say... I’ve not done this before.”

“O-okay.”

“Luna. You were worried about my reaction to the pregnancy, that I didn’t seem worried, that I seemed happy about it. I didn’t really get it at the time, but I do now. I haven’t really told you how I feel about you. Not properly. And I realize you probably need the extra reassurance, since I fucked you over so badly when we were last together... So,

I'm going to try and say it all now, so there isn't any question in your mind of my feelings. Okay?"

"Sure."

"I need you to know that... it was only ever you, Luna. For me, I mean. All this time, I've never met anyone I connected with like you, who I could spend every waking minute with and never get bored. I think I understand why you're worried when I laugh or smile about things... I think you're worried that I'm not serious about us. Because I haven't said those exact words. So, I'm saying them now. I'm serious about us, Luna. Deadly serious. And, not to be intense, but whatever you want from me, you can have. I would love to parent this child with you. I can honestly think of nothing else that would make me happier. I love you, deeply, and in some way I always have. I will love our child more than you can even imagine. I'd spend the rest of my life with you, Luna. Maybe you don't want that, I don't know, but either way, I don't want you to doubt that I want *everything*."

Luna's eyes were wide open.

"Is that... does that answer your questions?"

She blinked. "I hear you... loud and clear."

She seemed a little dazed, so just to drive the message home, I crossed the room, wrapped my hands around her hips and dipped her backwards on her chair so I was holding her aloft, and kissed her firmly on the lips. She melted into me, her neck swinging backwards so I had to support it with one hand. When I opened my eyes, she was smiling up at me with something like wonderment.

When I got back to Felix and Reed, they had their arms around each other on one side of the room. They jumped apart.

I flapped my hand at them. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve already noticed you two. Don’t worry about it. I just told Luna that I want to be with her forever. I’m a new man. How are the lyrics?”

Reed looked relieved. “We’ve finished them.”

Felix blinked between Reed and I. “Yep, they’re perfect.”

I picked up the sheet on the table and looked over them, and grinned. “I love it. Now let’s get the music sorted.”

LUNA



Each morning I rose early, before anyone else, and took a cup of coffee outside to stare up at the mountain peaks that rose above and around us.

My dad had always worked antisocial jobs, odd hours, unusual locations, but this was his remotest posting yet. He'd stayed in town, I supposed, until I'd finished my education. Then, there was nothing keeping him there.

My mom had loved the mountains. She'd go on long hikes, sometimes taking me or my dad or both with her. There's pictures of the three of us atop a mountain when I was just a baby, strapped to my father's chest.

When she'd gone missing, it was hard to console myself with the fact that she had died doing something that she'd loved. Instead, I blamed myself for not accepting the invitation to go with her. Maybe I'd have been able to prevent her death somehow. Or maybe I'd gotten lost alongside her. At least she wouldn't have died alone.

It was a morbid thought, and one that I had emotionally moved past. Now, looking up at the blue mountains, I wondered if my father had moved here to feel close to her, as if her spirit still inhabited the mountains she had so loved in life. We weren't a religious family, so that would be the closest

thing we had. My mom, guardian spirit of the mountains, watching over us and protecting us from harm.

Besides the quiet, contemplative mornings I spent thinking about my mom, my days were spent hanging out with the band, rehearsing for my solo performance, cuddling in bed with Sylvester and spending some quality time with my dad.

One day, a few weeks into our stay, I sat rehearsing yet again in one of the empty warehouse rooms. I'd started to feel like I'd rehearsed all I could, that I was weirdly ready for the gig, and rehearsals were becoming boring, draining all of the fun out of playing.

I heard a small noise and looked up. To my surprise, Monica, Winston's wife, was in the doorway. She was quite introverted, like me, so we hadn't talked a lot so far. Only politely, and usually in the company of others. What I knew of her, I liked.

She was a photographer who had started in abstract work, moved into commercial work for celebrities and models, then found a way to fuse her passion for interesting, unusual photography with her work for high-profile clients. I admired her for that – for doing what I'd never been able to do.

She was also somewhat intimidating. But I knew that was just my own self-consciousness and insecurities speaking.

Her voice was soft and gentle. "Hi, Luna. How are you doing?"

I smiled. "A little tired of practice, if I'm honest. I think at some point there's a curve at which practicing too much is gonna make me worse at it, y'know? There needs to be some rawness in a live performance."

Monica nodded. “I totally get what you mean. It’s like if I spend too long editing a photograph. It gets all distorted and overly processed. Plus, your voice is lovely naturally.”

I was almost blushing. “Thanks.” Female friends were somewhat rare in my life, due to my ‘resting bitch face’ and tendency to compare myself to others unfavorably.

“Since you’re a bit practiced out, anyway... I was wondering if you’d like to come on a little walk with Max and me? Not too far, so we don’t get lost, but the scenery around here is beautiful, and I think we’d all benefit from getting some fresh air.”

“Yeah, actually, that sounds really nice.”

“Would you mind being in some photos for me? You don’t have to if you’d rather not. But if you want, I can send you the edited pictures. You could use them for promo or something.”

I was a little overwhelmed by the offer, even if I was happy she thought I was photogenic enough to be in a picture. “I’m not sure... I feel all pregnant and bloated, even though I’m not showing much yet. I’ve not done my hair, or make-up... and my clothes...”

Monica laughed, not unkindly. “Luna, I think you’d look beautiful in a plastic sack. You’re naturally gorgeous, honestly. I prefer to shoot without make-up. And you’ll suit the mountain landscapes.”

“Are you saying I’m rugged-looking?”

Monica wasn’t sure if I was joking or not. “Erm – no! I mean, not in a bad way. Not rugged, just...”

I had a habit of over-deadpanning jokes. I winked at her. “Sorry, bad habit.”

Monica swatted at me with her non-camera hand. “Come on. Max is fascinated by you. He calls you ‘ghost lady’ and makes up stories about how you died.”

I laughed. It was every goth’s dream to be thought of as a dead ghost by a child, of course. “Oh, I’ll only add to his collection.”

“He’ll love that. Let’s go.”

We set off. I was nervous, as I always was in the company of people I didn’t know well. Especially women and children. I’d always been more at ease around men, had always slotted in better into friendships with them. But I did lack female company, and maybe that was how Priscilla had so easily taken me in, convinced me that she didn’t have some scheme behind all of her purring, motherly carefulness.

But Monica and Max were easy company. Monica didn’t feel the need to fill every little silence with speech, which I liked, and the silences didn’t feel uncomfortable. Max was the opposite, a hyperactive and weird kid, but in a way that was very charming, even when he was quite chaotic. I joined in a few times trying to persuade him not to climb up a certain rock or tree.

Monica took a few photos of Max and me wrestling when he insisted he was going to make a random wild bird into his pet, and started darting for it with his hands outstretched. I was convinced he was going to hurt himself or be attacked by a flock of wild birds. Monica just laughed – she was used to his antics.

Yeah, it turned out I did have some maternal instincts after all. If my kid was anything like Max, I wouldn’t have a problem. He was, for all his hyperactivity, easily entertained. He found entertainment for himself. He spent half the walk

telling me the long plot of a novel he'd made up in his head about the ghost lady, aka me, and how she'd drowned in a lake but also been attacked by a man with a machete but also been buried alive in a graveyard.

By the time we arrived back from the walk, I was tired in body but refreshed in mind.

The time went by in a flash. For what had been a forced hideout, I was going to miss my time in the mountains. I resolved to return more often.

Before I knew it, we were back on the long stretch of helicopter, stopping twice before making our way to the glittering lights of New York City.

Reed was muttering under his breath as we departed the helicopter for the final time. "Cutting it pretty close."

He'd always been the organized one of the band. He was the one who'd made sure the rest of the band were on time for their gigs, interviews, rehearsals. I felt bad for him: I'd heard all the gory details writing his memoir.

Sylvester had been a real handful back then. Now that I knew he'd been struggling with the knowledge he was going to have to abandon his whole life and all of his dreams to inherit a fifth of Emory Brock's businesses, his actions back then made a lot more sense to me.

I addressed the group. "I have one thing to do before the sound check."

Sylvester raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

I grinned. "Top secret. Nothing dangerous. I'll be with you as soon as I'm done."

"Okay, Velma. See you soon."

I took a cab and texted Eli Robinson to let her know I was on my way. She'd asked to meet, not in a public café or restaurant, but at her own house. Luckily, it wasn't that far from Jude's.

Settled in her beautiful sitting room, she leaned in and quirked an eyebrow at me, her expression unfathomable. "So, what made you change your mind?"

I sipped my tea, feeling a bit embarrassed by the reason. "You might decide to cast me out of your film after this, but... I don't really watch many films. Mostly horror, when I'm really bored. I, er, I'd not heard of you."

To my surprise, Eli grinned. "No, I won't cast you out. In fact, that's perfect. Composers for my previous films have come to it with too much expectation. Then I end up with all of this... edgy shit that I didn't want and hadn't asked for. Is it too much to ask that someone write music with their heart, and not some preconceived idea of what it is I 'want' for the film?"

"Well, I have zero expectations. But it turns out my dad is a big fan of your movies. He lives in the mountains by himself. I actually wondered... my dad's a composer, you see. But he's never had his music widely performed or anything. He really *does* compose with his heart. It's his language. He doesn't really talk. He's not mute or anything, it just doesn't interest him. But that's, I think, why he never got recognized musically. It's all about self-promotion these days, and he wouldn't even understand the concept of self-promotion. But if you like my music, then there's a lot of influence of his in mine, even though he's a composer and I'm a songwriter."

"Sure, I'll listen."

“Like I said, he’s never had his music played... this is a mock-up of one of his compositions, I guess. It’s all computer-generated, and he can’t stand listening to it, because he says it’s lifeless without real musicians and instruments. But I think you can hear the promise in it...”

I located the file on my phone and put it on the table between us, turning up the volume. As we listened, Eli’s face grew curiouser and curiouser. I honestly couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She was an unusual woman.

Eventually, she stood up. “I need my headphones so I can listen to this properly.”

I nodded, and waited while she retrieved a pair of headphones, connected them to my phone, and sat listening with the volume up so I could hear the tinny whisper of it, as if from a distance.

She listened again. And once more.

Then she put the headphone down. “I’ll be damned. I wait years for a good musician, and two come along at once.”

“You like it?”

“Your father is a deeply talented man. I can see where you get it from.”

“Do you think you’d... consider using his music in your film?”

“I’d like to use both yours and his. I think they work perfectly together. If you’ll let me. Of course, I’ll have an orchestra record his compositions – as many as he wants. If you’ll just agree to soundtrack my film for me, then we can all sleep peacefully.”

I smiled. “Yes. I will.”

“Oh, thank heavens. You have no idea how long it’s taken me to find you – and your father. It’s like I’ve had this song in my head I haven’t been able to actualize... thanks to you, this film will finally be made.”

“It’s an honor. Thank you. For liking my work. No one had listened to it in... over a decade. So thank you.”

Outside, I called another taxi. From one major musical project to the next. It was time to sound check for the *Needlehead* gig tonight.

SYLVESTER



Concerts take a hell of a lot of preparation. Luckily, I'd hired the best in the business to take care of everything – the venue, the stage manager, a team of technicians – so all I really had to do was rehearse with the band and make sure I turned up on time.

Check and check.

Somehow, I still found myself nervously stalking around, making sure everything was underway that should be underway. I found it odd that I was nervous. Performing never had made me nervous before. Instead, it had had a way of relaxing my body, loosening up my limbs so that I didn't care about anything but the moment I was living. I supposed it had been a long time since I'd gigged, not counting Reed's gig in which I had accidentally stolen the spotlight.

Felix was my shadow as I paced back and forth across the venue, barking out lines from the song to test me. In lieu of any poetry to read, he had taken on the role of 'coach' – an oft-underappreciated and usually unstaffed role in the group make-up of a band.

Mainly he'd been focusing his efforts on drilling the lyrics into my brain, worried I was going to bungle them. "Sylvester, the one thing you absolutely must not do is get these wrong.

Not because I don't love spending twenty-four-seven of my life with you, but I really do need to return to teaching at some point..."

I sighed. "Do you want me to write them on my hand?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Yes please."

With the lyrics to the chorus of our new song scrawled in the palm of my hand, I went to check in with Luna and the band.

Luna was sound-checking on the stage. I'd asked her what she'd been up to when she got back, and she told me it was a secret, with a smile. She said she would after she was sure everything tonight went well. I could tell she was a little apprehensive of what our next move would be after delivering this message to Apollo.

I found the band hanging out in front of the stage, where the front rows of the audience would be, up against the barrier. They liked to do this before a gig, I remembered now: look up at the stage from where the audience would be and imagine what it would be like to watch the gig from there.

"What do we think, guys? How many people are gonna show?"

Reed looked at me. "Did you not see? We've sold out."

I blinked. "Oh wow. I hope Apollo's not bought all the tickets."

"Even if he has, that's a decent chunk of cash. Though I guess you've got enough of that already." Reed eyed me. His joke was a gentle way of gauging how tense I was. And since I'd forgotten to laugh, he must have figured I was pretty tense. "Hey, go and take a break. I'll keep an eye on things from here. You're just winding yourself up."

I smiled at Reed. He'd always been the stressed one at our concerts before. "Oh, how things change."

"They change, they stay the same. Funny combination, huh?"

I waved a single hand to the guys and took Reed's advice to get a break before the concert.

There was an area just out of the backstage, an outside area designed for artists to smoke in. I didn't smoke, but it was nice to get some fresh air, and there was a little tree and some plants that made the area a serene spot to be. I sat down on the bench, and looked into the branches of the tree. My breathing steadied and my muscles relaxed, slacked of tension.

A little noise from behind me – Luna was in the doorway. She smiled coyly and came to join me on the bench. "Hope I'm not interrupting your moment of peace. That's why I came out here, too."

"No, please join me. We can have a moment of peace together."

Luna rested her head gently on my shoulder, and I pulled her in close. We watched a small breeze pick up the leaves of the plants in the courtyard, like it wound through the strands of her hair so she had to sweep them off her face.

If everything went very wrong tonight, there was a chance this might be the last little moment of peace like this for a while. We may as well make the most of it while it lasted.

LUNA



The atmosphere was electric. *Needlehead* was a band that had stood the test of time – their music had never become too dated sounding, in part because they had been just slightly too obscure to amass legions of imitators or to influence the dominating styles of the years they had been making music. As such, their following, which was quite sizable to begin with, had only grown since then.

The crowd, therefore, was a mish-mash of generations and styles. Watching from the side as the technicians set up, I saw the kinds of old-school rockers that frequented the dingy rock bar that was my regular haunt, as well as very cool looking Gen-Z kids in revived 90's grunge aesthetic. I saw emos, goths, and some normie-looking millennials in t-shirts and jeans.

I looked curiously up at the two private booths, wondering who could be waiting up there. I couldn't see through the one-way glass, of course – whoever was paying that much money for a booth was rich or famous enough to necessitate some privacy.

I knew that no one had heard from Apollo since issuing the invitation. It didn't seem his style, either, to attend something

like this in person. No, if there was anyone related to Apollo up there, it was likely his cronies.

Even Priscilla, I imagined, wouldn't dare risk being spotted here. With all the music buffs around, she'd be sure to be recognized if anyone so much as caught a glimpse. And then, her jig – whatever it was – would be up.

I was the only support act tonight, so the pressure was on. For some reason, I wasn't nervous. I thought I would be, considering how long it had been since I was last involved in anything resembling the music industry, but... no nerves. There were a few excitement butterflies in my stomach, of course, but nothing that threatened a panic attack or tears or anything. Perhaps my hormones had aligned tonight to stabilize me, just in time for my big gig. Or perhaps there had been so much stress and upheaval in the past few months that nothing scared me anymore. I liked to think that was the case.

The stage manager swept past me, informing me I had five minutes until showtime. The crowd could sense the start time nearing, and they were cheering and singing in one big unorganized mass. They were unorganized for now, but music would unite them, at least when *Needlehead* played and they could sing along to the songs they knew. They wouldn't know my songs, but I planned to end on an energetic cover of an Iggy Pop song to get the crowd pumped up for the main event.

It was time. I didn't check over my appearance again, I had to live in the moment, not worry about what I looked like. The lights across the entire hall went dark and I strode out onto the stage to an uproar of cheers, though no one could see me yet in the pitch darkness. My long black skirt flapped atmospherically around my legs, and the platform boots under my feet gave me a bit of extra height and power. I wore a

simple black tank top so I wouldn't fumble and get my clothes caught in my guitar strap.

I took my place center stage and played a single chord on the electric guitar propped up there, a signal for the technicians at the lights and sound desks to start up. Sylvester had spared no expense on the light show for this event.

Simultaneously, the lights and projections started up, sending glowing green, yellow and blue lights and kaleidoscopic, almost natural, projections across the stage. The colors and ambience matched my music perfectly.

When the cheers died down, I launched straight into my first song. Not super lively, but not so gentle as to be boring, either. The crowd didn't know it, of course, but they listened appreciatively, and cheered in all the right places.

When the song finished, and the cheers died down, I addressed the audience. You couldn't go a whole set without speaking, no matter how much I would have liked to. "Hi, *Needlehead* fans. Do they call you Needleheads?"

The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter. They, amazingly, liked me. I know it wasn't the same kind of 'liking' as when you really knew someone, but I'd somehow expected an underwhelming reaction, or even boos. I'd imagined they would be impatient, waiting for this unknown woman they didn't know to shut the fuck up and let *Needlehead* get on with it. But the crowd were there for the experience, and they were enjoying it. Then, so was I.

My confidence grew and grew as the set continued. Then, when it was time to play my last song, I was almost sad. I didn't want it to be over. But I was also growing tired. I was ready to pump the rest of the energy I had into my last song, then collapse backstage.

When I started the opening bars of ‘The Passenger’, a song the majority of people in the audience seemed to know, the crowd went fully wild. They were jumping around, screaming, singing along. My performance picked up energy – I was dancing around the front of the stage, holding out the mic for the popular lines. My voice had never sounded better, though perhaps that was the delusion of being on a stage watched by thousands of screaming music fans.

When the song ended, and the crowd finally quietened down, I muttered a goodbye into the mic. “Thank you so much. And thanks to the guys for having me. They’ll be playing next. Seeya.”

Despite the underwhelming farewell, the crowd once more erupted into screams and cheers. The lights went off, I set the guitar back down on the stage, and crept off

Being backstage was... underwhelming. Being suddenly alone after all of that noise. Sylvester and the band were in the next room over, and I didn’t want to interrupt them before the show. I thought I’d wanted to collapse back here. I thought I’d be exhausted, but I was in fact more energized than I’d been in some time.

I left the green room and ran into the band in the hallway. They’d been heading to see me. I was suddenly met with a clumsy and excited hug from all of them.

I laughed and pulled back. “Did I do okay?”

It was Reed who spoke. “Luna, you were the perfect support. They loved it.”

The rest of the band nodded along with him. I met eyes with Sylvester, who was keeping a low profile for obvious reasons – the band were still a little pissy that he’d dropped me

from their first tour, and he wasn't sure if he'd quite made up for it yet. But he gave me a wink, and I returned a smile.

"I'm going out into the crowd, actually, to watch you guys."

Sylvester grinned. "Nice one. Keep an eye out for Apollo, will you? I don't expect he'll be here in person, but stranger things have happened..."

"Yeah. I'll keep an eye out."

I walked through the passage of corridors leading from the backstage into the main bar area, then through into the doors at the back of the concert. The place was packed, and there was no way I would get to the front even if I wanted to. But even a few rows in from the back, the atmosphere was great. I'd thrown on a sweater and a hat to try and disguise myself a little bit. Still, a few people spotted me and exclaimed at me: "Hey, you were great!" "I'm gonna have to check out your music. Don't you have any merch?" "How have I never heard you before? You were great!"

I didn't really know what to say. I hadn't brought merch, I didn't even have an album out. I just had decades of hobby recordings made in my bedroom, with no plans to ever release them.

Luckily, it wasn't long until *Needlehead* were due on stage, so the necessitated small talk didn't become excruciating.

If the crowd had gone wild for me, they became utterly feral when Sylvester stepped out onto the stage, followed by Reed, Pete and Mark.

They played a bunch of their old hits, and then the lighting on the set changed and the band members, except Sylvester,

left the stage. Sylvester took to the mic. “The band is just gonna have a breather for a second before we play you our new songs.” A cheer from the crowd prevented him from speaking for a moment; he laughed into the microphone. “In the meantime, I’m going to play a cover for you. It’s actually a cover of a song by our very own Luna Black, who was so gracious as to support us tonight.”

The crowd cheered, remembering my act. That was nice. But wait... Sylvester was going to cover one of my songs? He hadn’t run that past me. Were there some kinds of laws against that? What was he doing?

My panic faded as he started up the opening bars of one of my slower, gentler songs. And then he started singing, a gentler croon compared to how he normally sang, and my stomach fluttered. My body has having some sort of reaction: I had flushed with heat, and was glad to be hidden in the crowd, because I’m sure under normal lighting conditions my response would have been all too obvious. I felt dizzy, like I might melt into the floor.

The song ended. My breath caught in my throat.

The crowd cheered, and then the rest of the band were back on stage. I exhaled. I had to get it together, because that meant they were about to play the song containing the hidden message.

I scouted around in the crowd, looking for any familiar faces that I might recognize from Apollo’s headquarters. Nothing for a while, until: *there*. A bunch of awkward-looking hench men and women wearing all black in a way that they’d tried to disguise as rock attire but that was clearly security attire. And, to prove my suspicions right, Abigail was in the

middle of them. The only one I knew by name – but there were other faces I could recognize after I'd seen her, too.

The song started up. I'd heard it in rehearsal – now was the time to really see if it had any power. The song was about the 'Sun God Son' – an obviously metaphorical reference to Apollo, which anyone familiar with the Brock family drama could obviously pick up. What they wouldn't pick up unless they were specifically looking for it, was the hidden message threaded into the song: *We know you aren't his son.*

I looked over at Apollo's cronies. A few of them were whispering to each other. Then a bunch more of them started exchanging looks. There seemed to be some general consensus between them – and then they turned around and headed for the door.

I wanted to watch the concert, but I needed to follow Apollo's team and see what was going on here. If they were just leaving to report back to him, that would be okay. But they hadn't stayed for the whole song – they'd all left. If Apollo wasn't here, surely someone would have stayed to record it. Which meant either he'd found some other way to watch the concert remotely, or they'd been ordered to leave for some reason, or... Apollo was here.

I needed to find out. I turned around and followed the stream of undercover security in their all-black outfits, blending in just a little with my own all-black attire too, though a flowing skirt was hardly bodyguard attire.

Apollo's guards left through the main doors, but rather than exiting the venue entirely they turned left and started climbing the stairs that led to the upper level. There were only three things on the upper level – the sound and lighting booths, entrances to the two private boxes, and additional toilets. Was

it too much to hope that they'd eaten something dodgy as a group before coming out and had all sprung with a sudden need to use the toilet?

I followed. There was plausible deniability if they caught me and didn't recognize me, or even if they did, possibly. At the top of the stairs, they turned left. Not the toilets, then.

Then, the one in front, possibly in charge, rapped on a door to private box number one. This was not good. The door swung open, revealing a furious Apollo Brock.

I ducked my head to avoid being seen. I was stunned. He was here in person. I'd never seen him out of the confines of his headquarters. I wasn't even sure he'd ever left – it was like his evil lair.

His cronies were ushered into the box. I followed at the back, blending in decently due to our matching all-black outfits, keeping my head ducked and hoping no one would notice I wasn't six foot tall and built for boxing like Apollo's team were.

Apollo was snarling and ranting, addressing the entire group of us with chaotic fury written across his face. "...I don't know what you've all come up here to *me* for. Of course I got the message, do you think I'm a simpleton? Now get back out there and be ready to do your jobs, I'm about to shut this concert down."

Someone piped up. "Where do you want us, boss?"

"Stay at the back of the room, I'm going to storm the stage. You can help me get through the crowd."

The guards started to filter out, mumbling. I found myself frozen at the back of the room. What was the point in shutting

down the concert? Was he really that upset by the message in the song?

My gut instinct made the decision for me: I stayed at the back of the room. When everyone else but me and Apollo had left, he glanced up at me, and fury shot through his eyes like a flash of lightning. “You.”

I held up my hands. “Before you go, will you just hear me out?”

He scoffed a single, bitter laugh. “Why would I ever want to hear you out, Luna Black? You and I could have continued our fine literary partnership, but you started dabbling in things you had no business with. I could forgive you working with my half-brother. But fraternizing with my mother, digging into my private business? That’s unforgivable.”

“But she isn’t...” I tailed off, quickly realizing that what I was about to say had no chance of a productive conclusion in this discussion.

“I know she’s not my mother, you silly girl.” He hissed it through gritted teeth, flecks of spit catching light in the air. “You don’t think I have access to simple DNA tests like the rest of the population? I’ve known – for years – that I am not the product of relations between Priscilla Lamb and Emory Brock. Nor one of them with any other human on earth.”

“Does she know you know?”

“No.” He smirked for just a second, then dashed it off his face with a blaze of contained rage. “I confess, I don’t understand her motivations. She was in love with Emory Brock, that’s for sure. Undoubtedly obsessed with him. I don’t know if she’s deluded, and I’m simply part of her fantasy...”

“Or she’s lied to you your whole life?” I said it carefully, quietly.

There was something here that Apollo clearly needed to unpick. His parentage and family had always been a touchy subject in our sessions. Once, me and him had been friends. Maybe I could unravel that snagged thread, get him to see there was no point being angry at his half-brothers. If Priscilla had been manipulating him his whole life, it would be harder for him to see that clearly... but potentially explosive if he could.

I realized Apollo had gone quiet. He was staring, not out of the window of the box at the still-happening concert out there, but at the dark shadows of the far wall. When he turned around to look at me, his face was the most bare I’d seen it: stripped of all his theatrical pretenses. He was, suddenly, just a man. Some guy, like Sylvester, who had been dragged into a world he didn’t truly belong in, and had never asked to be in.

“Do you know, Luna Black, what it is like to know that you don’t really exist? That you aren’t a person whose parents loved each other and decided to create a family. That you were instead plucked from god-knows-where, lied to, and filled full of expectations you could never hope to uphold? Knowing – for decades – that you’re being manipulated, knowing you’re being lied to... but knowing that *that was all you had*? That, if you took that away, there was nothing left of you?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think I do.”

He was still going on. “Being an entire fabrication created in the mind of an obsessive woman and a long-dead multibillionaire entrepreneur... Then again, what exactly is reality, anyway? I live in the mind of Priscilla Lamb, my supposed mother. I do what she says. That’s all I know.”

My voice was almost a whisper, so afraid was I to provoke something nasty out of him since he was opening up. “Where did you grow up, Apollo?”

A horrible grin wound its way across his face. “Poor Priscilla. She really did love Emory. Her obsession was so strong that, when he found out she had supposedly conceived a child by him, he offered her an arrangement: to work for him in his primary household as a maid. A cleaning lady. And my adoptive mother, a superstar of her day, accepted. She accepted his offer!”

My eyes widened. The tale of the Brock family was ludicrous in general, but for some reason that was the wildest thing I’d heard yet.

Apollo picked up on my disbelief and nodded, smirking. “Yes. She’d rather work as his maid and give up her entire career than be parted from the man she loved. Sad, really. Anyway, that’s where I grew up. In the mansion of Emory Brock, looking up at the man who I was told was my father and not being allowed to call him such. Then, finally, being called upon as one of five – five! – when he summoned his illegitimate children to train as his heirs. Heaven knows where she got me from – or how she faked the evidence – but I don’t doubt she did it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I tried to focus on what it was I needed to get through to Apollo. “It’s not too late to shake off all that expectation and do your own thing.”

He laughed bitterly. “What would I do? Open a florist? Write the next Great American Novel? Pack bags at the grocery store?”

“I don’t know. But you are a person. Everyone’s a person.”

He played it off as sarcasm, but even I could see the vulnerability behind his next question. “Even me?”

“Even you.” And then I risked a small smile. “Probably.”

He glanced away, made awkward by the sincerity, perhaps. “Yeah, well, your belief in me is... admirable, Luna Black. You know, you weren’t such bad company. And we did make a number one bestselling book together. Say, fancy running away with me to a tropical island somewhere?”

I choked back a laugh. “Um. No offense but absolutely not.”

He shrugged and swept towards the exit, not looking back and giving me a lazy wave farewell. “Worth a try. Alright. Showbiz calls. *Sayonara.*”

He walked out through the door and into the hallway. I watched from the door frame as he went down the stairs. *Showbiz calls* implied he was still planning to storm the stage. What could I do? Was there any point in trying to stop him?

A deep, purring voice echoed in the corridor: “What a lovely performance tonight, Ms. Luna Black. A shame we couldn’t publicly duet on that stage. Maybe the world isn’t quite ready for us just yet.”

I struggled for a moment to find the location of the voice. Then I turned to the right to see Priscilla standing at the doorway of the second private viewing box, just next door. She beckoned me with those purple claws of hers.

I was torn – between fascinatedly seeing what on earth was going to happen next with Priscilla, or running to warn Sylvester that Apollo was about to storm the stage. He’d known that it was a possibility something dramatic would

happen tonight – but I don't think he'd counted on Apollo showing up in person, intending to steal the show.

Seeing my indecision, Priscilla stepped back and two of her guards slunk out of the door and grasped me by the arm, walking me forwards so that my decision was made for me. Priscilla had plans for me, it seemed.

“I hear my son's about to shut this concert down.” Priscilla's grin gleamed in the hallway lighting. Had she heard the whole conversation with me? Or just the part where he'd sent his guards on ahead to prepare to part the crowds? “You can watch with me from the sound box.” She gestured to her guards. “C'mon. Time to commandeer the sound and lights.”

The majority of Priscilla's guards led the way to the technician's area. Priscilla followed, and I came last, dragged along by guards on either side of me, digging their hands into my upper arms so hard they'd surely leave bruises.

I felt helpless, but there was little I would have been able to do to help Sylvester, anyway, besides give him a heads up. Just like Priscilla, I was committed to seeing how things played out. We had all committed to that when we had made this plan to send a message to Apollo in a way that he would hear it.

Ahead of us, Priscilla's guards forced the doors open and pulled the technicians out of their booths. I was shoved into the back of the sound booth, held in place still. Through the glass window, I could see the crowd was being parted by a small mob of Apollo's guards, and that he had made it two thirds of the way to the stage. None of the members of *Needlehead* seemed to have noticed yet: they were still playing, fully absorbed in their own music and the cheers of the crowd.

“Alright, gentlemen. Cut the sound to everything. Be prepared to bring it back up solely for whatever microphone Apollo reaches first.”

SYLVESTER



*M*y whole body felt electric. The crowd screamed and cheered. I was intoxicated with the glare of the stage lights, the rising heat and scent of sweat from the crowd.

We'd done our part for tonight. We'd delivered our message. The next part was to wait and see if Apollo had received it.

Reed thanked the crowd for enjoying our new material, and then we geared up for our next song. Mark started up on the bass, Pete on the drums, and then—

Abruptly, the sound on all the instruments cut out. Mark's hands were moving, but there was no audible sound. Just—

Silence.

“What the fuck?” I may as well have mouthed the words. The mics were down too. I squinted in the direction of the sound desk, though it was so far away that I couldn't even make out the shape of it to the right of the private viewing booths on the topmost level of the concert arena.

Then I saw something happening closer to the stage, in the crowds. A group of attendees, dressed all in black, were pushing their way through the crowd — quite rudely, forcing

people out of their way, so that the crowd started anticipating their arrival and parting in advance so as not to get shoved.

I squinted past the lights. In the middle of the small gang of people was the indisputably malevolent form of my half-brother, Apollo Brock. His head was bowed, but I'd been stared down at by him from enough billboards over the past months that I'd recognize him from just the tip of his ears or the corner of his eyebrows.

I glanced at the other members of the band. "It looks like someone received our message."

"Didn't count on him fucking up our one reunion gig though, did we?" Reed sounded a little cranky, but he gave me a wink all the same, to show that things were okay between us. "Should we be honored? When was the last time the infamous Apollo Brock showed his face in public?"

"Feels like he's everywhere with those billboards." I looked darkly at the approaching huddle of Apollo's guards. "But you're right. An honor, for sure."

Apollo's huddle of security reached the barriers. Half of them vaulted the barriers to restrain the security stopping anyone from jumping over. The other half lifted Apollo over the barrier, and then onto the stage, holding him aloft like he was a king being carried on a throne.

He was close enough now for me to see his expression. His eyes were dark, his brow furrowed. He glanced around at us, but he didn't meet my eyes. For some reason, none of us said anything. Perhaps we thought we'd briefly had our voices taken away now that the microphones had ceased to work. More likely, we had no idea what was happening.

Apollo headed for an unused microphone just to the left of the main band area of the stage. He turned to face the audience, who were comparatively silent, though a whisper of mumbles swept the crowd.

He tapped the mic, and the sound was like being able to hear the drop of a pin in a quiet room.

I guessed that microphone was the only one working, then.

At last, he spoke. “Hello, assembled fans of my brother’s middling and quite dated rock band. You may or may not know me. My name is Apollo Brock, author of the number one bestselling memoir *The Black Sheep: The Lives and Lies of My Brothers*. You more likely know me, if at all, as the brother of your favorite band’s lead singer, Sylvester Brock, who, it should be clear, did not invite me on stage tonight.”

Apollo didn’t look at me even as he mentioned my name. He was speaking in quite a stilted manner compared to his usual dramatic flair. For some reason, this was scarier than if he had just started cackling evilly into the microphone.

“I apologize for using you, assembled music ‘fans’, as a *de facto* press conference. But I have news I just couldn’t wait to share with the world. And, in this modern age, aren’t we all journalists of social media, in the end?”

A dramatic pause. Silence from the crowd. But, I noted, a majority of the people in the audience were holding their phones, recording or texting. So Apollo was kind of right.

Reed took a warning step towards Apollo. “Get to the point.”

He was met with an icy glare that seemed to halt him in his tracks.

Apollo turned back to the microphone, cleared his throat and continued: “I hereby announce I am stepping down as CEO of *Brock Industries*. That is all I have to say, really. Ever again. Thank you, and goodnight.”

Then he turned around and stalked off backstage, leaving us in stunned silence, unable to play our instruments.

LUNA



There was a sharp intake of breath from Priscilla's throat, a rasp that cut through the silence of the sound booth. "*Stupid boy.*" Her voice was a hiss.

Then she turned around to face me. "I warned you not to meddle with my son's head. Start picking at it and it all falls apart. Do you know *how many years* I spent carefully constructing that boy's mind?"

I really had no sympathy for Priscilla. "He's hardly a boy." But I could see how she could easily whisper lies into someone's ears. I'd been taken in by her, in the recording studio, when we'd sung such a beautiful duet and she'd held me while I cried.

"No matter." She turned around airily to the sound desk. "This wasn't the eventuality I wanted. But it's not like I hadn't prepared for the possibility I'd have to step up as CEO."

I couldn't help it – I blurted out my reaction before I could stop myself. "*You're the new CEO of Brock Industries.*"

"Why yes, child. In fact, it was mine from day one – a clause in the will I persuaded Emory to leave in. I simply preferred to use Apollo as my figurehead all these years. I found that retiring from public life suited me rather well –

after I was no longer required to pretend to be a maid during daylight hours.”

Even when being held hostage by Priscilla, I couldn't force myself to sound enthusiastic for her benefit. “Congratulations, I guess.”

Luckily, she was barely paying attention to my responses. With a wave of her hand, she took a step towards the door. “But I suppose the stage lights beckon to me once again. Time to make my re-entrance onto the world stage. Bruce, start up my backing track, will you? I'm going to take the spare mic and make my way to the stage. The rest of you, come with me. If they parted for Apollo, they'll part with me.”

Backing track?! What on Earth was about to happen?

Priscilla left the sound booth, taking most of the security with her, except for the two holding me by the arms and ‘Bruce’, who was operating the sound desk. Outside the booth, I could hear one of the technicians on the phone to the police, or maybe the venue security.

Bruce fiddled with the sound desk, and suddenly the backing track to one of Priscilla's best-known hits, ‘I Wanna (Take Over the World)’, started blaring over the speakers across the entire concert hall.

I found myself laughing aloud at her choice of song. Maybe I'd gotten a bit hysterical. Possibly I was over-tired.

The crowd started jostling, looking around, wondering what was about to happen next. I couldn't see, from this far away, what Sylvester and the band's reactions were on stage. Their instruments and microphones were still muted.

Then, the crowd, starting at the back and rippling forwards to the front, began to turn around to face the back of the room.

The guards holding my arms let me step forwards, up against the glass of the sound booth, so I could look down in time to see Priscilla Lamb, surrounded by her suited-up bodyguards, pushing her way into the crowds just as her fake son had done only moments ago.

Into the microphone that Apollo had been using, which was the only one working, Sylvester quickly yelled: “And now for another special surprise guest, one which was definitely planned... seventies icon Priscilla Lamb, in her first appearance in decades!”

“I’ll have you know...” Priscilla paused dramatically before continuing. “...That’s Priscilla Brock, to you.”

From what Apollo had told me, Priscilla and Emory had never been married. But, if she were as obsessed as Apollo claimed, it made sense that she had decided to take his name, anyway.

Pushing into the crowd and surrounded by her bodyguards, who seemed to be sweeping the crowd back almost to the beat of the music, like the world’s most muscular and inflexible backing dancers, Priscilla sang.

I wanna (take over the world)

I’m gonna (take over the world)

You stop me (you can’t stop me)

You try and stop me (you can’t stop me)

It was undeniable that she hadn’t lost her skills since she’d disappeared. She’d clearly been keeping up her practice in that recording studio, and perhaps, before Emory’s death, while working as his maid. Her voice had incredible range and power. Her songs were iconic, if obviously a little dated for today’s audiences.

*Soon you'll see there's no denying
I'm Priscilla and I'm flying
Higher than the highest mountains
Up above the tallest trees
Watch me soar and swoop and sparkle
Just step back look up and marvel
At the greatest woman of all time
The one and only
The divine, gorgeous and wise
But cunning when she has to be
The winner in the end is me
There's no point in fighting destiny
Don't you see
The power all belongs to me
It's me, Priscilla, future Priestess of Everything*

The two guards holding my arms glanced at each other and let me go, heading for the door, possibly to help form Priscilla's getaway. I rubbed gently at the skin of my arms where their brute hands had pressed bruises into my flesh. Bruce, the last remaining bodyguard, was entirely fixated on the sound desk.

*I wanna (take over the world)
I'm gonna (take over the world)
You stop me (you can't stop me)
You try and stop me (you can't stop me)*

So, as Priscilla danced onto the stage to the end of the song, and the end of the backing track was nigh, I turned on my heel and ran out of the sound booth and down the stairs towards the backstage area.

I found the three other Brock brothers at the door that led to backstage.

“Luna!” Forest greeted me. “We got here in time to catch the end of Priscilla’s... song. Can you let us in backstage?”

“Hi, yeah, sure.” I keyed in the code and pulled open the door for them, ushering them through before any random members of the public could follow us inside.

Winston frowned, pausing and examining my arms before he passed through the door. “Where did you get those bruises?”

I shut the door behind us, and started leading the way to where we would find Sylvester... or Priscilla.

I glanced at my arms. I’d forgotten the bruises, but I could feel them, freshly sore, now they’d been pointed out to me. “Oh, yeah. I was held hostage by Priscilla while Apollo and then Priscilla stormed the stage. Her security guards have pointy fingers, I guess. I don’t think they all had fake nails as long as hers, though, or I’d have holes in my arms instead of bruises.”

I had everyone’s attention now. Jude looked highly concerned. “Are you okay?”

I smiled around at them. “Weirdly, yes. I don’t know if I’m gonna freak out later when the adrenaline wears off, or if I’m just accustomed to all of this drama by now... but I’m fine.”

“I think she’s in shock.” Winston addressed the other brothers, then turned back to me. “Luna, I’m gonna make sure

you're assessed after we've caught up with Sylvester. Unless you're feeling short of breath or panicky or anything right now..."

"I'm fine. Honestly."

"Alright. But I'll be checking over you soon, mark my words. After saying 'her security guards have pointy fingers', I'll be surprised if you don't have some kind of concussion."

I had bruises on my arms, not my head, but I took his point. I was a little lightheaded, maybe. Yes, I was definitely overtired. But I didn't feel anxious or worried. My nerves at all the situations in which I was currently involved had melted away when I had taken to that stage and performed for the cheering crowds as I was supposed to have done years ago.

Even being held hostage by Priscilla hadn't dulled the shine of my evening. There was still time, of course, for events to unfold even further tonight.

But, even now, I was flying high. Two decades of stress and failure and self-loathing had been expunged from my insides, leaving me feeling fresh and optimistic about the future.

Now, time to face the music.

SYLVESTER



The crowd, presuming that Priscilla's song was a bizarre, if planned, appearance, burst into rapturous applause as her backing track finished and she bowed as if humble, sending air kisses into the crowd. She didn't have legions of die-hard fans, like *Needlehead* did, but she was much more of a household name, in part due to her mysterious disappearance.

The internet was probably blowing up right now. I imagined I'd hate to see the state of my phone notifications.

Priscilla, graciously, handed me the microphone she'd commandeered as she swept past me. Her long purple nails grazed the backs of my fingers as the microphone exchanged hands. She smiled at me, that enchanting, alluring smile, as she passed. She was like a poisonous frog – brightly colored and toxic.

I wanted to race after her and confront her, but I had the fans to think of. They'd paid to be here, and they'd certainly gotten their money's worth as far as drama was concerned, but I had to thank them before we left.

“Wow, what an evening's entertainment, huh?” The crowd cheered and laughed. “I think that's enough excitement for one evening, so we'll be leaving it there. But, er, Reed, is it safe to

say that people will be hearing more from us in the future?” I handed the microphone to Reed.

Reed smirked and accepted the microphone. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to say that, Sylvester. Old pal.”

The crowd erupted into screaming applause once more. Though they’d all hated me for splitting up the band, I’d be forgiven if we got back together to release more music. Or at least, I hoped so.

I glanced at Mark and Petey, who nodded, and so I tipped my head at Reed, set the mic down on the floor, and we all left the stage together as a band, to the continuous cheers and foot-stamping and clapping of the somewhat bewildered, but still excited, crowd.

In the hallway outside, I was almost bowled over by the onslaught of my three brothers speed-walking in our direction, led by Luna, who was weirdly grinning.

“Oh hello, Jude, Forest, Winston. Did any of you see where Priscilla went?”

The gang of them stopped pacing and shook their heads.

Then a voice trilled out from the green room. “Oh boys!”

I cursed and followed the sound of the voice, the band and my brothers following behind me, Luna too.

Priscilla had commandeered most of our green room now for her crew of bodyguards. She stood in the middle of them, protectively, her hands poised in front of her like a graceful statue, glittering a smile at all of us. When she saw Luna, the edges of her mouth twitched downwards. “And girl, too.”

I decided to get straight to the point. “Erm, hello. Nice to meet you. What the fuck is going on here?”

Priscilla smiled as if I'd asked that in a much politer way and swept her arms out into the air as if unveiling a grand monument to her own greatness. "Well, thank you, *Needlehead* crew, and Luna, for letting me share your stage tonight. Brocks, I'm glad you're all here to hear this. This may not come as a surprise to you, but, since Apollo has stepped down as the CEO of *Brock Industries*, I'll be taking up that post. You'll be relieved to know I have no personal grudge against any of you. So you can consider that slate wiped clean. Stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. Alright? Wonderful."

Before I could formulate a thought, never mind a sentence, Priscilla pushed forwards through the small crowd towards the exit door. At the same time, venue security finally showed up – that'll teach me not to bring my own security team – and faced off with Priscilla at the door.

Airily, she trilled: "Don't worry, darlings. I'm making my own way out. I don't need escorting, thank you very much."

The venue security followed after her, anyway, presumably to make sure that she really was gone.

Then, the green room was silent.

I, as usual, decided to break it. "Did we... er... did we actually manage to vanquish Apollo?"

Forest looked just as stunned as most of us. "Yeah. I think he's... gone. I mean, he stepped down as the CEO. That's big. I can't imagine he intends to keep up his campaign against us with his own personal means."

I sighted Luna, who was still smiling, which was slightly disconcerting. Then I saw the bruises on her arms, and I rushed over. "Who did this to you?"

She shrugged and wrapped her arms around me. “Priscilla’s guards. I followed Apollo’s security up to his private booth. He was going to storm the stage and shut down the concert. And then... I talked to him.”

The cogs in my brain were whirring. “You... talked to him? What did you say?”

“We just kind of chatted about how really, he’s been being manipulated all along by Priscilla. That his problems aren’t really with you four, but with all of the expectations he’s had foisted on him since he was born, basically.”

I was malfunctioning. “Just... you just... you just... chatted with him?!”

Luna frowned, confused. “Yeah. Shouldn’t I have?”

But I couldn’t get the words out. “You... you... you...”

Jude stepped forwards behind me. In his deep, smooth voice he spoke for me. “I think what Sylvester is trying to say, is that *we* didn’t really manage to vanquish Apollo, after all.” He stepped forward until he was next to me, until I could see that he was grinning with the kind of cheesy grin I rarely saw from my stoic and serious eldest brother. He held his hand out to point towards Luna. “You did. You vanquished him.”

Luna’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

Winston burst out laughing from across the room. “Oh, man! Our greatest enemy, just vanquished with the power of... actually having a fucking five-minute chat about his issues. Luna, you might be insane for trying to have a conversation about feelings with Apollo, but turns out you’re a goddamn genius.”

From somewhere in the green room, Forest had managed to locate a bottle of champagne. “A toast! To getting rid of

Apollo, hopefully for good, and to Luna Black, for somehow managing to Jedi mind-trick him into quitting as the CEO of his own goddamn company.”

“Hear hear!” Winston began handing out glasses.

Luna looked totally bewildered by the realization that she had almost single-handedly taken down our greatest nemesis, a man who had been plaguing us with constant psychological torment for years now.

Behind her, Felix sprang through the door looking like he’d possibly napped through the entirety of the concert. He made a beeline for Reed’s arms, and the two of them began gratuitously making out as the champagne was poured and handed out.

“Oh yeah.” Forest suddenly seemed to remember that Reed, Petey and Mark were there, too. “And of course, to *Needlehead* for your, er, awesome concert...”

I snorted. “Don’t pretend to know anything about music, Forest.”

Reed separated from Felix’s lips long enough to add: “Thanks though, for the afterthought.”

When the champagne was in the hands of everyone gathered there, I decided to put Forest out of his misery and take over the proceedings. “Alright, gang. To vanquishing Apollo Brock, to Luna Black who vanquished him, and to *Needlehead*’s reunion and hopeful continued collaboration! Cheers!”

A chorus of cheers swept over the room and we all took a glug of the champagne. Except, of course, Luna, who just smiled and tipped a little bit of it onto the floor as a gesture.

As the noises of our celebration faded, a much larger, louder noise started to filter through into the green room. It was the noise of thousands of people bellowing, singing, cheering...

The word on their lips? *Encore*.

Mark looked pale. "Oh. I forgot about the encore."

Petey glanced at me. "Do we even have a technician anymore? Or were they disposed of by Priscilla?"

I looked to Reed for some guidance. Unfortunately, he was otherwise occupied in Felix's arms.

Instead, I looked at Forest. Time for me to make decisive action. "Hey, Forest. You're good at computers, techy things, right?"

Forest could see where this was going. He grimaced, pushing his glasses up his nose, clutching the champagne glass into his chest with the others. "I guess so... yes..."

I snorted. "You run a tech company, so I'm going to take that as a more enthusiastic yes. Please, please, pretty please would you go and check out the sound desk?"

Forest handed his glass to Jude, shaking his head, and left the room.

I called after him: "Text me when you're in position!" Then to the band: "Are we ready for an encore?"

Reed finally parted from my twin brother's embrace. "Not really, no. But I guess we owe them one after the ramshackle nature of this gig."

"Ramshackle? Never. *Exciting* is more like it." I winked. My phone buzzed in my pocket. "Alright, Forest's in position. Let's get this over with."

I started heading for the door that led to the stage, then I stopped and looked at Luna. “Are you alright, my love?”

She nodded. “This evening has been like a weird dream. But, yeah, I’m feeling... I’m feeling really good actually!” She was glowing like she really meant it. This was a Luna I don’t think I’d ever seen before. She wasn’t just happy, she looked... overjoyed.

“Join us on stage. Please.”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“Please, Luna? It’ll make the crowd happy.”

She smirked. “Anything for your audience of baying fans.”

“That’s the spirit.” I took her hand and pulled her after the other members of the band and out into the bright, bright lights of the stage.

Seeing the five of us descending on our instruments once more, the crowd’s calls for an encore gave way to shrieks and yells of delight.

I walked Luna up to the front of the stage. Under the lights, she dazzled even more. I couldn’t help myself. I knew I was on a stage in front of thousands of people, but in that moment, I just had to kiss her. I turned to her, swept the loose strands of jet-black hair out of her eyes, cupped her face, and paused just long enough to see her eyes shining with that glow that she’d attained somehow tonight.

Then, in front of everyone, I kissed her.

Though the crowd became louder than they had been that entire evening, their presence kind of faded away as I held Luna in my arms and felt the soft push of her lips against

mine, her tongue against mine, her slightly warm body against mine.

The thousands of people were barely there anymore. I only had eyes for her.

LUNA



I sneaked a sideways look at my dad. Beside me, his eyes were welling up with tears, his mouth held stiffly to try and hold back the flow. I put my arms around him, leaning my head into him, and he ruffled the top of my head.

In front of us, through the glass of the recording studio, a huge orchestra were playing one of my dad's compositions. This was the first time he had ever seen one of his compositions played in full. It had been my one goal in life to hire an orchestra to play these for him. And now, I hadn't even had to. They were about to be used in a film by my dad's favorite film director. Everything was perfect.

Eli Robinson looked up approvingly at us. "I'll give you two some privacy to enjoy the music." She left, closing the door quietly as she did so.

My dad was a man of few words, but I didn't need him to speak to know what he was feeling right now. I was really proud of him. I was also, to my incredible surprise, really proud of me. I'd managed to shake off two decades worth of business and revitalize my passion for music.

I'd done a lot of the work myself, but I wasn't sure I'd have started any of it if not for Sylvester's re-entry into my

life. I wished he was here with us right now, but he had said he had some other engagement and regrettably could not make it.

As the last song to be recorded drew to a close, my dad wiped his face of tears with a handkerchief and offered it to me, too.

Oh yeah, I was crying, too. Damn hormones. I'd never cried this much in my life.

I dabbed at my tears. "Would you like to get some lunch?"

Curiously, my dad shook his head. A cryptic smile had made its way onto his face.

"You don't want to get lunch? That's okay. Maybe we can go for a walk."

My dad shook his head again, still smiling.

Just then, the orchestra started up again. I was confused. There had been a schedule, and everything had been recorded to perfection.

Besides, this wasn't a song I'd heard before. Were they just making use of the studio to practice, record something else?

Then I heard something in the midst of the composition: a little melody from one of my solo songs. A shiver went up my spine and I froze solid on the spot, transfixed by whatever the orchestra was doing. Then the song shifted, and a melody from a different song of mine worked its way into the composition. It was beautiful – my music transformed from lo-fi rock into a full orchestral symphony.

I looked at my dad, who had tears in his eyes once again, and was smiling at me. "What is-"

A voice came from the doorway behind us. "We called it *Luna's Theme*."

I startled around to see Sylvester there, dressed casually in that way that reminded me of the Sylvester I'd first known. He hadn't changed at all really since we'd been teenagers. We were both a little older, disputedly a little wiser. The only thing that had changed his been my perception, and our misconceptions.

I beckoned him over. "Who's we?"

My dad's voice chimed in. "Me and Sylvester."

I was just as surprised to hear my dad speak, so overcome with emotion as he'd been, as I had been to see Sylvester arrive. "You two... composed this together?"

My dad nodded. He sent a wink Sylvester's way.

Sylvester grinned back. Then he tilted his head to one side, looking at me. "Do you like it?"

I was overwhelmed. It was one of the most beautifully arranged things I'd ever heard. I'd never felt so seen in my life. The two people I loved the most, who knew me the best, had created an orchestral arrangement out of snatches of the songs I'd written.

Sylvester slid his hand into mine. "I'm going to take that look on your face as a yes."

I stood and listened to the rest of the performance, resting between my two favorite men in the world. Sylvester's hand stroked my palm, and I realized I was crying again. My dad dabbed carefully at my face as if I might not have the coordination right now to wipe my own tears away. That only made me cry more. But these were tears of happiness, and I didn't mind them.

The song ended, and the three of us naturally applauded the orchestra, even though they couldn't hear us. Sylvester's

hand slithered out of mine so he could clap with both.

Then, when I looked around, he was down on one knee on the floor.

I gasped. “Oh no you don’t, Sylvester Brock!”

He grinned up at me. “Oh yes I do, Luna Black.” I saw now that there were tears shining in his eyes too. Just a single manly one had managed to escape and made it halfway down his cheek. “Luna, it’s only ever been you. I thought I didn’t deserve you, and maybe I’ll still be proven right, but for some crazy reason, I think you’d be upset if I tried to martyr myself and pull away so you could find someone better...”

I laughed, angrily, if that’s a possible thing to do. I had too many emotions raging in me right now. “Yes, I would be!”

Sylvester laughed at my reaction. “So, in that case, with all options of being selfless taken away from me... I must make the choice to be selfish, and ask you for what I truly, truly want. What I want, Luna, selfish as I may be... is to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you, Luna?”

He looked up at me with such hope.

I played dumb, deadpanning. “Will I what?”

He blinked and faltered. “Err, I mean to say, will you, um, will you, err... if it’s alright with you, I mean... will you marry me?”

I smirked, and he realized with a jolt that I’d tricked him for a moment. He laughed into the ring box.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. Yes, of course. Of course. I will.”

He fake-scowled up at me. “You will what?”

I smiled. “Marry you. I will marry you.”

I wiggled my fingers and made it difficult for him to slide the ring on. But finally he grabbed me by the wrist, wrestled the ring onto my finger, then held up my hand for us both to admire. It fit perfectly. I was his, and he was mine.

EPILOGUE



We listened to the baby cry.

I looked in the direction of the adjoining baby room, then swiveled my head in Luna's direction. "What do you think?"

"What do you mean, what do I think?" Luna gave me a sideways look. "Wait, are you still on about—"

"Musical baby!" I grinned at her, and she flopped over onto her back.

She rolled her eyes up at the ceiling, then spoke in quite a flat, reasonable tone. "I'm just not sure how a baby cries is evident of future musical prowess. You'd need to conduct a study, except you wouldn't know which babies would go on to be musical, so you'd need to study so many babies... it's just not realistic."

"Nuh-uh. We only need one test subject. Our little Ziggy."

She looked unconvinced. "If anything, having that name is gonna put him off a career in music."

"Hey, you said you liked it!"

Luna held her hands up in mock defense, giving in and bursting out into laughter. "I did! I mean, I do, I love the name,

you dolt. I'm sure he'll go on to be the next Mozart..."

I grinned and pounced on her, darting between tickling her on the sides and holding back her arms so she couldn't escape. Finally, she gave up, and we lay there for a moment, torsos pressed tightly against each other.

God, she was gorgeous. Always, but even more so in the half-light of our shared bedroom, her black silk slip luxuriating her skin, her hair tied back in a messy mom-bun, free of make-up, breasts tender and sensitive.

I slid a hand between us, slipping it up under her nightclothes so that I realized she wasn't wearing panties under there, and as my fingers glanced across her, I could feel how wet she was already. I stiffened even more against her.

She bit her lip coyly. Her eyes were taking in every inch of me. "Sylvester..."

Then Ziggy cried out again and we both cringed. I rolled off her, pulling on my silk dressing gown and shuffling my feet into slippers. "My turn."

Luna propped herself up on her arms, still flushed. "Isn't it mine?"

I smiled. "Maybe. What can I say, maybe I just love fatherhood."

She smirked back at me. "You're going to try and teach him chords before he can talk, aren't you?"

"I may have a hidden agenda. His first word is gonna be 'guitar'. Go on, you rest. I'm feeling wide awake anyway."

Her smile now was warmer, her eyes more open. "Did I ever mention I love you so much?"

“You did. But I won’t tire of hearing it. Or saying that I love you too. Very, very much.”

I kissed Luna’s forehead, grabbed my phone, and padded through to Ziggy’s little adjoining room, closing the door behind me so Luna could try and get some shut eye.

Ziggy’s desperate crying burred to a milder wail as I appeared on the edge of his developing awareness. And when I picked him up, enveloping him in my embrace, he practically silenced.

“Hey, little prodigy.” I spoke to him softly then started singing, as gently as I could, the opening lines of ‘Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars’, his namesake.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, interrupting my flow as I launched into the chorus. I pulled it out automatically, a throwback to when we had all been on Apollo high alert. Since then, he had stepped down as CEO and his adoptive mom Priscilla had taken over the company, vowing not to continue his grudge. We were safe from Apollo now. He no longer commanded the resources to come after us, even if he still wanted to.

But old habits die hard, and I unlocked my phone to reveal a mysterious message.

Unknown: *Don’t believe everything Priscilla says. She has her own agenda.*

The group chat pinged then, too. Ziggy gave a half-hearted cry-giggle and quietened when I bounced him.

Forest: *Did the rest of you get that message?*

Jude: *Yep.*

Winston: *Yeah*

Sylvester: *Affirmative*

Sylvester: *What do we reckon? Apollo trying to keep things exciting for us?*

Forest: *I mean, most likely, yeah*

Winston: *He's gotta be so bored right now*

Jude: *I do sometimes wonder where he's gone...*

I locked my phone and slipped it back into my pocket. It didn't matter to me where Apollo was right now: he was gone, and I was here with my beautiful wife and gorgeous son.

Things were perfect. And if there were challenges in my future, I was more equipped to deal with them than ever, with my little family at my side. And my bigger, extended family: the Brock brothers and their wives and kids, my brother Felix, my bandmates - and lead guitarist Reed's future child with Felix, since they were already talking adoption.

I'd never be short of support. Little Ziggy had so many people who cared deeply about him, his protectors.

Whether he was a musical prodigy or not, Luna and I loved him more than anything.

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