



WITH THE
Band

The

KILLJOY

LOLA WEST

THE KILLJOY

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Ain't nothing like a killjoy, baby.

*To all the bold and brazen bitches
who choose not to let the world put them down.*

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MEREDITH

The 6:27 a.m. local from Grand Central Station to Lochton, New York, wasn't fast enough. I bounced on the ball of my foot, making my knee jitter like a sewing machine needle. A overcast gray sky promising cool air raced by the window, but inside the train car was humid with the breath of strangers. Sweat gathered just above the waist of my painstakingly chosen librarian-like moss-green tweed skirt suit. I wasn't actually late for my first day as a teacher, but I wasn't going to be early. Feeling rushed wasn't for me. I worked best when I had the time to adjust to my surroundings.

I'd overslept. Notoriously an overzealous organizer, I'd set my alarm for 3:45 a.m. My plan was a leisurely two hours—shower, get dressed, linger over a cup of coffee, casually make my way to Grand Central Station, and catch the 5:57 express train. But after an early dinner, snuggled down under my covers in my nightgown, anxiety took hold. Was I doing the right thing, abandoning my coveted position at LSA Records to take a job teaching music at Hawthorne Academy? I had attended the private school as a kid and my memories of the place weren't exactly warm and fuzzy. I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. But was that teaching? In some ways I couldn't even imagine myself standing in front of

a room full of students and presenting myself as their educator. I mean, at twenty-three, wasn't I still more teenager than anything else? What if they thought I was a fraud?

With panicked thoughts spinning in my head, I tossed. I turned. I stared at the shadowy ceiling and fitfully twisted and harrumphed in my sheets until way after midnight, so I wasn't all that surprised when James—one of my seven roommates and closest friend—woke me by hovering over my bed with a cup of steaming coffee, saying, "It's like twenty to six, Mer."

Needless to say, my leisurely two hours was cut short, a real rush job with obvious consequences: eyeliner that was nowhere near straight, hair a frizz-fest, and my underwear definitely on backwards and possibly inside out. But none of it mattered because the adrenaline of a possible win pumped through my veins. I wasn't out yet. By abandoning casual for driven, I could make it to school on time.

So when the breaks squeaked as the train slowed, nearing the station, I jumped up, gathered my brown leather backpack and purse, and made my way to the exit. With a whistled release of compressed air, the train doors opened, and I was off, rushing down the platform, past the strangers waiting to board.

My plan was to shave a few minutes off my commute by crossing the public park toward the river, and then cutting through a cluster of trees that butted up against the school campus near the rowing team's boathouse. A smattering of mud on my boots was a fair exchange for making it to check in at the administrative office and get into my classroom before my students arrived.

But Lord, luck was not on my side. Halfway to the boathouse, the heavens opened up. Raindrops the size of dice

pummeled down from the sky and my perfectly executed professional librarian-vibe melted away, leaving behind my impersonation of a mangy wet rodent. I pulled off my jacket, trying to cover my head, but it was no use. Blond wisps of hair turned mousy and plastered themselves to my cheeks and chin. There was nothing I could do but keep moving. Goodbye composure. Goodbye facade of poise and maturity. Hello, scatterbrained smart girl who thinks of herself as a feminist but hasn't figured out how to call herself a grown woman in her inner monologue.

Clenching my teeth to hold back frustrated tears, I trudged through the tree line toward the boathouse. I took deep breaths as I approached the building, planning to hide under its awning for a few moments and make an actual plan. I thought perhaps I'd use my phone to call Janey Chamberlain—my childhood friend who worked at Hawthorne and suggested me for the job.

Not wanting to be seen in my drowned condition, I approached the side of the boathouse that was completely obscured by the trees. I knew the spot well. In my days as a Hawthorne student, I often escaped to the building's shade when the social pressure of not being a perfect prep school barbie doll overwhelmed me. Hidden in the shadows on the old dock by the edge of the water, I'd always been able to catch my breath and find the will to brave the rest of my day. I called on those old memories of comfort as I jogged around the corner, soaked and unseemly, and for a moment I almost felt calm.

But then, the glare of familiar gray-green eyes stopped me in my tracks.

“Ezra,” His name washed over my lips, a heavy, inappropriate whisper. We’d met a couple months earlier when Janey reached out about this temporary job teaching music at Hawthorne. Unsure if I would be well suited to the work, I invited a class of students to come to LSA Records. I thought showing them around the studio would help me decipher if teaching was for me—and it did. After that day with the students, I felt teaching might just fill the psychic emptiness I’d been grappling with—my need to see the positive effects and influence of my work. I thought if I could help young people understand the power of music as not only entertainment, but as a catalyst for human evolution, unity, and communication, then I’d feel grounded because I’d know I was doing my part to make the world better. If anything, I only had one tiny moment of doubt, and here he was standing right in front of me, loitering in my spot by the old boathouse as if he owned the place.

The first time Ezra and I made eye contact, I felt light-headed. He wasn’t like the other students that traipsed into the lobby of Bruno’s record company. He wasn’t awkward or odd. There was nothing gangly or knobby-kneed about him. His movements were slow and calculated, as though he was taking a mental inventory of the space around him. He was wary. He hung back from the crowd, claiming a spot off to the side where he could lean against the wall. He was easily six inches taller than anyone else, and his look was all rocker—worn black jeans with ripped knees, Converse, a white T-shirt, and a jean jacket with a cream-colored fleece collar. Nothing about what he was wearing was warm enough for freezing temperatures outside.

His hair was dark and shaggy, falling around his face and keeping his eyes in shadow. He wore a heavy silver ring on his

right thumb, another on the middle finger of his left hand. On his right wrist I could see the swirling black markings of what looked like a full sleeve of tattoos. I would have bet a thousand bucks that he had a pack of cigarettes on his person and that the dry woody stink of tobacco lingered on his fingertips. It was instantly clear that he wasn't a kid with an easy life. He didn't look like a kid at all, and at the time I contemplated the possibility that he wasn't one of the students—but his pregnant teacher crossed to him, urging him to join the group.

It was at that moment that he and I first locked eyes. His were a deep unforgettable earthy green, like the moss that grows between rocks and under trees, hiding its liveliness from the sun. When he caught sight of me watching him, he peered back, hard and unflinching. His stare felt like a snarl, like he was an animal standing his ground and proving his strength. I didn't want him to feel threatened by me. I wanted him to like me—to feel he could trust me, confide in me, be safe with me, learn from me. So I tried with all my might to send him the message that I was open, kind, accepting, that I wasn't looking to fight. The muscles in my face relaxed and gently, sweetly, I smiled.

As I shifted, so did he. Instead of quieting the beast inside him, I intrigued it. The heat in his eyes rose fast and hard and suddenly, I was bare before him. His desire drove right through any facade of professionalism that I might have offered to the clenching truth at my core. For two beats, everything froze. It was base and animalistic, a raw unadulterated attraction unlike anything I'd ever known. My breaths grew ragged. My heart pounded. And like a swarm of bees, my blood surged, rushing through my veins, echoing in my ears.

Within a second, I remembered reality and looked away. Ezra was a student and I was potentially his teacher. I'd felt him watching me that day, but I let the electric combustion of our one moment recede into my subconscious. I was not an animal. I was a fully conscious human being who could exert control over her hungers.

Sure, there was only a handful of years between us and he was clearly of legal age, but I minored in women's studies in school. I believed in consensual relationships, and if the power dynamic between two people was unequal, then consent was not possible. So, even though my body seemed sucked into Ezra's gravitational pull, my mind could steer me free of his magnetism.

Even at twenty-three, I knew that in each of us there exists an innate and endless longing; it's the part of the human condition that gave birth to the first missed connection ad. The hand of a handsome stranger reaching for your coffee cup. A smile or a laugh that seems to play on repeat in your mind. A found journal entry or sappy letter. A glance across a crowded room. What could have been fantasies unburdened by reality were extremely powerful because it's so easy to fall for your mind's idea of a person. Ideas don't leave the toilet seat up. Ideas don't ogle other women or men; they don't have opinions about your clothes or get jealous. Ideas are flawless. The reality of a relationship is insanely complicated, influenced by millions of factors.

Two breaths was all it took for me to be smart enough to sidestep the chaos that occurred when we let our romantic ideas take the wheel. A baseless attraction to Ezra had no good outcome. When it came to relationships, it was always best to leave Pandora's box right where you found it. Locked up tight and pushed back into the darkest corner of the shelf.

So that's what I did. I treated Ezra like all the other students in the room, asked his name, questioned his musical influences, and kept a professional distance. By the time they exited the building, I'd convinced myself that his allure was nothing at all, just one of those aforementioned odd cosmic anomalies, the kind of fleeting human kismet that ruffles everyone's feathers now and again. And yet, there I was a couple months later under the boathouse awning with my mascara weeping down my cheeks, looking into his eyes, having another moment that felt utterly lurid and clandestine.

He didn't speak. Just stared hotly, his breathing fast. He was holding a Dixie cup with a clipart image of steaming coffee on the side. Shifting away from the intensity of his glare, I shook the water from my body by stomping my feet and wringing out my hair with my hands before pulling it into a bun.

"I got caught in the rain," I said, dumbly stating the obvious because I didn't know how to manage his silence. I was cold; goosebumps coated my skin as a mist floating off the water gathered around our knees. The chill seemed like a good reason to keep moving. Also, standing next to him was making me more and more anxious. Afraid of sounding unprofessional when I called Janey freaking out, I decided to just make a run for it. Barely talking to him, I sighed. "I guess I'll just have to brave it if I don't want to be late."

I turned, preparing to run back out into the rain and manage the consequences of the deluge when I got to the administration office. But before I could head off, the wooden floor beneath my feet creaked and Ezra's strong grip ensnared the back of my arm.

“No,” he growled, his tone dark and thick, drippy like syrup against the back of my neck. Where he touched my arm, warmth blossomed, cascading through my body like ripples in the water on the surface of a lake. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even turn to look at him. He was behind me, close enough that our shadows became one. I heard him swallow, clearing his throat, before he said, “You can’t go like that.”

With a heavy breath, he released my arm and stepped back. I turned to face him, preparing to say something quippy about how I’d eventually dry out, but I completely lost my train of thought when he shrugged out of his jean jacket and reached down to pull the hem of the gray Henley he was wearing over his head.

Somehow, I formed the word, “What...” as he stood before me in a black undershirt, but then he removed that too and at the sight of his puckered rosy-red nipples and the planes of his abs, I was rendered speechless. He held out the black t-shirt, offering it to me. I shook my head no. I couldn’t. I literally couldn’t. The thought of the fabric that smelled like him pressing into my skin all day was not an option.

I managed to say, “No, but thank you.”

His eyes fluttered closed, and he pulled a deep breath in through his nose before he spoke.

“Meredith.” I noted that didn’t call me Ms. Campbell, like he should have. “Your blouse... it’s...”

I looked down. The white fabric of my shirt had gone completely sheer and it clung to my breasts, revealing my own rosy pebbles.

Shit.

I snapped my arms up, crossing them over my chest like I could somehow erase what he'd already seen.

Ezra focused his eyes elsewhere, tipping his head up as if the decaying wood above our heads was endlessly fascinating.

“Oh my God,” I rattled, my voice on the verge of tears. “Oh my God.”

“It's not a big deal.” His voice was laced with a bitter kind of sarcasm or disdain, as if my embarrassment annoyed him.

“Oh my God,” I lamented a third time, frantically pulling on and buttoning my jacket. “It is. It's a big deal.”

“Why?” he questioned brutally. Shifting his gaze to my newly covered tawdry bits before playfully making eye contact and snarking, “You think I've never seen a pair of tits?”

His words stung. Because they were ugly. Because Ezra was angry. Maybe not at me really. Maybe he was just angry at everything. But in that moment, he chucked his words at me, trying to make me feel little, and it worked. His dickish assault pierced my chest and shattered any ideas I was harboring about a connection between the two of us.

Snatching the shirt he offered from his hands, I snapped, “I'd appreciate it if you'd forget this ever happened and at least pretend like you have a modicum of respect for my authority as your teacher.” With that, I stuffed his shirt into my bag, hoping to keep it dry as I spun and trudged toward the storm.

He hummed at my back. “Some things just aren't forgettable, Teach.”

EZRA

I sculked toward the back corner of the music room, pushing past Sloan Riley, a wannabe Instagram influencer, and jostled her arm as she tried to take a selfie.

“WTF, Ezra,” she snapped. I’d slept with her a few times. She was more friendly naked. Pretty rich Hawthorne girls, like Sloan, thought I was great for unencumbered orgasms because I kept their dirty desires secret and their reputations untarnished. Sloan should have been the queen of the hashtags #DateUpFuckDown #Stillavirgin;))

“What the fuck, Sloan,” I chided back, moving toward the chair where I religiously chose to sit. It was on the highest riser, near the windows. A spot where no one sat next to me and no one bothered me. I had a couple of friends at Hawthorne, Nick and Jake, but neither was driven by music like me. The primary thing the three of us had in common was financial aid.

Usually, I was the first one in the classroom. I liked the silence of being surrounded by still instruments. I liked the potential, the cacophony of notes just waiting to be unleashed. Before the other students arrived, my mind could hear the potential of unsung tunes. Sometimes I fancied myself the

sorcerer's apprentice, trapped in a chaotic fantasy world where the music I couldn't seem to control would come to life. Other times I just drank in the calm and sucked down my coffee in peace. It was one of the few moments in the day when I felt unburdened. But my run-in with Ms. Meredith Campbell kept me loitering by the boathouse later than usual.

Did you ever lay eyes on something foreign that was so familiar it left you completely unsettled? Sort of like *déjà vu*, only not. Or maybe you tasted something, and you knew you were the palette meant to relish that flavor. Looking into Meredith's eyes was like hearing a piece of music I wrote—only in the future. Since she invited our class to LSA Records, Bruno DiFranco's record company, a few months ago, I'd been haunted by her.

On the way home from the studio that day, I googled her. And then, I spent weeks hunting down every YouTube video she'd ever made. Most of them were beatboxing videos from when she was my age. Only unlike me, at nineteen years old, Meredith was in college. In most of the videos she partnered with James Baker—whom I'd heard of. He was one of LSA Records up-and-comers, a pop star. They were an odd pair. Neither seemed all that interested in the spotlight. They never faced the camera. They either looked at each other or closed their eyes. Their performances were all about the music. All about sound and exploration. There were whole sections that were just Meredith using her vocal cords and her mouth shapes to bring percussive sounds to life. I couldn't stop listening to her. I would lie in bed at night in the dark with my headphones on and close my eyes and just listen to the way she could create an entire symphony using nothing but her body. It was like she was a literal embodiment of music, a living instrument.

But my fascination wasn't all saintly appreciation. Meredith was an instrument I wanted to play. Fuck. When she crashed around the corner at the boathouse, all that wet fabric clinging to her breasts, I was instantly hard. More than hard, my dick clearly attempted to tear its way out of my pants. And then when she said my name like she was already coming for me—Jesus, I just wanted to drop to my knees, lift her skirt, and spread her out all over my face. I needed to hear what other sounds I could make her sing.

Only she wasn't one of the rich, young debutants who wanted to slum it on my dick. Meredith was a woman. She was an artist. She was a teacher. She wasn't going to just spread her thighs for my tongue. She knew who she was and what she wanted. I had no right to a woman like her. I was just another deadbeat, blue-collar kid who'd probably spend his life slinging drinks in some grimy bar, dreaming of writing music. I should have been thankful for the few months I got to sit in her classroom and listen to what she had to say because Meredith was as close as I was ever going to get to the music industry. But I couldn't seem to see it that way. I wanted to devour her.

Sinking into the anonymity of my spot in the classroom, I tipped my chair back, balancing on only two of the legs, and watched as the door opened. The other students around me continued their ruckus as Mrs. Chamberlain, one of the school administrators, and Meredith entered. Mer had recovered some since our moment by the boathouse, and she was wearing my shirt. She'd knotted it at her waist and somehow, she made it look fashionable. The look was better than the schoolmarm suit she'd chosen for her first day. In my t-shirt she looked cool and professional. Like she wasn't trying so hard to be 'the teacher.' Instead, she was edgy. She was who she actually was,

a badass music industry professional subbing at her alma mater because the regular music teacher was preggers and ready to pop.

To get the class's attention, Mrs. Chamberlain created a high-pitched whistle by putting four fingers in her mouth. The students settled and gave her their attention, but I stayed focused on Meredith, who was standing to her left, intentionally avoiding my gaze.

“As you all know, Ms. Campbell agreed to help us out while Mrs. Blake is on maternity leave.” Ms. Chamberlain boomed her announcement in that strange singson that only works for educators and nursing home staff. “I expect each of you to show her respect and be stellar representatives of the Hawthorne community. Understood?” Heads bobbed in agreement, but I was familiar with this crew and they had no idea what respect was. It wasn't their fault, really. It's hard to learn to respect other people or even understand the concept of respect when you've been handed anything and everything you've ever wanted. Satisfied, Mrs. Chamberlain signaled to the space at the center of the room and said to Meredith, “The floor is yours.”

After smiles, thank-yous, and goodbyes, Mrs. Chamberlain left Meredith standing awkwardly before us. She scanned the space and the faces before her, but stopped just before connecting with me. I was impressed by the tone of authority she took when she said, “I'd like to spend today learning from you what you've been working on. But before that, I'm betting I have a bit of work to do.” She started pacing as she spoke. “I know what Hawthorne is like, which means I know that I need to prove myself worthy of your attention.” She held up her hands and used her fingers to make quotation marks, as she said, “Because I'm sure that most of you 'steller

representatives of Hawthorne' think you know better than your teachers. Sooo..." She glanced around the room at the different musical choices and then while pointing toward the instrument, shrugged a rhetorical question. "Piano?"

The room was silent enough that I heard the shiny black bench sigh as she settled on its seat. Placing her fingertips on the keys, she looked out over the room.

"What do you think?" Her fingers started to sail and she played the introductory chords when she asked, "The Beatles, 'Let it Be'?" Two more stanzas and she started to sing. Her voice, a deep sultry alto, made my chest too warm, like sitting too close to the fire on a cold night. I closed my eyes and let the sound of her dance around me. She didn't mean to reinvent the melody, but the melancholy sound that emanated from her made the notes a smidge longer in a way that seemed to snarl at your heart like barbed wire.

Halfway through the second verse, she stopped. Talking to the room like we were all old friends, she shook her head. "Too easy, I think. I could have prepared that, right?" She left her fingers on the keys as she tilted her chin at the class. "You tell me. What should I play?"

Spotlight hungry, Sloan was the first to call out a suggestion. "Kate Bush, 'Running Up That Hill.'"

Meredith was unfazed. She closed her eyes, swayed her shoulders, and made her own hauntingly sexy deal with God, no problem.

Ed Caitlin, a nerdy metalhead, was next, "'Enter Sandman.'"

"Ooooooh... fun," Meredith quipped, leaning into the piano keys to jam out the deep, sultry Metallica riff.

“You know the lyrics?” she asked Ed.

He nodded yes.

“You want to sing?”

He grinned, almost laughing, and shook his head no.

She shrugged as if to say your loss before she growled her way off to never-never land for a bit before the next song was thrown her way.

One after another, my classmates threw pop songs at Meredith and didn't stump her. She was obviously some kind of a savant. No one knew how to play and sing everything, but Meredith seemed to. She wielded her talent like a spell, wooing the students in front of her to believe that she was the most talented person they'd ever met. She probably was, but I could see the strings she was pulling. The average Hawthorne student had to be blown away if she wanted any semblance of control.

The sad thing was they didn't know as much as they thought they did. There wasn't even one suggestion that came close to stumping her. Every song my peers presented was a good one, but none of them asked an artist to push the limits. They threw basketballs at her, not boulders. I wanted to see her catch a fucking boulder.

Thinking she had stumped them, she teased, “You guys give up?”

I scanned their faces from my vantage, and it was clear they did. My fellow students were all smiles, glancing back and forth between Meredith and each other with expressions that beamed, *Holy shit, can you believe this?*

Meredith removed her hands from the keys and pushed them into her thighs, readying to stand, but unlike my peers, I

wasn't quite satisfied.

“‘La Campanella,’ Franz Liszt.” My voice cut through the haze of side conversations and for the first time since she entered the room, Meredith looked at me. Our eyes locked. Everything around us went silent. I watched her draw a heavy breath through her nose. Anyone who had truly studied piano, knew that “La Campanella” was perhaps the most complicated piece of piano music ever written. And she seemed to know it. Unable to control my ego, I crossed my arms over my chest and winked at her. While I was outwardly snide, my heart thrummed with anticipation. I didn't know what would please me more, watching her squirm as she attempted to meet my request or seeing her master the painfully technically piece.

I stared her down, waiting for her to act. I didn't know if it was our connection or the prospect of a true challenge, but suddenly, her eyes sparked. They seemed to glitter with delight as they bored into mine. Briefly, she let a flash of something absolutely villainous cross her face, and then she turned back to the keys, unfazed.

Meredith attacked the piano, diving into the frenetic energy of the piece. Her body seemed to rock and drive with the chaos, and then she swayed as she moved through the serene and delicate melody that grounded Liszt's work. She knew the music well. So did I. I liked to study, understand, and master things that other people feared. But I couldn't do what she was doing. Meredith seemed to explode with the emotion of the music she performed.

She was a force that flooded your senses. “La Campanella” was a volcano of emotion. As she played, the truth of her power burrowed under my skin. All her composure fell away. And I understood the thing that haunted me about her.

Underneath all that demure, contained do-goodiness, Meredith was wildfire. A beautiful, unruly disaster.

I could see her fucking savage.

And I wanted it uncaged.

MEREDITH

“**Y**ou’ve got to be kidding me. What teenager knows ‘La Campanella?’” Eric laughed.

I was sitting cross-legged on the U-shaped sectional in the apartment, which I shared with my roommates. Most of my crew was still busy at the studio. But Eric and Josh often worked from home, so as soon as I came through the door, they appeared, wanting to know how my first day went.

“I’m not even sure I know ‘La Campanella,’” Josh joked.

There wasn’t much music Josh was unfamiliar with. Like all of us, he had attended The Randall School of Music, so he was well versed in music history. So he absolutely knew Liszt’s piece, but it wouldn’t matter if he didn’t know it. Three Grammys in his first year professionally producing for LSA Records made for a fairly bulletproof ego.

I sighed dramatically, letting my lips flub together and vibrate before answering.

“I’m pretty sure this particular guy knows everything.”

Eric laughed again and snarked, “Don’t all young men think they know everything? Isn’t that like the whole point of

being high school students—to be know-it-all bastards who hate everyone?”

Eric was perhaps the most anxious, geeky, and cynical of my friends. I adored him for it. He worked hard. Nothing he'd achieved came easily. His parents were scientists, and he thwarted their goals for him to chase a career as a recording engineer. His attitude was very different from the rest of our crew. He was quiet and sort of antisocial but also oddly passionate. He approached life with methodical diligence. A total nerd, by all accounts, but admittedly, the prettiest nerd-boy ever. And there was something undeniably satisfying about being his friend. Basically, I loved watching him be a successful weirdo; it gave my inner weirdo an utter sense of peace.

“Yeah, I guess, but this guy actually does know it all. I feel like he's savvier than me,” I sulked. I was upset about Ezra on so many levels.

I'd nailed “La Campanella.” I felt it in my bones. There's a certain power that takes over when a musician performs a piece that is loaded with emotional context. If you do it right, the music owns you. Your blood pumps faster and everything else disappears. It's intimate and dissociative, almost like having an orgasm. For a few moments, everything about you is alive and thriving but you are also so incredibly vulnerable. If the audience is tuned in to that frequency, it can feel like your soul is stripped naked in front of them. Most people just see the extraordinary. They can't put a name to it. But others know. They feel what you've shone them. They digest it and feed on it, rabid like beasts, hungry for a contact high.

As soon as the last note stopped reverberating through the classroom, I knew I'd made a mistake. Well, half a mistake.

The general consensus of the students was that I was a genius. Their silent slack-jawed, awestruck stares were delightful. In a matter of minutes, I had commanded their respect. They were young and maybe not worldly enough to see how deeply I dove to master “La Campanella.” What they knew was that they’d seen something that wowed them and going forward they would fall in line because they knew I had something to teach them.

But Ezra was different. He leaned back in his chair, smug. He made no secret of the fact that he saw us as adversaries. No, it was worse than that. Ezra didn’t see me like an equal opponent. He made me feel like his prey.

He intentionally requested “La Campanella.” He knew where a musician had to go emotionally to perform such a complicated piece of music. He’d flipped the table. It was as if he’d commanded and bowed before him. He had taken control and I didn’t even notice it was happening. The feminist in me was appalled, disgusted by his macho swagger. But there was some other layer, some darkness deep inside me that fed on the way he hunted me. All our exchanges, no matter how subtle, left me unsettled—yet wanting more.

“What do you mean he’s savvier than you?” Josh asked, a rightfully confused look on his face.

Entering the room from behind me and then reaching over my shoulder to dangle a caramel crème brûlée frappuccino in front of my face, James chimed in, “Who’s savvier than you?”

This is why this man was my bestie. Caramel crème brûlée frappuccinos were my go-to heartache solution. He was home early, obviously for me. I took a sip as he came around the couch and plopped down next to me, draping his arm over my shoulders.

“How’d you know?” I grumbled, lifting the modern milkshake up in reference to my question.

He squeezed me and kissed my forehead before saying, “High school is heartache for us all. But they’re not savvier than you.”

I dropped my head back so it sort of lulled against his shoulder. “Most of them aren’t. But this one is. I don’t know his story, but he’s not your usual prep school kid.”

“Why not?” Eric asked.

“He’s edgy. His clothes look worn. I think maybe he’s had a rough go of it but maybe not. I wouldn’t put it beyond a Hawthorne student to pose as a blue-collar kid with a troubled life.”

I felt James tense up behind me before he said, “Wait, this is the guy. The one from the tour.”

“What guy?” Josh asked, a gleeful smirk spreading across his face. Josh and James, and honestly all my dude friends, like to give me a hard time about my dating life. They teased me a lot, calling me the killjoy, because when it came to all things intimate, I found most guys incredibly juvenile and narcissistic.

Eric was known to come to my defense, but not at this particular moment. “Wait,” he jabbered, “there’s a guy. How is there a guy? Aren’t you teaching high school?”

“There’s not a guy,” I snapped, leaning forward to put my drink on the coffee table.

“No, she’s lying,” James interjected. “There’s definitely a guy. I saw him when the students came to LSA a few months ago. If you saw him, a high school student would not be your first thought.”

“Do tell,” Josh dramatically quipped, leaning in toward James and swinging his neck like he was channeling a Kardashian. He should have been an actor.

“He’s hot,” James said. “And Bruno told me he was stalking our girl with his eyeballs from the moment they met.”

“Oh my Gods, stop,” I whined, covering my eyes. “He’s my student.”

“So you admit there’s a guy?” Eric questioned quizzically.

I shook my head. “I mean, there’s not a guy but there is an issue.”

James chuckled. “A guy issue.”

“How hot are we talking?” Josh asked. “On the Thai food scale, mild or spicy?”

James answered, “This is some ghost pepper—raised on the spice, sweat on the brow kind of hot.”

“Daaaamn.” Josh stretched the word out, like a kooky MC. They were being ridiculous.

“But he’s her student.” Eric reiterated.

I flared my eyebrows and threw my hands up to point to Eric as I argued, “What he said.”

Suddenly, on the opposite side of the dramatic spectrum and presenting more like Dr. Freud than a gossiping ninny, Josh said, “So, despite his status as your student, you admit there is an attraction?”

“What? No.” I was getting irritated. “There’s no attraction. None. I’m not interested in Ezra.”

“Ezra,” James rolled the name around deep in the depths of his award-winning baritone. “Even his name is hot.”

“You guys are the worst.” I was practically crying with annoyance.

Still trying to make sense of what he was witnessing, Eric questioned, “Okay, so if you’re not attracted to him, what’s the issue?”

“He’s clearly attracted to me,” I snapped.

Back to channeling Kardashians, Josh turned his head and whispered to James, “Someone thinks she’s hot shit.”

I knew he was trying to get my goat, but I still couldn’t calm my temper. “He is attracted to me. He’s challenging me. He’s the one who suggested ‘La Campanella,’ and I’m wearing his fucking shirt, for Christ’s sake.”

My explosive reveal shook the silly right out of Josh. His eyes dropped down to take in Ezra’s T-shirt and he stuttered, “Ummm...”

Eric interjected, “Wait, what? Why are you in his shirt?”

I hadn’t meant to tell them about my wet white fabric escapades, but there was no going back now. I half buried my face in James’ armpit as I relayed my tale of titty woe.

When I was done, James attempted to be serious for half a second before he and Josh broke out into full-on guffaws. Even Eric was smiling.

“Oh my God, Mer,” James managed between chuckles. “You showed your titties to the student who wants in your pants.”

“I know,” I whimpered, burrowing my face deeper.

“And then you played ‘La Campanella’ when he suggested it,” Josh added.

“I know.”

Eric sighed, heaving out a tuft of heavy air before he asked, “How well did you play it?”

My face was completely submerged in James’ shirt at this point. “I kicked its ass and dragged it home as a trophy.”

“Shit,” Josh said, knowing full well what such a performance relayed.

Eric was less subtle. “Okay, so the kid saw your boobs and then you basically musically masturbated for him. He humphed like he was trying to reason the situation. And then he sighed again. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. He’s savvier than you.”

I laughed, unburying my face to look at my friends. They were all smiling at me—no judgment, just warmth.

Josh spoke. He sometimes saw himself as the most grounded of us all, and in this moment, he used his commanding-dad voice to say, “Don’t worry about it. This smart-mouthed hottie can tease you and leer at you all he wants. As long as you aren’t fucking him, you aren’t doing anything wrong, Mer.”

Right.

Just don’t taco tango with your student.

That was the rule.

EZRA

“Yo, Lix,” Ollie, my fellow bartender at The Fat Lady, hollered at the tattooed cocktail waitress who could have been related to Joan Jett and treated me like her kid brother. “Is it just me or does our boy look like he’s more chipper than bitter tonight?”

The three of us were prepping to open the bar. I was silently splitting limes for the condiment caddy while thinking about Meredith, and while I didn’t love all the moments I had with her earlier in the day, there were definitely some shiny bits, so it was possible that I had a little glow. And yet, I wasn’t looking to share my thoughts on Meredith with Ollie so I kept my attention to the meditative repetition of lime slicing.

I’d been illegally tending bar for a handful of months. I hated being home alone while my mom worked nights. I decided to tend bar because I wanted to make real money, the kind of money that give me a leg up after I graduated from Hawthorne. I also wanted to be part of the music scene. So I’d used a fake ID, my pretty face, and some well-earned swagger to weasel my way into *the* bartending gig.

The Fat Lady was *the joint*. It was in the city, way downtown, in a brick building that used to be a ladies’ shoe factory. There was nothing fancy about the club—nothing. It

was run down and kinda gross, the kind of situation where holes in the upholstery got covered with duct tape. But it was still one of those spots where music was born. Acts got their start on the Lady's dilapidated little stage. I wanted to be close to that kind of magic so I lied. What I didn't know was that The Lady was also a community, a family that would welcome me into their midst, making my life a constant moral conundrum, per usual.

Lix, who was refilling napkins on her tables, paused to turn and examine me. She narrowed her eyes, peering in my direction before she teased, "Are you insinuating that young Sir Dark and Grumpy has recently had the pleasure of glazing a doughnut?"

Ollie, who was well into his thirties and sported a scruffy red beard and a pot belly, laughed to himself. "Why, yes, m'lady, I was thinking he'd been stuffin' some muffin."

I shook my head as I pushed my knife past the rubbery flesh of a lime and into the juicy center. "Not that it's your business—either of you—but I'm a very discreet biscuit butterer who doesn't go more than a few weeks without slathering some tasty treat. So perhaps we table the baked goods themed innuendos. Mmm...kay?"

"Shit." Ollie grinned, still certain there was something on my mind. "Did you get a gig?" He was also a musician.

"I wish," I lamented.

"Oh God." Lix fake cringed. "It's not the feelings. Don't tell me you've caught the feelings?" Lix was seriously jaded. I was sure that she had a complicated history with men, and years as a cocktail waitress with the name Lix certainly didn't help. There wasn't a dude she trusted on sight, but somehow she was still a big old softie.

Ollie rolled his eyes at her. Men being afraid of their emotions was a constant source of contention between them.

“It’s not the feelings... exactly.” I paused my lime cutting, considering how to explain the situation I currently found myself in.

My momentary silence left Lix an opening. “No offense, but that sounds like the feelings.”

“Honestly.” I shrugged. “It’s juicier than feelings. You see, there’s this teacher...” They thought I was in college.

“Oooooooh,” Ollie whooped and rubbed his hands together eagerly. “I knew that look was about doing some squat thrusts in the cucumber patch.”

Lix had finished her side work so she crossed over toward the bar, laughing. “What the fuck? Squat thrusts in a cucumber patch. Ollie, where did you come up with that shit?”

Ollie shrugged. “I don’t know.” Eagerly, he pointed at me. “Stay focused on the prize, queen of darkness, our boy is hot for teacher.”

Lix pulled out the bar stool directly across from me and sat down. “Isn’t everyone hot for teacher at one point or another?” She reached for a couple of limes and then signaled for me to hand her a knife from the sink so she could help me do my work. “The real question is, is teacher hot for you?”

I grumbled, “She’s like... successful, ya know?”

“That’s a no,” Ollie said, running a rag over the bartop.

“Not exactly,” Lix corrected. “That’s self-deprecating; why *would she be?*”

“Fuck you.” I smiled begrudgingly at her, both hating and loving how easily she saw me and also feeling guilty about

how little she actually knew me. With my coworkers at The Fat Lady, I felt at ease. It was the one place where I was genuinely accepted. No one treated me like the poor kid or the troublemaker. So, it was endlessly painful that I was lying to them. I tried to tell as much truth to them as I could. I would never have discussed Meredith with the people in the other parts of my life.

“There’s something there. Something between us. But…” I faltered.

“But…?” Lix asked, pausing her lime slicing.

I laughed. “I’m a total dick around her.”

“Fuckin’ dudes,” Lix grumbled, bowing her head, back to chopping citrus.

“Come on, Lix,” Ollie argued. He liked to make Lix angry. It was possible he secretly harbored a thing for her. “Women know dickishness is the equivalent of pulling a girl’s pigtails on the playground.”

“*No, it is not,*” Lix snarled, giving him the evil eye before she snapped her gaze back to me. “Do not torture a woman because you like her. That’s bullshit behavior. Masculine trauma shit. Don’t do it.” Finished cutting her limes, she used the knife to push them in my direction.

“Really? Trauma shit?” Ollie said, his tone laced with sarcasm. “It’s not trauma. No one likes feeling vulnerable.”

She glared at him, her face slack, but I could hear her silently screaming. After a deep breath, she said, “Oliver, masculine trauma makes you think having feelings is bad so you should cover them with cruelty. It’s cultural bullshit that taught you to assume women would put up with that behavior

and read *attraction* between the lines of your immature abuse.”

“Women cover their feelings with nastiness too,” he argued.

Unfazed by his new line of defense, Lix asked me, “When you acted all dickface to your teacher, was she a see you next Tuesday in return?”

I shook my head no and then shrugged my shoulders at Ollie as if to say, sorry, man.

Ollie scrubbed harder at the bar. “Whatever.”

Hopping off her bar stool, Lix pointed at him, shooting her thumb and index finger like a gun, and then to me, she said, “Trust me, mean sucks. Commanding. Masculine. Brave enough to be honest, that’s what wets panties, kiddo. Well, that and the expertly timed breathy use of the words, *good girl*.”

It was a Wednesday night so it was slow. Wrapped up and locked up by midnight put me home before two a.m., which was great. One might even say ‘early’ in my book. Since I constantly burned the candle at both ends, the prospect of a solid five hours of sleep had me grinning, but when I strolled up to my house, my mom’s car was in the driveway.

My mom worked the night shift as a front desk clerk at a hotel and the day shift at a local mom and pop grocery since I was ten. After my dad bugged out, she devoted herself to keeping our lights on, and I was thankful for how hard she worked to keep us afloat, but I couldn’t remember the last time

we had a conversation that didn't include the words, "I'm exhausted; can we talk about this later?"

When I was thirteen, I accepted that she and I were just two ships passing in the night. It was the morning of my scholarship audition for Hawthorne. I woke up early, a bundle of nervous energy, and made my way into the kitchen, looking for her. I'd told her the date of the audition and the time, and I thought she'd get the day off and take me. I hadn't explicitly asked her to do that, but I still thought she would. Anyway, what I found in the kitchen was an empty coffee cup and a note that read, "Hey, kiddo, could you unload the dishwasher before dinner? Thanks, Mom." She didn't even remember the audition until days later.

After that, I just started forging her signature and handling my own business. I thought she'd be pleased. I thought I was taking something off her enormously overextended plate. But when she discovered I'd embraced my self-sufficient tactics, she was pissed. We'd been locked in a mental brawl ever since.

For example, even though I'd been working at The Fat Lady for months, I hadn't seen any reason to mention my job to her. In fact, I had no intention of ever telling her about my job. I didn't need her to meddle. I didn't want her to ask questions. I also didn't want to lie to her. I'd just rather not tell her at all. So, I didn't. And it took six months for her car to be in the driveway, six months for her to realize that I wasn't home until two a.m. on a school night.

I opened the door casually—not a hint of shame or apology on my face.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked, her tone exasperated—part anger, part fear.

“Out,” I answered coolly.

She glanced at the clock for show. “It’s two a.m., Ezra.”

“Yep.” She was in a ratty old Mickey Mouse nightshirt that she’d worn to sleep for as long as I could remember and there were dark circles under her eyes.

“You have school tomorrow.”

“Sure do.” I shifted my bag off my shoulder so I could take off my jacket and hang it on the hook next to the door. Then I lifted the bag again. I didn’t want her looking through it so I kept it in my room.

“You can’t stay out till two a.m. on a school night.”

“Who says?” I sneered. “You? Are you gonna be here tomorrow at two a.m. for a bed check? Maybe sing me a lullaby? No?” My sarcasm was palpable. She pursed her lips and her nostrils flared, but she didn’t answer for obvious reasons. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. So, how about you cut the bullshit and just let me go to bed. I have to get up in less than five hours.”

She took a step back and sternly said, “Fine, but only because I’m also exhausted. However, we *will* talk about this later.”

There it was, her catchphrase.

I moved around her, headed for my bedroom.

“I was worried,” she said quietly to my back. I loved my mother. I did. I just also couldn’t seem to get her to see that I was the son she raised. I didn’t need her to coddle me. I could fend for myself.

“Well,” I smarted. “Luckily, I’m fine.”

She'd be gone when I woke up.

MEREDITH

Thankfully, day two of my life as an educator was drastically less dramatic and completely free of impromptu boob flashing. I managed to get up with the alarm, catch the correct train, and get to school excruciatingly early. Upon entering the classroom, I found Ezra at the highest vantage point by the window in the same chair he sat in the day before, casually sipping a cup of coffee. He was like a hawk observing the mice from his perch high in the canopy. I crossed the room to place my things on my desk. I felt him watching me, but I was surprised he spoke.

“I owe you an apology.”

I wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, but he didn't sound remorseful. He didn't whisper or deliver the words gently at all. Instead, they came from a place deep in the register of his voice, a remarkably masculine place. My chest felt tight and my movements slowed. Sounds that would have been nothing seconds before became uncomfortably noisy. The clunk of my bag against the desk, the rustle of fabric against fabric as I took off my jacket. The swallow of saliva as I turned to face him.

Holding his gaze, I leaned against the desk and crossed my arms over my chest. It occurred to me that he looked oddly

large for the chair, like his legs were too long to fit on the seat. Having captured my undivided attention, he leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knee and a chunk of thick, dark hair fell into eyes.

“Yesterday, I called you Meredith. I shouldn’t do that.” He smirked. He wasn’t the slightest bit contrite. He pushed the hair back off his face before he added, “I also shouldn’t have seen you...” He paused, biting his lower lip for a second before he looked out the window and sighed. “Wet.”

One word popping from his lips and I was tense from head to toe. He was right. He shouldn’t know my nakedness. Seeing me wet was a huge complication. It was an honest mistake, but he was young and virile and he had a mental picture of my boobs. That was not so easily set aside. It wasn’t even a clinical image of breasts. It was a tits picture, my trembling nips soaked in folds of silky white fabric. *I mean, come on?* But if I softened and admitted that the barrier between us was too thin, that he had gotten under my skin, then that one moment of nakedness would only become a bigger problem. So I didn’t flinch. I maintained my outward composure, playing the role of his superior, ignoring that the word *wet* was so very heavy with desire.

I stayed silent, scowling at him, channeling every parental figure I had ever known. I waited for him to squirm. He was my student after all. No matter how bold or brazen, no matter how big his balls, I was in charge.

“You have to admit that we got off to an odd start,” he said, relaxing against the back of his chair and returning his gaze to mine like he didn’t have a care in the world. “I’m not going to lie, you’re fascinating. I’ve never really known a woman like you. And seeing you like that—all dripping and

upset. There was a hormonal reaction. You emboldened a part of me that wasn't..." He paused again, shifting in his seat, closing his legs and drawing my attention to his lap. I quickly returned my gaze to his. A tiny smile played at the corner of his lips, but he kept it at bay. "...appropriate."

Even though it was irritating, I decided to ignore that his apology shifted some of the blame in my direction. It felt manipulative—like he was still trying to see if I'd break and acknowledge him as my equal. I held my ground, keeping my lips terse and my voice stern when I said. "No, it wasn't."

"I will do better going forward," he said, his eyes intensely focused on my face.

"Will you?" I asked, my head instinctually shaking from side to side, giving away my subconscious belief that Ezra wasn't looking to do better.

He let out a breathy little laugh and glanced away, focusing again on the view out the window. His jaw relaxed and his eyes softened, growing melancholy. I turned to look out the window too. Random students were crossing the quad heading to their different classrooms. He and I wouldn't be alone much longer but still, I waited. I couldn't give him any room to think his behaviors were welcome.

For a second time he turned back to me, only there was nothing nonchalant or breezy about his attitude when he said, "I promise. I will do better—but I have to say one more inappropriate thing first." His eyes were dark and hot, like they had been the day I met him. The air between us prickled at my skin and my breath caught in my chest as he spoke. "I will never forget seeing you play 'La Campanella.' It was..."

His words slipped away as the door to the classroom opened and two girls came in chattering. They glanced in my

direction and I smiled.

“Morning, ladies,” I said calmly, my voice even, soft and welcoming, despite the way my heart was shaking in my chest.

“Morning,” they chirped in unison. They were both pretty, with painted lips and shiny hair. One strawberry-blond and one chestnut, smiling and pleasant and strangely indistinguishable. I couldn’t remember either girl’s name. It wasn’t that they were forgettable per se. It was more like they were intentionally not unique, conforming to a standard that made them so much like each other, that they rendered themselves invisible.

I was once again struck by the fact that Ezra was nothing like them. I wondered how that happened. How did the boy who was sitting on his perch looking down at me become a man before his time? And why did I so desperately want to know how he felt when he saw me play “La Campanella”?



The class I was teaching was music composition and the entirety of my lesson plan for the day was, *show me what you got*. My goal was to get to really know my students. In general, they weren’t musically atrocious. However, their clearly undeveloped talents were diverse and not cohesive. Two played the clarinet. There was a violinist and a guitar player, a drummer, and a lead singer in a metal band, and some other stragglers who just seemed to like singing stuff. Finding a way to reach them and teach them all would prove a challenge. And then, of course, there was Ezra.

When I asked him why he was in a music composition class, he answered differently than the rest. He didn't tell me the instrument he played or the music he loved.

He simply said, "Because I write music."

"What kind of music?" I asked

He pursed his lips and shifted in his seat as if my questions were annoying and then, seemingly remembering his promise, he plastered a smile on his face.

"Different kinds."

"So forthcoming," I teased.

A girl sitting a couple rows in front of him giggled and offered her opinion. "He's not particularly chatty. Ms. Campbell."

Ezra grumbled something snide under his breath. I wasn't sure what he said but it was clear that the girl heard him because her cheeks went pink. I recognized that there was something between them and irritatingly, I couldn't hide the annoyance in my tone when I retorted, "I think I'll assess his ability to communicate for myself."

The young woman's cheeks grew redder and she mumbled an apology. Ezra eyed me, raising his eyebrows in question as if to say who's inappropriate now?

I ignored him completely and spoke to the class. "Listen, I'm going to run an informal classroom and we're gonna make a lot of jokes. But one thing I have very little patience for is judgment. I don't want you judging each other. This is a safe space. There will be creative criticism of your art because that's productive. But anytime you say anything about your classmates that isn't productive, I'm going to call you out." I

turned to the girl who had spoken about Ezra and with a smile said, “Tell me your name again.”

“Sloan.” Her voice was tiny and repentant.

“Well, Sloan, thanks for being the guinea pig.” I grinned at her, trying to make sure all seemed forgiven.

With the tension diffused, I turned back in Ezra’s direction. “Is it true what Sloan says? Are you less than chatty, Ezra?”

He was still smirking at me but he nodded.

“I’m pretty sure the people who write musical compositions are communicators. So, if you’re telling me that you write music, you must have something you want to communicate.”

He cleared throat, making it seem like he was going to deliver a diatribe, but then all he said was, “Perhaps.”

My turn to smirk. “Go ahead then.” I pointed toward the piano. “Show us what you got.”

He didn’t stand immediately. He glared at me instead. I’d given the other students a choice, asked them if they’d like to perform, but I wasn’t asking Ezra. This was a command performance. I’d finally flipped the tables and taken the high ground. I was cocky about it. Mirroring the attitude he’d been giving me all along. Staring him down, smirking. There were whispers among the other students. And when Ezra stood, the buzzing of other voices increased. I got the gist that he didn’t play for this class often.

He climbed down and took his place on the piano bench just like I had the day before. There was only about ten minutes of class time left. He played the fool, shifting on the bench, pretending to toss the tails of an imaginary tuxedo jacket like a maestro, and then he lifted up his hands

dramatically, emphasizing the moment they connected with the keys. He didn't tell us what he was going to play. He didn't talk about his composition. He just played.

For exactly four stanzas, he reached for his own genius. The elegant moody opening of a haunting ballad. I could instantly feel the depth—the peaks and valleys of emotion that drove his song. But just as he was about to slip into the darkness of his own creativity, he pulled back.

Instead of playing his composition, he played “La Campanella.” Only he didn't kill it like I did. He was technically flawless, which was a feat unto itself, but he refused to give in to the emotional journey of the piece and so while the other students laughed and clapped, they didn't drop their jaws.

The bell rang, throwing the class into motion. As the students packed their things and left to head to their other classes, Ezra waited. He wanted my response. When it was just the two of us again, I said, “Congratulations, you can clearly tickle the ivories.”

That endlessly defiant mouth of his curled into a toothless grin.

Slowly, I moved closer to him, and dropping my voice low in my register, I crooned, “But tell me, Ezra, when are you gonna drop the bullshit and make me feel inspired?”

His nostrils flared and his shoulders got tight. A storm took off inside of him, and it was so brutal that I could see it clenching all the muscles in his body. I thought he was going to explode and yell at me, but instead, he pushed up hard, turning the bench over behind him, and stormed out of the room.

“So?” Janey asked. “How’s it going?” We were sitting in the room just off the cafeteria that was designated as the teacher’s lounge.

I shrugged. “Fine, I guess.”

Janey chuckled sarcastically. “Not the delightful learning environment you expected?”

I peeled back the plastic wrap from the peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread that I got from the lunch line as I sighed. “Why are educators so jaded?”

Janey viciously stabbed her fork into her salad. “Because students are the worst.”

“Are they?” I questioned. “Mine seem alright.”

“Just wait till you ask them to turn something in.” She wagged a square of ham that was on the end of her fork at me. “You’ll see.”

I shrugged again and took a bite of my sandwich, which was just as squishy, sticky, and sweet as I remembered.

After chewing her bite of ham, Janey prodded a bit more. “Heard you were up to your old tricks.” When she and I were kids, I used to ask people to call out titles for me to play, just like I did in my class.

“Seemed a good way to garner their respect.”

“Yes.” She paused to chew. “Scuttlebutt is you’re as amazing as ever.”

I chuckled. “Hardly.”

“Um... from ‘Enter Sandman’ to ‘La Campanella’ in five minutes sounds pretty genius to me.” I rolled my eyes. Janey knew the truth. I could play anything if I heard it once. Sure, it was like magic, but it was also just a parlor trick. When it came to composition and texture, I had to study like everyone else. Janey sighed. “I imagine. It was Ezra Beckett that called out Liszt.”

My tongue was stuck to the peanut butter on the roof of my mouth, so I nodded to confirm, hoping my subtle response would hide how much I wanted her to spill the tea on Ezra.

“He’s a handful,” Janey offered. “Here on scholarship. So smart, but basically only willing to apply himself to music. Just barely getting good enough grades to maintain his funding.”

After a slug of water, I intentionally examined the globs of jelly that were oozing from my sandwich so I seemed nonchalant when I said, “He seems so different from the others. Is it just me or is he a couple years older?”

“He’s nineteen,” Janey explained. “He was held back twice in elementary school. Mostly for behavioral issues, I think. I don’t really know the whole story, but I’ve never met his parents, so there’s that.”

“Is he on track to graduate this year?”

Janey nodded. “Yeah, but he’s missed all his appointments with the college counselor. I don’t think he applied. Not that he could afford it.”

“He’s talented though, right? Like musically.”

Janey huffed air and put down her fork, stilling herself for emphasis. “Mer... he’s beyond talented. Honestly, students like Ezra are why educators are jaded. He’s special—but there

is nothing we can do that will stop him from slipping through the cracks.”

EZRA

I acted like a petulant child and still she sent me an email.

To: EBeckett@hawthorne.edu

From: MCampbell@hawthorne.edu

Clear Potential

Ezra,

While I was not impressed with your cheeky rendition of “La Campanella” because I didn’t feel you connected emotionally with the piece, I was tantalized by the few stanzas you played of your own work. I believe you have talent as a composer, and I would like to discuss your potential.

Do you hope to become a professional musician? What is your plan for next year?

Please meet me at seven a.m. in our classroom tomorrow morning to discuss.

Best,

Meredith

I read and reread the email, trying to be annoyed, but instead I was absolutely fixated on the fact that she signed it Meredith, not Ms. Campbell. Was she teasing me? Did she think that signing with her first name after I apologized for using it would make her approachable? Was it some kind of subconscious mistake or a tantalizingly conscious one? Also, I'd been nothing but a nightmare for her—storming out of her class, constantly hounding her, and reminding her of the moment by the boathouse. Why was she still showing me kindness? Was she into me? She couldn't be genuinely intrigued by my talent, could she? Either way, I decided to show up because even if my future plans were limited, my current inclination was to spend as much time alone with Meredith as possible.

After the formalities of good morning and with a smile that was a little too wide, Meredith asked me to actually play one of my compositions. She was wearing a cream turtleneck and a dark-brown pencil skirt, a sure sign that I was dealing with Meredith the educator rather than Meredith the fun record

label employee or Meredith the woman who mistakenly won the wet T-shirt contest.

I came prepared, ready to play one of my most recent compositions. It was something I'd written a few months back, riding the train home after a night at The Fat Lady. I was feeling low, guilty about my lies to Lix and Ollie, incapable of seeing a future that didn't involve at least two dead-end jobs, and hungry for something that didn't need to be microwaved, when this dude strolled down the center aisle, holding one of those classic blue Bic pens. He let the end of the pen hit the back of each seat he passed. His strides were even so the taps of the pen created a pulse. Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. The beat hit like an infection, building an achy discomfort until I was overtaken by the fever of it, all hot and delusional. It was like the music claimed me, pouring through me, spilling everywhere until it was on paper, free to roam the world and be heard.

It wasn't a piece I could just sit down and play on the piano. There were multiple tracks of percussion—but in the modern world, I had a ten-piece band in my pocket. Once it was keyed up, I dropped my phone on the top of the piano and hit play. The piece began with only the thrum—the simplicity of the Bic pen against the train seat. Slowly, the layers built, until my fingers moved over the piano keys, spilling a melody that reeked of the moody melancholy of a late-night train.

Alone with Meredith, I gave in. I pulled back the curtain and threw myself into the work at hand. Unlike her soul-bearing performance a few days earlier, mine was consciously intimate. I dropped my guard and let her see what I had to offer because I wanted to give it to her. She took the moment seriously. She absorbed every emotion, never looked away, never blinked, and when I was done, she was on fire. I could

see it. Her neck was flushed. Her pupils were dilated. Her chest rose and fell with quickened breaths like she'd just run a marathon. But she was quiet. Didn't say a word. My instinct was to say something dirty. I wanted her to cross the room, straddle my lap, and bow her back until she pressed into the black-and-white keys. I could see her like that, her stuffy brown skirt pushed up and my rough fingers pressed into the flesh of her hips.

When she finally spoke, she was frenetic but all business. "You understand the need to hone and use your talent, right? Would you be willing to study with me in the mornings before school? I think I can help you, Ezra. I think you could truly make something of your skills."

Everything about what she was saying felt untruthful. She was intentionally pushing away how my performance affected her personally and focusing on how my music could affect others. She was drawing a line between us. Meredith was underscoring the fact that she was the teacher and I was her student. I swallowed. It didn't matter that she was attracted to me. I was pressing on a line that Meredith would not cross.

Message received.

"Thank you," I said, my voice tight. "But I already have a full course load." I reached for my backpack that was on the floor, preparing to move toward my regular chair, but when I stood, Meredith blocked me. She invaded my space, standing just a couple of inches too close. I could hear her exhale. I could smell her shampoo and see the downy fine hair on her skin that was usually invisible. God, I just wanted to lean forward and run my tongue over her pulse, taste the rhythm of her just once.

“Don’t be a dick, Ezra,” she breathed. “I want to work with you. Let me work with you.”

This ask wasn’t condescending. It was genuine.

The feeling of her in my proximity was so intoxicating. She couldn’t *hone* my talent. Getting better at composition wasn’t going to be the foundation of my story. But I realized that I was willing to pretend with her because I didn’t want to say no. I wanted to spend time with Meredith Campbell, even if I never got to fuck her.

And so, after the email, there was the tutoring. Three times a week at seven a.m., she would be in music room waiting for me. On Mondays, we worked on my compositions. On Wednesdays, I played whatever piece of music she assigned the previous Friday. And on Fridays, Meredith played for me. Friday was the best day. She performed every piece she gave me to work on. Then we discussed why the piece worked for her and how I could reframe the phrasing or the runs to make the piece work for me.

She made me sing a lot, which was not my favorite thing. I had perfect pitch, but my voice was raspy, and I was never sure what it added to my compositions. But Meredith felt otherwise. So I sang. The first few weeks, I just fucking drooled over her. I know she noticed. But as the time went on, I found that when she was around, I was an unfamiliar version of myself. Still a cocky bastard, but a softer, more focused one.

We fell into a friendly rhythm—more than student and teacher, but less than I hoped. Everything between us was centered on the music we exchanged. There was no need to prove myself. There were no assumptions that I was a jerk. No judgments about where I came from or the things I did. She

didn't treat me like the deadbeat punk with tattoos and a deadbeat dad. She didn't feel sorry for me. None of that. In the mornings with Meredith, it was just music. We were just instruments, conduits of emotion and sound.

One Wednesday—about a month after she asked me to work with her—I played my punk version of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Meredith grinned, pleased with my performance, and asked, “When did you become a musician?”

She was sitting in one of the student chairs, watching me like I was on stage. I could perform music like that, but somehow having a conversation in that dynamic made me feel examined, like she was a scientist looking through a microscope, so I put my guitar on the guitar stand and crossed the room to sit back at the piano bench before responding.

“Am I a musician?” I waxed poetic. “Is that a title I can claim?”

“I'm pretty sure you were born a musician.” She was still grinning.

“Look who's talking.” I was grinning too. “How many instruments do you play?”

“All of them,” she smarted, crossing and uncrossing her legs. I loved watching her. She'd relaxed the schoolmarm fashion a bit in the last few weeks so there was no denying her cool. On this day, she was wearing this funky jean skirt, a rust-colored cotton tee, and a crocheted vest. She looked like she raided Janis Joplin's closet.

I shook my head at her ego. “Oh yeah, I bet you're great on the didgeridoo.”

She smirked. “I am.”

She was serious. Confused, I asked, “Wait, what?”

She shrugged, then asked, “How many do you play?”

“A few.” I played more than most, but I certainly didn’t play any instrument. “Can you really play any instrument, Mer?” We’d fallen into an ease about her name—if there were other students present, she was Ms. Campbell; when we were alone, she was Meredith or Mer. It wasn’t something we discussed, but it felt impactful, like she wanted me to know that I was different from the others. “How is that possible?”

“I just can.” She started counting the ones she’d seen me play on her fingers. “Drums, guitar, bass, piano... any horns?”

I shook my head.

“So four?”

“Five,” I corrected. She questioned me with her eyebrows. “The harmonica. Oh wait, six.” Again, silently asked me to divulge my list. “The tambourine, obviously.”

She laughed at my terrible joke and gently asked her original question, “So, when did you know that you were a musician?”

I saw what she did there—pointed out how many instruments I’d mastered—so I couldn’t deny I had some musical prowess.

“Maybe middle school.” My answer was hesitant because the title musician still felt like it didn’t fit.

“Oh my God, stop making me pull teeth.” She was already sitting but she made a show of her mental anguish by collapsing like a ragdoll in her chair. “Please expound. Tell me the story of Ezra Beckett’s humble musical beginnings before I die.”

When I was around her, I found myself smiling in a way that felt unfamiliar. It was a smile that wasn't born of pleasantries, manners, or pride. It was a smile without any cynical undertone, the kind of smile that kids have on Halloween. It was unadulterated, gluttonous, goofy joy that felt amazing but also must have rendered me utterly unattractive because I was always radiating a smiling doofus at her.

Hoping she found my grin charming, I closed the fallboard, hiding away the piano keys, and pushed back the bench so I could lean on the wall behind me. Thinking, I threw one hand behind my head before I said, "I had a music teacher in middle school, Mrs. Browning. She was the woman who suggested I apply for Hawthorne. She was the first person who thought I was more than a delinquent."

Meredith teased, "Wow, was that lady wroooooong." I made a show of dropping my jaw and pretending to be offended. "Clearly, you're a hardened derelict, one of those rabid tattooed tambourine players." She paused for effect before adding, "But like a really talented one..."

I rolled my eyes at her.

She laughed, delighted by her own joke. I pretended to pout. She stretched her leg out and pushed the tip of her toe into my thigh, using her body language to say, Hey, I'm not serious. I pretended to grab at her foot and she quickly snatched it back. When I looked at her face, she was grinning some more.

"Did Mrs. Browning teach you to play?"

I shook my head. "No, my dad, who was not a musician, always planned on starting a band, so he had instruments in the garage. 'Cause that's the kind of guy he was—a blowhard

who wanted to be the center of attention and wasted money our family needed on useless things.” I scoffed. Anytime I mentioned my father, righteous annoyance tightened my my shoulders. “Anyway, one day he was gone, but I had a drum kit and a guitar. My mom worked a lot, so there was no one trying to escape or quiet my inharmonious learning curve.” I’d never really told anyone this stuff, but talking to Meredith felt natural.

“You taught yourself.”

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded.

“Do you have any idea that you’re special?” she asked.

I pulled in a breath that felt tight like there was a rubber band around my lungs. Looking at the ground, I shook my head. “Nah.”

Meredith’s chair screeched as she stood. Her shoes clacked on the floor as I watched her feet close the distance between us, and before I knew it, she was kneeling between my legs. She put one hand on my knee, ducking down so she could tilt her head up and make eye contact when she said, “Ezra, you’re legitimately talented.”

I knew what she meant to do. She was being sweet and supportive. She was the second person ever to genuinely believe in me, but she was also on her knees between my legs, her pretty pink mouth inches from my dick, the heat of her hand coursing through my body like a rabid river.

I slammed my eyes shut.

“Ezra.” She was pushing her agenda, my self-confidence, but all I heard was breathy begging. “Please.”

Fuck. I was definitely getting hard. I tried to picture something gross. Pimples. Pimple popping videos.

“Ezra, look at me.”

She squeezed my knee, drawing my attention back to the warmth rushing between her touch and my cock. If she wasn't so focused on getting my attention, one glance at my lap would reveal why I wouldn't look at her. Pimples. Puss-filled oozing zits with worms in them. God, her lips looked so soft. She wore this candy-pink gloss and I could picture it smeared all over my dick. Fuck.

“I wish you could see what I see.” Her voice was so gentle, so reassuring. But if she could see what I was imagining, she would not be on her knees trying to boost my ego. “It's incredible.”

That was it. I couldn't take it anymore. I swung my leg over her head, turning as I jumped up so that I was facing away from her. Moving around the back side of the piano, I grumbled, “I gotta pee before class.”

She called after me, but I didn't stop moving until I was at the other end of the building, locked in one of the bathroom stalls in the back boys' locker room. I stilled, listening for the possibility of other students. The first bell hadn't rung and no one had phys ed first period. Thankfully, all I heard was silence, because if I was going to function for the rest of the day, I was going to have to tame the fucking beast in my pants.

As I pulled down my zipper, I pictured her lips.

MEREDITH

“W hacha doin’?” James asked, leaning on the doorframe to the storage room for sheet music that I’d organized at LSA Records.

“Looking for something to challenge my students,” I said without looking up. I was intentionally being vague. I was looking for something specifically for Ezra. He was really starting to open up but he hated using his voice so I needed to find the song that pushed him past that stupidity. He told me his raspy bass was garbage, but it was actually captivating, ruddy, and sultry. I bet money that he could make almost any woman shiver.

James took a step into the room. “What kind of challenge are we talking here?”

He was offering to help me. I didn’t really want help, but I couldn’t think of a good reason to say no.

“Vocal.”

“Duh... that’s easy. Adele.” It was a good suggestion and I hated that I hadn’t thought of it. “Maybe ‘Rolling in the Deep.’” He crossed to the back corner of the room to the file cabinet, which I had marked with an *A*. As he flipped through the files, he asked, “Can you please explain to me why you

thought we needed paper copies of sheet music? You know there is this crazy invention called the computer, right?”

I’d had this argument before with basically everyone, including James, but I answered him anyway. “It’s the principle. I want to believe that record companies have music on hand. I want to believe that the tangible is still important to people. I think that flipping through actual physical files can inspire the creative process and Ava agrees with me.” Ava was Bruno’s nemesis who turned out to be the love of his life and co-owner and CFO of LSA Records.

“Okay, but you are the only one who comes into this room and you don’t even work here anymore.” He pulled the sheet music from the file, then triumphantly slammed the drawer shut before turning and linking arms with me as we headed out into the hall. “Also, clearly, physical searching wasn’t doing you any good. It was my noggin that found the solution for your students, not your files.”

“That doesn’t mean the files aren’t an important part of the process,” I debated as he led us down the hall.

“Wasn’t part of my process,” he teased, and then pulling me toward the copy room, he asked, “How many copies?”

“Just the one,” I said, taking it from his hands and pulling him in the opposite direction.

We strolled arm in arm for a second, and I could feel the tension in his gait. I knew James better than almost anyone. He wasn’t going to pry but his expectation that all my students would need copies of the sheet music clashed with the reality of me only needing one copy. If even a tidbit that little didn’t jibe for him, he was gonna fixate on it. He was going to wonder what I was keeping from him, and push comes to shove, he was going to figure it out. But it wasn’t like I had

some big secret. The only reason I hadn't mentioned Ezra's independent study to my friends was because I didn't want them to get the wrong idea.

I knew I was walking a fine line, like a tightrope. The way I felt when I heard Ezra perform wasn't teacherly. I hungered for the high of his sounds crashing into me. When he sang, when he played, my body fucking hummed. It vibrated at a frequency I'd never known before and it was absolutely addicting. But that wasn't all about attraction. Ezra was unbearably talented. I was certain that he had a future in music and I'd been trying to figure out how I could help make that happen without throwing him into the deep end of the industry before he was ready. So yes, there was a tiny piece of me that wanted to devour him, take a huge bite out of every forbidden morsel, but I wouldn't. I was feeding that need by helping him. I was going to make sure he succeeded and that would be the ultimate high.

Was my strategy totally on the up and up? Maybe not. Which was why I was avoiding the topic with the people closest to me, but I knew—deep down in the best part of myself—that what I was doing was right. I was helping Ezra. I was going to make sure he knew that he deserved good things, that he was talented and had a future.

So, before James could think too hard about why I would need a single copy of sheet music, I said, “Should we go out tonight?”

“Hells to the yes,” Kelly squealed, coming from behind us and jumping onto James' back. She was the only other female who lived with us and she and I were polar opposites. She ran LSA's security team.

James caught her, unlatching from my arm so he could latch on to her thighs, and then began to spin, fast. In response, Kel squealed.

From his office just a few feet down the hall, Bruno boomed, “What the fuck is happening out there?”

Marcus—the one of us who had the talent for discovering talent—answered Bruno in his usual deadpan. “Kelly’s screaming.”

Now hulking in the entrance to his office, Bruno snarked, “No shit, Sherlock.”

James stopped spinning, his large body waving with dizziness. He panted when he said, “The ladies want to go out tonight.”

Kelly, who was still clinging to his back, moaned, “Puke, it may cometh.”

My crew laughed and all thoughts of sheet music evaporated.

We went to The Fat Lady. It was Marcus’ idea. There was a band playing he wanted to see. I agreed immediately because I was a fan of the seedy dive bar; it had an old-school dance floor and the no frills cocktail menu and grungy waitstaff gave me the nostalgic feels. Bruno called ahead and reserved a table near the stage and we all got gussied up.

Feeling a desperate need to break boundaries, I gave myself intense smoky eyes and wore a dress that was more lingerie than clothes. Honestly, it felt illegal, black bra top connected to a series of stretchy black strips of fabric about an

inch thick that gripped every contour of my body. I paired it with thigh-high boots, and when I looked in the mirror, I felt like Superwoman, capable of bending the bars of any cage.

One of the things I loved most about feminism was that it taught me that I could embody my own objectivity. I could see fashion and makeup as playful costumes, sources of joy. Unattainable beauty ideals were not a weapon that kept me down. I could embrace my own body and get dressed up to feel empowered. I could be all the things in one woman, a saint and a whore, an intellect and an idiot, a pushover and a militant. I was allowed to be infinite. So, was my dress a hot mess of sluttiness? Why, yes, it was. But also, wild sexy Mer who was about to let loose on the dance floor was exactly the girl I wanted to hang out with.

My crew whistled and hooted when I came down the apartment stairs, but I was entirely safe with them. Not one of my boys was looking to hit on me. We were like siblings, which meant I could get wasted if I felt like it and always know that I was safe. Protected by a gang of brutish men and a sister, who was the toughest of the bunch. (Legit, Kels was probably carrying a switchblade. She was a peach.)

Once we were at the club, we partied. The band Marcus brought us to see was a retro Ska band. They had a full-blown horns section—a trumpet, two trombones, and an alto sax. The music was fun, campy, thrilling. We all drank, and I danced like a maniac. I wasn't particularly looking to go home with a stranger, so I stayed close to my people, goofing and grinding with Eric and Josh, gyrating and cavorting with Kels, Bruno, and Ava, straddling Marcus' lap to make the others laugh. I was in rare form.

When the band took their break, Led Zeppelin II whined through the speakers, and James stood, holding out his hand toward me. We took to the empty dance floor like we were on psychedelics, oozing and melting all over each other until we were sweating. We were in the middle of “Whole lotta Love” when the music stopped. James’ arm was wrapped around my waist as I draped backward with my eyes closed, swaying to the recorded jams.

The pop of an amp connecting to a guitar snapped my eyes open, and the scene I took in hanging upside down made me freeze. Ezra was on the stage. He was wearing a black Ramones tee, jeans, shitkickers, and a wallet chain. The tattoo on his arm that he always covered at school was completely exposed. I expected something tribal, but he was covered in vines and flowers. He looked right at me before he strummed the guitar and snarled, the first line of his own version of Ani DiFranco’s, “Untouchable Face.”

He owned the song, his thick rasp, growling and seducing anyone in its wake. The dark piece of me that claimed him as mine clenched. I also felt pride. He was composing in the moment. Remixing and rephrasing the song on the spot so he could tell me how angry and jealous he felt. He was raging, so bitter that I could taste it. And he was so fucking sexy. Wrapping his body around the microphone, he popped the words, “Fuck you” at me, like he was tearing at my clothes.

James released me and I stood, still staring at the spectacle in front of me. Next to me, Marcus appeared, drooling, “Who the fuck is that?”

James answered, “Mer’s issue.”

Apparently, Bruno joined us too. He knew Ezra was my student from his visit to LSA, so he kept his voice low. “Mer,

are you fucking that kid?”

Trapped in some kind of shock, I shook my head slowly.

Always the voice of moral corruption, Kelly spoke next. “Maybe you should be.”

“Jesus, Kels.” Eric laughed nervously.

I was still just staring, my mind unable to process the depth of emotion that would push Ezra to be so genuinely vulnerable.

“Should we get him off the stage?” Josh asked.

“We should sign him,” Marcus said. He was always about talent. “He’s raw. But we’ll get there first. We can polish him.”

“No,” I said, finally finding my voice. Ezra wasn’t ready for that. He was still too unsettled to carry the weight of fame.

“You know he’s one of the fucking bartenders, right?” Kelly noted. She and Marcus frequented The Fat Lady. “He has been for like six months.”

My face swung to look at her. “Does he work weeknights?”

Kelly nodded.

I didn’t think about what I was doing or care how it would affect Ezra. I just knew that tending bar till after midnight when he had school in the morning wasn’t what was best for him.

“He’s only nineteen,” I said, shifting my gaze back so that Ezra locked eyes with me. “He shouldn’t even be here.”

“Consider him fired,” Bruno said before turning to go find the club’s manager.

“Listen...” I paused, trying to collect the words I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him everything was going to be okay.

Ezra was four feet away from me, his back turned. We were standing on the street corner waiting for the town car that Bruno called to take him back to Lochton and he had his school backpack on his shoulder. My crew was still inside The Fat Lady, but when the manager escorted Ezra outside, I felt the need to follow.

He spun at me, fierce and fiery. “Listen?” His arms flailed as he yelled. “Listen to what, Mer? That you’re sorry you just took away my only source of income? Or that you’re sure my friends will forgive me for lying to them for months and putting the club they work in at risk of violating their liquor license?”

“No,” I snapped, once again annoyed that he was blaming me for choices he made. “I was going to say you were unreal on that stage, but you know what? Fuck you, Ezra. I’m always in your goddamn corner and you are always fighting me.”

He raged, “You just cost me my job, Mer!”

“You just made everyone in there think we’re fucking, Ezra.” I emphasized the syllables of his name the way someone would when saying the word ‘*d-uh*.’ “But I’m not treating you like shit, am I?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to forget how cold and exposed I was in my ridiculous dress. It was great as an empowering costume, but less practical for the reality of fighting on a chilly street corner. The movement of my arms drew Ezra’s eyes. They dropped down, lingering over my

curves for a second before he snarled, “Why are you always almost naked in front of me?”

Spinning his backpack around so that he could access the main pocket’s zipper, he pulled out a hoodie and threw it in my direction. “Put this on so I can be angry without thinking about fucking you.”

Deep down, I knew he thought about sleeping with me, but hearing him say it was heavy. Shifting into a calmer space, I pulled his sweatshirt over my head before I said, “You can’t fuck me, Ezra. I won’t let you.”

The town car pulled up along the curb and Ezra pulled open the door. He paused before he got in, turning to look at me as he said, “Just because I can’t have you, doesn’t mean I’ll stop wanting you.”

As the Lincoln’s red taillights barreled away from me, I curled into the warmth of the sweatshirt that smelled like him and Sandy’s line from *Grease* popped into my mind.

Tell me about it, Stud.

EZRA

All day Saturday I sulked and moped around my empty house, mourning the loss of my job and feeling like an idiot. First thing in the morning I sent an email to Lix and Ollie, apologizing for lying to them. I let myself be vulnerable. Told them that I wasn't looking to be forgiven, just wanting them to know that despite my lies I had valued their friendships more than they would ever know. Around five in the afternoon, just when her shift would be starting, Lix texted me.

Lix: Don't sweat it, kid. We were nineteen once. You are loved.

My breath caught in my chest when I read her words, and then like a little baby, I started to cry. My fucking shoulders shook. At first, I didn't know why I was sobbing, and then when I read the word again, I realized I couldn't remember the last time someone told me they loved me. I weeped. I just sat there and bawled until I didn't need to anymore, and then I sent Meredith a text.

Ezra: Sorry I was an ass. I promised you I wouldn't be. I think I was lying when I made that promise but I'm not now.

Unlike Lix, she didn't text me back. But I wasn't surprised. Meredith's way of dealing with me was overlooking when I was flawed. Certain she would be in the classroom at seven a.m. on Monday, I took a shower and I went to bed peacefully, planning to spend the rest of my weekend working on my compositions so I could impress her.

On Sunday morning, I woke up to the sound of the doorbell. Sunday was the only day that my mother was always home, so I didn't stir. I lay in bed, listening to her shuffle down the hallway. There was a pause as she opened the door and then the muffled sound of her voice filtered into my space.

"Can I help you?" She sounded pleasant enough. Nothing about the moment felt unusual. I could picture her standing there, her ratty old robe tied tight around her nightshirt, her eyes heavy with her never-ending lack of sleep.

I was startled when I heard Meredith's voice.

"You must be Mrs. Beckett," she said. "I'm Meredith Campbell, Ezra's music composition teacher, and these are my friends, Bruno and Marcus."

Holy fuck, I thought, jumping into action. I grabbed my jeans and shimmed into them as I threw open the door to my room to hear my mother huff, "Oh Jesus, what has he done now?"

"What the hell, Ma?" I said, pushing my hair out of my face as I turned the corner into the living room.

Meredith—who had traded back her harlot look for the marm we'd all come to know and love—was the consummate professional, but I didn't miss how her eyes lingered over my shirtlessness for a second too long.

Turning back to my mother, she had to clear her throat before she said, “Actually, Mrs. Beckett, the three of us are here because we'd like to help Ezra get into college.”

Mrs. Beckett wasn't my mom's name.

My mom looked shocked, and then she laughed awkwardly before blurting, “Wait, is this a joke?”

Bruno, who had sprawled himself on one of our two couches and was large enough that it felt like no one else could fit, said, “Not a joke, Beckett.”

I couldn't help myself. “Her name is Adams. She changed it after my dad jumped ship.” I saw annoyance flash in Meredith's eyes, but I wasn't sure if she was annoyed at my interjection or if it bothered her that my mom and I didn't have the same last name. It bothered me.

“Ezra is incredibly talented,” Mer said. To my mother. She was in my living room talking to my mother. I hadn't even brushed my teeth. I pushed my hair back again.

“I can't afford college,” I said.

Marcus, who was still standing by the door looking at his phone, said, “We can.”

“What?” My mother blubbered, her breathing ragged, her legs unsteady. “What is happening right now?”

Mer took a step toward her and helped her take a seat on the couch across from Bruno. Taking my mother's hands in hers, she said, “My colleagues had a chance to hear Ezra

perform on Friday night, and like me, they think he has an inordinate amount of potential. We would like to see him foster that potential.”

“You would?” My mom was on the verge of tears.

Mer nodded, then she looked up at me for confirmation that I was okay. The expression on her face was so hopeful, so full of faith in me that my stomach turned. I had to shove my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking.

“It’s not a done deal,” Meredith continued. “Bruno made a call to our alma mater, The Randall School of Music, and while they respect us, they will not just accept Ezra. He will need to apply like everyone else, but they are accepting his application late. Ezra needs to come into the city with us today, so we can record his preliminary audition track, and then later in the month, he and I will need to make a trip to Boston so he can perform for the admissions committee.”

“What about his SATs?” my mother asked, as if that was going to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. “He never took them.”

Meredith looked at me. I could tell by her expression that she knew that I had not only taken my SATs, but I had good SAT scores. I might not apply myself to anything that I didn’t give a shit about, but I was usually intelligent. She cleared her throat before looking back at my mother. “Well, Ms. Adams, in the fall, Hawthorne required that all students take the SATs—including Ezra.”

My mother turned to me. “You took the SAT? Don’t I have to sign off on that?”

“Ummm...” Mer mumbled.

I laughed. Everything that was happening felt ridiculous. My mother's eyes got wider. She looked back and forth between Meredith and me, and then she slowly said, "I signed off on that."

Meredith nodded. "You did."

"Excellent," my mother smarted. "And he did well?"

I did.

"Yes, he did," Mer said.

Bruno piped up, "Do they really fucking keep a record of students SAT scores at that school? That feels like an invasion of privacy, if you ask me."

"No one asked you," Marcus noted. "But just for your bank of knowledge, most high schools have access to students' SAT scores."

"Teenagers are second-class citizens," Bruno grumbled. Then he turned to me. "Your 1580 got me beat, dude. I bet you didn't even study."

My chest instinctually puffed up. "I worked till three the night before."

Bruno chuckled. "I love this fucking guy."

"A 1580?" my mother repeated, stunned. "Isn't 1600 a perfect score?"

"Yes, ma'am." Meredith smiled.

My mom looked at Bruno. "And you'll help him get into college and pay for it?"

"I will," Bruno said, tipping his head like he was bowing.

"For a price," Marcus chimed in.

I knew it was all too good to be true.

“Uglch” Meredith rolled her eyes at Marcus. “Will you drop the blood pact bullshit over there?” She looked at me. “If you get in, Bruno is sending you to school. Period. But Marcus would like you to promise to work with LSA in some capacity in the future.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Lemme get this straight. You want to send me to college and what I have to do to earn that privilege is work my dream job? What’s the fucking catch, Mer?”

My mother gasped. “Ezra, don’t talk to Ms. Campbell like that.”

Mer shrugged. “No catch. No contract. You get in, LSA foots the bill.”

Pushing out a fat sigh, Bruno stood. “Okay. Message delivered. Time to go. Grab a shirt, cocksucker.”

Mer scolded Bruno like my mother scolded me. “Can’t you even try to play civilized for five minutes?” She turned to my mother and shrugged. “Please excuse him; he has too much power.”

A grin spread across my mother’s face as she said, “Honey, if he’s helping Ezra, he can say cocksucker, motherfucker, or anything else he wants under my roof and I’m still gonna think he’s a prince.”

I spent the day in the studio at LSA Records, recording one of my compositions with the help of Josh Devrow and Eric Preston. Literally, the people helping me with my college

application had Grammys for Christ's sake. It was nuts. Even crazier, they all treated me like an equal, listening to my ideas and tweaking the recording in response to them. Marcus came in at some point to listen to the track and he turned to Mer, annoyed.

“Does he really have to go to college?”

I started to answer for her, but she clamped her hand over my mouth.

“Yes, he does.”

I wasn't sure why she was so adamant that I pursue the collegiate path, but I also wasn't going to go around her. I trusted Meredith. She'd earned that from me, and I was certain that if I didn't get into Randall, she'd come up with another plan. As long as I didn't screw it up, Meredith was going to make sure that my future looked bright.

Somewhere around nine p.m., Eric downloaded the final MP3 and said, “Mission accomplished. Can we eat now?”

And that is how I found myself in the most lavish NYC apartment I have ever seen in my life, sitting at a dining table, eating out of Chinese take-out cartons, and shooting the shit with some of the most influential voices in the music business.

I sat to next to Meredith on the far end of the table and was just taking it all in, when Bruno called out to me, “Oi, Ezra, why do you look like the cat who ate the canary?”

Ava raised an eyebrow suspiciously and clapped back at him, “Oi? Are we in a British pub? Who are you right now?”

“He was watching *Ted Lasso* today,” Kelly announced, chewing as she spoke. “And apparently he's a Brit now.”

Bruno teased her. “Says the girl who uses the adjective ‘wee’ for everything.”

Kelly grinned back. “I frickin’ am Irish, you fuck.”

“Born in Boston,” he retorted.

“Ah, but that is the wee Ireland, my bloke,” Josh quipped, impersonating the Lucky Charms leprechaun.

Kelly poked at him too. “You know you’re king of the douche parade, right, Josh?”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Bruno drolled, turning to me. “Come now, esteemed guest, tell me why you look delighted.”

I stopped poking my chopsticks in my carton and shrugged. “Other than you sort of made my life today, I don’t know. I guess it’s nice here.” I stumbled over my words. “I mean, you are all nice. You’re kind and you treat me with respect and you seem to take care of each other. It’s nice.”

“Nice?” Bruno scowled at me. I looked to Meredith for guidance.

She mouthed, “He hates the word nice.”

I started to squirm. “Shit, ahhh... not nice. Good. This place is not what I expected. None of you are what I expected. You’re real. You’re a family and getting to be part of that for even a day... Well, that shit feels like a gift.”

“Oi,” Bruno said again, lifting his Coke can. “Cheers to the kid who wants to bone Mer.”

Mer turned beet red, and Ava smacked Bruno’s arm, scolding him. “Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you?”

The others were laughing, lifting their soda cans as Bruno winked at me.

After dinner, the LSA family disbanded, all heading off to their different rooms. Mer showed me to my place on the couch. There was already a pillow and blanket waiting for me.

“There’s a bathroom by the front door and in the morning if you want to shower before school, I’ll show you the bathroom upstairs.”

“Thank you so much, Meredith,” I said.

Thinking I was being grateful for my place on the couch and her instructions on how to find the bathroom, she offered me a perfunctory, “Oh, of course, you’re welcome.”

I laughed. “I’m not thanking you for showing me the toilet. I’m thanking you for today, for my future, for everything.” I said the words as plainly as I could, wanting her to know that I would never forget what she was doing for me.

The tenor of her voice changed, getting smaller, as she said, “Oh yeah, well, you deserve it.”

I turned, picking up the linens and shifting them to where I was going to lay my feet.

“Probably not, but I’m going to try to earn it.”

Meredith collapsed onto the couch and dropped her head back so that her eyes were on the ceiling and heaved a heavy sigh.

I sat next to her, mimicking her position.

We were both silent for a beat, and then I asked, “Are you sighing because of me?”

“No,” she said. “I’m sighing because I love being a teacher and I wish I could help all the students who were like you. So many things had to align for me to see you play. Just imagine how many cool people don’t even begin to get a chance because they don’t think they’re worth it or they can’t see their own talent. And the idiots around that buy into the bullshit. You could have gotten lost. You could have been missed, Ezra. That kills me.”

“If you keep teaching, I bet there will be other students like me.”

Meredith turned her head so that she was looking at my profile, and then I felt her pinkie curl around mine as she whispered, “There will never be another like you, Ezra. Never.”

MEREDITH

In the middle of the night, I restlessly wandered down the stairs, telling myself that I needed a drink of water, but that was a lie. I wanted to check on him. I wanted to see him curled up on the couch and hear the quiet rhythm of his sleepy breaths. I couldn't squelch the need to know those tiny details. I tiptoed through the dark hallway and stopped just outside the living room entrance, trying to force myself to turn and head for the kitchen, but it was no use.

Slipping into the shadows just beyond the door, I drank in the sight of him. He was on the couch in nothing but his boxer briefs with the blue moonlight filtering through the apartment windows. He'd tossed off the covers, lost them in his sleep, and now he had his body knotted in a tight ball, consolidating for warmth. I crossed the room and lifted the blanket off the floor so I could drape it over him. When fabric touched his skin, he groaned in relief, and I was pleased. Leaning in, I kissed his forehead and whispered, "Sleep well, talented Ezra."

Satisfied, I stood and headed back toward the stairs, only to find an upset Eric sitting on the bottom step, waiting for me. He was still dressed. Eric was a night owl and he often stayed up late working in the home studio.

“You’re in love with him,” he said. I laughed. He must have seen me tucking Ezra in but to think I was in love? That was ridiculous.

“I’m not in love with him,” I said, keeping my voice low so as not to wake up our other roommates.

“You don’t know it, but you are. You need to quit, Mer. You need to quit your job before you cross a line you can’t uncross.” I scoffed and went to climb past him to head to my bedroom. He stood, blocking my path. “I see it. You all laugh at me. You think that the feeling developed for Olivia in a matter of hours wasn’t love, but it was. And you reek of it. Quit. Your. Job. Mer.”

“First of all,” I snapped, whisper-yelling. “I like my job and secondly, I’m not in love.”

He shook his head as he stepped aside and let me pass.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I woke up to what felt like the first real day of spring. The light poured in the windows of the apartment and the sky was cerulean blue with puffs of cotton candy clouds. It was the kind of day that made you think that if you opened the windows and sang, cartoon bluebirds would fly inside to join you in your happy little tune. Hopping out of bed, I grabbed my bathrobe and headed out into the hall. Even though Eric was still asleep, I made sure to flip the bird at his closed bedroom door as I passed. I headed downstairs to make sure Ezra was all set up to get ready for school, but I ran into James on my way, who said, “Your boy is already fed and in the shower.”

Lifting up on my tiptoes, I kissed his cheek. “Thank you, my man.”

In the shower, I reminded myself that everything with Ezra was fine. Sure, we were close, but I had our relationship in check. We were in the friend zone through and through, and we both knew it. I pushed down Bruno’s jokes and Eric’s concern, and I took my lead from the sun, deciding to feel shiny.

Once out of the shower, I sifted through my closet, settling on a bohemian floral sundress. The fabric was a cream background covered in tiny red and pink flowers. I paired it with a wide brown belt and riding boots of a similar color, then left my hair loose and wavy. I had started storing a lot of my stuff for work in the desk in my classroom, so all I needed to grab was my purse, and then it was time to go.

Ezra and I strode happily down the busy New York street, headed for the subway station. Even early in the morning NYC is loud, a cacophony of cars and horns and people just bustling. We chatted above the noise but not about anything of consequence. I noticed as we took to the subway stairs that our gait was in sync.

Waiting for the train to come, Ezra asked, “Why do you put yourself through the torture of the subway when you could afford otherwise?”

“Can I?” I questioned back. “I’m not rich. Bruno is.”

Ezra, who was leaning against one of the yellow poles on the platform, rolled his eyes at me. “You don’t have to ride the subway, Mer. In fact, I’m pretty sure you could use LSAs car service to get to work.”

I shrugged. “I guess I could, but I like the subway.”

“No one likes the subway,” Ezra chided with mischief in his eyes. “It’s dirty. It’s crowded. It’s somewhat dangerous. Please, tell me. What’s to like?”

“It’s efficient,” I suggested tenuously, looking up and taking in the glory seeing his features totally at ease.

“Sometimes,” he scoffed playfully. “But that’s not a reason to like it.”

“I don’t know.” I threw out my arms. “It’s human. It’s humanity. Being part of the people makes me feel grounded and alive.”

“You’re such a damn weirdo.” He laughed at me with so much joy in his eyes.

My heart did a somersault.

We stared into each other’s eyes as the train pulled up to the platform, squealing and blowing hot air all around us. I bit my lip.

He tipped his head toward the train and I nodded. If we were together, he would have grabbed my hand, but we weren’t.

We filed in, standing side by side, and entered into the odd state of quiet that often happens on public transportation. Sure, a big group of friends might continue their conversation, but most people go utterly silent on the train. It’s almost like everyone is pretending no one else is there. Particularly when the train is full.

Ezra and I had to go quite a few stops and it was rush hour, so it was no surprise that at our next stop, more people poured into the subway car than seemed possible. Jostled by the crowd, I found myself standing in front of Ezra, with my back to him. The warning announcement blared as the doors

closed and the people squeezed in even tighter, forcing me to take a tiny step back in Ezra's direction.

The crowd was so dense that I could hardly see my own feet, but I could feel Ezra towering behind me. My whole body responded, lighting up and buzzing like a live wire. As they do, the train took off with a jolt, testing our balance. Ezra's hand shot up, grabbing my hip, keeping my body from pressing against his.

His touch on my hip seared, red-hot like a brand, and my mind hyper-focused on the sensations he was causing. The way his fingertips and thumb pressed into the fabric of my dress, lifting it the tiniest bit and changing the flow of air around my thighs. The pinch of pressure every time the train's movement shifted our bodies. The aching need to reach down and push his hand toward the inside of my thigh. I sucked in a shaky breath, trying to quiet the rush of desire that was flooding my senses.

The train stopped again, and for a second there was some relief. People exited giving us a modicum of breathing room, but moments later the tide turned. The scenario repeated itself, only this time Ezra wasn't fast enough. When the train took off, I lost my balance and he couldn't stop the press of my body against his. Everything slowed. I could feel him through the flimsy fabric of my dress, the thick hard length of him pressing into the cleft of my ass.

My heart pounded and my clit throbbed. I pressed my thighs together trying to squelch the ache. Behind me, he jerked in an attempt to put some space between us, but there was nowhere for him to go. In a last-ditch effort to preserve the status quo, he leaned down, bringing his lips to the shell of my ear, and he whispered, "I'm so sorry. I can't help it."

His words backfired. The heat of his breath on my skin made me shudder. Instinctually, I made a small guttural sound and my hips bucked in his direction, rolling against his cock. He hadn't moved so his groan and surprised, "Oh fuck," fell on my skin again, making me repeat my shudder.

This time when Ezra's hand shot out, he pinned me against him and buried his face in my neck. Somewhere inside of me there should have been warning bells, but there weren't. I just wanted more of him. I didn't care that we were surrounded by people. I didn't care that he was my student. I just wanted to feel him in every way possible. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, I rocked against him.

When the train stopped again, Ezra didn't allow me a reprieve. He stood a little taller, masking the appearance of our connection, but he kept our bodies connected, and when we started moving again, he began to speak.

"You want me," he whispered. "You like this." His hand pressed into the flesh of my hip.

My breath caught and I dropped my head back against his shoulder, closing my eyes, wanting only to hear the sound of his voice. The hand that wasn't holding my hip tickled the skin on my opposite thigh, playing with the hem of my dress.

"Do you wish my fingers were climbing, Mer?" He spoke so quietly that even with his lips right next to my ear, I could barely hear him. "You're wet, aren't you? Soaking your panties for me."

I whimpered.

"Fuck, what I wouldn't do to be inside you. To pull up this piece of fabric between us and push the length of my cock into

your pussy. Would you like that, Mer? Would you let me fuck you right here in this crowd of strangers?"

Oh God, I would. I would. I would let him do anything he wanted to me.

The train squealed to a stop as the fear rose up from the pit in my belly and wrapped its claws around my heart. Terrified, I bolted, pushing through the crowd and racing out onto the random subway platform, desperate to get away from him.

I needed distance.

Distance would give me the clarity to remember who I was.

EZRA

For a week after the incident on the train, Meredith wasn't in school. We had a substitute. He couldn't sing. I don't think he could even play the tambourine. Music Composition became a study hall. Then the following Monday at seven a.m., I saw her. I was at the end of the hall and she was standing just outside our classroom door. Initially, I was relieved because I missed her. I missed how it felt to talk to her and the calmness of her smile.

I hadn't contacted her. I didn't know what to say. Honestly, I was terrified. There was no denying what happened on the train. I crossed a line. Meredith defined the boundaries of our relationship over and over again. She was very clear that she was not mine for the taking. I knew that teaching mattered to her. I knew that a relationship with me threatened her reputation and everything she hoped to achieve. I knew that she would bend over backward to make sure my life was going to be better than I ever expected.

And still, I lusted.

I broke my promise to her again.

How many times could she forgive me?

So, even though I wanted to, I didn't rush to her when I saw her outside the classroom. Instead, I paused. I couldn't fail her anymore. I couldn't just act on instinct. I had to think about what I was doing.

When I really looked at her standing there in front of the classroom door, I could see that she was wrecked. It had only been a week and she was thinner. Her pallor was off. She had her eyes closed and she was taking these deep meditative breaths, moving her hands up and down as she breathed in and out, only they weren't working. She didn't seem calmer or more centered. Her brow was furrowed and lined with tension. Meredith was suffering. She was suffering because of me. I had to let go of everything I wanted from her. It didn't matter how her body reacted on that train; I knew what she wanted. I shouldn't have pushed. When she was weak, I should have been strong.

After a few more deep breaths, she finally reached for the knob and pulled open the door. She expected me to be in there, waiting. I watched her steel herself. She straightened her shoulders and plastered a smile on her face, and then she was gone, the weighted door pulling itself shut behind her. I stayed where I was, sipped my coffee at the end of the hall, and let the sadness I felt settle in my gut.

My mornings with Meredith were over.

For two weeks, I went to her class. I sat in the back row, like always. I squelched down all my feelings and I became just another student of Ms. Campbell's. We didn't talk about what happened. We didn't talk about the end of our morning sessions. We didn't talk about anything. Meredith didn't

ignore me. She was kind. Offered feedback on the work I was doing for class. But I made sure I was no longer special. I came in just before the bell and I was the first one to leave. I didn't seek her out in any way.

And then one morning, I woke up to the following email:

To: EBeckett@hawthorn.edu, MCampbell@hawthorne.edu,
Bdifranco@LSA.com

From: Admissions@Randallmusic.edu

Audition Time: Saturday, April 8, 3 p.m.

Dear Mr. Beckett,

We have reviewed your application materials and would like to invite you to continue the admissions process. We have scheduled your in-person audition for three p.m. on Saturday April 8 in the Dansk Auditorium.

Please be prepared to perform a work of your own composition and a work by an established artist.

I have attached a campus map for your convenience. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Carol Williams

Director of Undergraduate Admissions

Meredith had already sent her a reply:

To: Admissions@Randallmusic.edu

From: MCampbell@hawthorne.edu,

CC: EBeckett@hawthorn.edu

Re: Audition Time: Saturday, April 8, 3 p.m.

Dear Ms. Williams,

Wonderful. Ezra and I will be there!

Have a great day and thank you,

Meredith Campbell

She sent me an email as well:

To: EBeckett@hawthorn.edu

From: MCampbell@hawthorne.edu,

Re: Audition at Randall

Ezra,

I will pick you up at eight on Saturday. It's about a four-hour drive so that will give us time to drop our stuff off at the hotel and maybe grab a bite to eat if you're not too nervous. (I would be.) Also, if we do hit any traffic, leaving early will make sure we are still there on time.

Feel free to pick any composition we have worked on—they are all good. But for your cover, your rendition of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” was killer.

You got this.

See you in class.

Meredith

We hadn't said more than ten words to each other in over two weeks. I had been certain that my behavior on the train meant that my chance to go to Randall had disappeared, But I should have known better. Meredith didn't walk away. She would always make good on her promise to me, even when I didn't come close to living up to mine.

On Saturday, April 8 at 7:50 a.m., I was waiting on the curb, duffel in hand, when Meredith pulled up. She was driving a blue second-generation Volkswagen Beetle, the ones they started making in the nineties. From the outside, it looked like it was in pristine condition. I smiled at her through the windshield glass, hoping my pleasantry would put her at ease.

She returned the favor, offering me an expression of utter friendliness when she rolled down the window and pointed her thumb behind her, saying, "I'll pop the trunk."

Bag in the back, it took me a minute to adjust the seat to accommodate my legs, but the high ceiling made the car pretty darn comfy for a tall guy like me.

"Nice car," I said as she pulled out onto the road. "It's in good condition."

"Yeah, totally. I don't drive it much." Talking about nothing with her felt stunted but I was determined to make it work.

"It's yours?" I asked, even though that already seemed clear.

"Yep." She kept her eyes focused on her driving. "It was a present."

"Really? Nice gift."

She nodded in agreement. "It's always been my dream car. Bruno gave it to me for my twentieth birthday. I thought he

was nuts.”

“I’m pretty sure he is nuts.” I laughed. “But in a crazy, generous way.”

She chuckled to herself. “When I first met Bruno, I thought he was just like this showy rich kid who was always trying to buy his friends.” She glanced at me, looking to see my reaction. I didn’t judge her. I would have thought that too. “But over time, I’ve come to realize that in Bruno’s world, money was always a means to power and control. Making money was a thing that stunted artistry and creation. Making money was the thing his parents prioritized over everything else, including him. So, he hates money. He will not let the earning of it drive him. And he undermines the power of having it by spending it and giving it away.”

I shifted in my seat, contemplating what she was saying, and then said, “I can’t decide if that’s super sad or amazing.”

“Both.” She shrugged. “Like most things in life, it’s not black and white.”

We were whizzing along the highway at that point, and her words bored into my chest. Meredith and I weren’t black or white. There was no clear-cut space for us to exist in.

Unable to contain it anymore, I blurted out, “I’m sorry.”

Meredith stilled and then she sighed. She was completely poised and utterly firm when she said, “You have nothing to be sorry for. You reacted to my behavior. I’m the culprit here.”

I should have said something but I was stunned into silence. She went on, her voice losing its solidarity. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I am a fucking adult. I know better. It doesn’t matter how attracted we are to each other. We cannot be, and I

know that. It's up to me to be the grown-up. It's my job to help you avoid mistakes, and I failed you."

I couldn't help myself, I laughed. She was fucking ridiculous.

With knitted brows, her gaze whipped from the road to my profile, and she snapped, "Why are you laughing?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I'm a fucking adult too, Meredith." My tone was laced with sarcasm and I emphasized my words by talking with my hands. "And while you may think the onus to protect my..." I searched my brain for the right word and felt slightly gleeful when I found it. "...virtue is your responsibility, it's not. Should you have been rubbing your ass on my cock in a subway car? Probably not. But my dick was hard long before you backed into it." I was ranting at this point. "You can't stop me from wanting to fuck you. You can't stop me from dreaming about what it would look like to see you come, and you can't keep me from caring about you in a way that is clearly not teacherly. I have to do that. We have to do that because staying away from each other protects us both."

She swallowed. "But..."

"No. Stop it. We are both adults. I know you think there is some socially constructed power dynamic here, and I'm sure that if this was happening to you with any other kid at Hawthorne, that could be true. But I am not a fucking child, Meredith. I haven't been a kid in a really long time, so please take your guilt and toss it out the fucking window."

At this point, she was laughing at me.

I smiled. "Settled?"

She nodded.

And just like that my eyes glassed over because she wasn't mine and she wasn't going to be. I reached across the car and took her hand, running my fingertips up and down each one of her fingers, taking in the softness of her skin.

"I can't have you," I said softly, looking at her hand, not her face. "I get it now."

After a while, I put her hand back in her lap. She lifted it to her face immediately and pushed tears away with her palm.

We were silent for a bit, looking out opposite windows, until Mer asked, "Green Day?"

I responded, "Hell, yes."

MEREDITH

The Dansk Auditorium wasn't grand. It was inside a building that was mostly classrooms, and when I went to Randall, it was used for instructional purposes and performance exams. I liked that the admissions committee held their auditions in the space; it felt like a kindness, like the committee had chosen an unimposing location so that the stage itself wouldn't contribute to the auditioner's anxiety. Because of Ezra's late application, I expected us to be alone, but there were quite a few other students who missed the originally scheduled audition dates due to justifiable emergencies. So, Ezra and I sat on a pair of blue plastic chairs that the admission committee had set up in the hallway and we waited.

Ezra was restless, constantly shifting his long legs and pushing his hands through his hair. One by one the other students auditioning were called in to perform by a stout woman holding a clipboard. She read their names awkwardly, trying to avoid mispronunciations. And when she looked up to see who responded to her call, she peered through her glasses like her prescription wasn't strong enough. With every call to audition, she also offered the knowledge of who was next in line to perform. Every student other than Ezra was accompanied by his or her parents, and bundles of nerves by

association, they were invited to follow their children into the auditorium.

I sporadically tried to start conversations with Ezra, but it didn't work. He was consumed by his anxiety. Each time the names were called, his eyes lingered on the families of the kids who were on deck to perform. He watched the way their parents hugged them, whispering affirmations and straightening collars. Studying them, he furrowed his brow and wrung his hands until his knuckles were white.

When the woman finally signaled that he was the performer on deck, Ezra stood and bolted down the hall. I didn't even think about it. I just followed him right into the men's room, fast enough to watch Ezra plow into a bathroom stall and slam the door behind him. A second later, I could see the soles of his shoes as he dropped to his knees and violently emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet. I leaned against the wall space between the stall he was in and the stall next to him, wishing I knew exactly what to say or do to make it all easier. What words erased years of people eroding your self-confidence?

When the puking stopped, Ezra's feet shifted and I could tell he was sitting on the floor, perpendicular to the toilet, his shoulder blades resting against the stall wall. I wanted to throw open the stall door and pull him into my arms, but after our discussion in the car, I was certain that wasn't appropriate so I just quietly said, "I'm here."

He stayed silent for a few minutes. I stared at the clock on the wall—watching the second hand tick by. I didn't want him to miss his audition, but he certainly couldn't go in there until he calmed his nerves. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath,

trying to push off my own need to rush back to the auditorium.

Eventually, he pushed the stall door open with his hand. His eyes were glassy and his voice was utterly hollow when he looked up at me and said, “No one ever watched me audition.”

The Ezra I knew was a man, but sitting on the dirty restroom floor, I could see the glimmer of a long-lost boy.

“No one ever kissed me on the forehead and encouraged me to do my best.”

My bottom lip started to tremble.

“No one was ever there, Mer.” He shifted his gaze away from me, staring blankly at the wall across from him. “I did everything alone. Everything.”

Fuck it.

Stepping over the giant gangly leg closest to me, I entered the stall and dropped down between Ezra’s knees, wrapping my arms around his torso and pressing my cheek to his chest. His body went stiff and he shifted his arms, awkwardly holding them out to his sides.

Gently, I said, “You are so strong, Ezra.”

Beneath my cheek his chest shook and I could hear the tiny puffs of air he pushed out his nose as his tears fell. I squeezed him harder, pressing my face against his heart, wanting to absorb all the pain he felt. The awkwardness in his body softened and his arms encircled me, gripping me as tightly as I gripped him.

We stayed that way until he was breathing calmly. Shifting away from his arms, I sat up onto my knees so I could look him in the eye. Gently, I smiled at him. There was no question

in my mind. Eric was right. I was in love with Ezra Beckett. Deeply, insanely, utterly in love with him, which was why I knew that no matter how much I wanted to be there for him, no matter how much I wanted to go back into his childhood and right all the wrongs, I couldn't.

Ezra had survived all that. He had already learned how to cope. He knew how to think for himself and master the world around him. He was a force in his own right. He was bold enough to win this dream all on his own and I wanted that for him. I wanted him to know that he didn't need my help. He had earned this win on his own merits.

Because I loved him, I brushed the hair off his face with my hands, leaned in, and gently touched my lips to his forehead. Then I told him the God's honest truth. "You don't need anyone, Ezra. Your talent will speak for itself. Get up, go out there, and fucking blow them away."

I took one more lingering look, and then I stood, leaving him on the floor of the men's restroom.

Four hours later, I was pacing back and forth in my hotel room, stopping periodically to look at the door that connected my room to Ezra's. As far as I knew, he hadn't come back from his audition. When I left him at Randall, I didn't stop or go anywhere else. I just came to the room to wait. I expected him to be an hour, maybe two, but four felt excessive. I didn't question my decision to leave him to audition on his own. I knew in my gut that he was fueled by his self-determination. But I couldn't understand why he hadn't come back to me. He had to know that I was invested in his success.

My mind kept defaulting to thoughts about the classic film, *An Affair to Remember*. In the film, the main female character gets hit by a car on the way to finally solidify her love with the male character. Was that what was happening? Was Ezra sprawled broken on the asphalt somewhere? The rational part of me knew that it was unlikely he lay dead or dying somewhere. That didn't usually happen, but it could. In college, a friend of mine OD'd and Bruno's parents died in a plane crash. Shit went sideways sometimes.

Still, I was pretty sure that the scene in my head where Ezra was sitting up in a hospital bed, his head wrapped in gauze, telling some random doctor that he couldn't remember his own name wasn't real. But an irrational part of me couldn't release the idea that losing him was a possibility. He could disappear from my life in a second, and I hadn't said anything when he spoke in the car in the morning.

I hadn't told him that I thought he was braver and stronger than me. I hadn't told him that those few moments in the subway car were the sexiest of my life or that giving him up felt like my world was imploding. I didn't tell him that as much as I knew what the right thing to do was, I fucking loved him, and I wanted to do all the wrong things.

I checked my phone for new texts for the thousandth time and then clicked over to see if he emailed. He hadn't, but Carol Williams had.

To: EBeckett@hawthorn.edu, MCampbell@hawthorne.edu,
Bdifranco@LSA.com

From: Admissions@Randallmusic.edu

Re: Mr. Beckett's application

Dear Mr. Beckett et. al,

Congratulations. I wanted to be the first to tell you that you have been accepted to The Randall School of Music. You will receive an acceptance packet in the mail in the next few weeks, but do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Carol Williams

Director of Undergraduate Admissions

PS. Remarkable performance today.

As soon as I finished reading the email from Carol, I got a text from Bruno.

Bruno: Fuck yeah to Ezra. Way to rock it, bro.

Bruno: This whole thing has me thinking. Catch up with me tomorrow. Let's chat.

I read the texts quickly and basically ignored it because it wasn't Ezra, but when I didn't answer, Bruno followed up with another text, and another, and another.

Bruno: *Silence...*

Bruno: *I didn't know that Meredith Campbell was capable of silence.*

Bruno: *Oh shit...*

Bruno: *Meredith, are you two fucking?*

As soon as that last text pinged on my screen, the group text I had with my roommates exploded.

Bruno: *On a scale of 1 to 10, who thinks Mer will take her student to bonetown?*

Ava: *:::::Cringing:::::*

Kelly: *Bonetown is Beantown. LOL*

James: *What has inspired this particular poll, sir?*

Josh: *12 - maybe 12 and half*

Marcus: *If she twiddles that dee, I get to sign him before he graduates.*

Eric: *Do y'all aspire to be douchebags? Because on a scale of 1 to 10 - 12, maybe 12 and half.*

Kelly: *If she doesn't do 'im, I will.*

James: *Mer?*

Josh: *She's awfully quiet.*

Bruno: *Right!?! We should totally be called out for #slutshaming right now.*

Josh: *I'll #slutshame you, Bruno.*

Kells: *Neither of you idiots know the definition of #slutshaming.*

Ava: *OMG. Women everywhere are crying.*

They weren't going to stop unless I answered, but I wasn't ready to sound the alarms or talk to my friends about how I was picturing death scenarios. So I lied, trying to divert their questions and suspicion.

Meredith: *Jesus, next time I pee, remind me to bring my phone.*

Bruno: *Premature ejaculation?*

Ava: *Please, someone tell me why I love this man.*

Josh: *Big dick?*

Eric: *How would you know?*

Marcus: *Basic google image search.*

Bruno: *Are you peeping my #superschlöng, Marcus?*

Marcus: *Always. And, you know, running your in-house public relations team.*

Josh: *:::hehehe::: dickpics are in Marcus's job description.*

Their banter, albeit frustrating, was a welcome distraction, but suddenly I heard movement in Ezra's room. I immediately silenced my phone. I stood there frozen, wanting him to knock on the damn connecting door, but he didn't. There was shuffling, creaking, the rush of the bathroom faucet, and then when he turned on the television, I got angry. He knew I was as invested in his audition as he was. How did he leave me standing alone in my room for hours? How did he not want to share his success with me?

I threw open the door on my side and pounded on the door on his side, hollering, "Open the door, Ezra."

Immediately, he was toying with the lock and when he got the door open, he seemed out of breath, almost panicky. He pushed his way past me into my room and scanned my surroundings, then turning back to me, he blurted, "Are you okay? Why are you yelling?"

With hands on my hips like a petulant child, I snapped, "I am not okay. I'm angry."

"You're angry?" He looked confused.

"So angry."

"Why?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"Where were you? I've been waiting for hours."

"I grabbed some food." He still seemed confused. "You've been waiting?" He looked around my room. "Here? For me?"

"Of course." I huffed at him, wanting to stomp my foot.

“Why?” Something about the way he asked slowed my roll. The look on his face was a mixture of disbelief and happiness.

My anger started to fizzle as I said, “Because I wanted to know about your audition. I wanted to celebrate with you.”

“Oh,” he said awkwardly, shifting his weight. “Um... I didn’t know.” He pushed his hand through his hair and genuinely sighed. “Shit. I guess I’m not used to that.” He was contrite for a moment and then a contagiously joyful smile spread out across his face. Cocky, he boasted, “I fuckin’ blew their minds.”

“Is that so?” I snarked, still pouting a little.

He took a step toward me, playfully shimmying his shoulders—a tiny victory dance. I liked seeing him happy. I liked the way it made his eyes soften.

“That admissions committee wants to have my babies.”

I laughed. “You are ridiculous right now.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He kept smirking at me, and I had the urge to bite his crooked mouth. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they accepted me on the spot.”

He didn’t know. He hadn’t read his email.

“They did.” I beamed.

He stilled. His face went slack for a second, and then he quietly asked, “They did?”

I nodded vigorously. “They did.”

He went from still to frenetic. He ran in circles around my room, whooping, “They did! They did!” He ran to the door, threw it open, and yelled into the hallway, “They did, folks!”

Then he barreled back in my direction, swooped me up, lifting me off my feet and spinning us in circles as he hollered. I laughed, absolutely delighted by his joy.

Once my feet were on the ground again, he held me at arm's length and looking me in the eyes, he whispered, "I'm going to fucking college, Mer. Fucking college."

I was smiling so wide, my cheeks hurt.

My heart was full. We were just standing there with all this joy pouring out of us, inches apart. And his eyes fell to my mouth. Under the weight of his gaze, my tongue jutted out, wetting my lips. His nostrils flared, and his breathing raced. Everything about his body language screamed kiss her, but he didn't. He'd made me a promise, one he intended to keep. My whole body felt electrified, pulled in his direction by a force I couldn't control. I couldn't waste another minute.

"Fuck it," I groaned, grabbing his face in my hands and devouring his mouth. If he was shocked, it was only for a moment. I might have initiated our kiss, but he owned it. I was chaotic, coming at him defiantly, brutally, taking the thing I thought I couldn't have. He slowed me, walked me backward until my ass pressed against a dresser that had a large mirror hanging on the wall behind it.

He kissed me softly, gently. He didn't grope at me or pull at my clothes. He stayed focused on my mouth. He savored the taste of my lips, licked them, nibbled them, and traced them with his tongue. Ezra's kiss wasn't taking; it was claiming. He was branding my lips. He was erasing every kiss that came before his and making sure that no kiss after him would compare.

Between hungry little swipes of his tongue, he said, "Tell me you want this." He was protecting me from my past

mistakes. He wanted my consent, my commitment. “If you give yourself to me, you cannot run away again. Do you understand?”

I pushed my hands against his shoulders, so that he was forced to look me in the eyes and what I saw there was familiar. He was determined. He was certain. Ezra Beckett wanted me desperately, but not because it was taboo or because he was a victim of my desire. He wanted me because I was me and he was him. He had hungered for me this way from the moment I first smiled at him. Looking into his eyes with his scent all around me, all the lies I’d been telling myself unfurled, and I knew that I’d wanted him since day one too.

Slowly, I nodded my chin up and down. “I understand.”

He wasn’t satisfied with my response. Fierce raw emotion flooded his face, and he grabbed my chin, stilling it between his thumb and forefinger.

“You need to be sure.” He was stern when he reiterated, “We cross this line, Meredith, and you are mine.”

Mischief curled the corner of my lip when I said, “Haven’t I always been?”

My words pleased him. His deep-green eyes flared hot, and he mimicked my naughty grin as he said, “Face the mirror.”

As I turned, he pulled his shirt over his head and I took in my first glimpse of what it looked like to have him towering behind me, bare-chested. He closed the space between us, pressing his front to my back, and like I had on the subway, I could feel him thick and hard behind me.

“Do you think about being on that train, Mer?” He was watching my face, waiting to see if my expression would tell a

different story than my words. What he didn't fully realize was that I was done hiding from the truth.

Biting my lip, I nodded.

He held my gaze, but his hand dropped down by my side, his fingertips starting behind my knee and tracing a path up my thigh. His movement was excruciatingly slow, but the resulting sensation made all the muscles at my core clench. It was everything I could do not to drop my head back and moan.

“Do you think about how I touched your legs like this?” He kept stroking the sensitive flesh above the back of my knees, feeding the fire he was building.

I rocked my ass against his cock, like I had before, and his hand moved higher, dragging the fabric of my dress up. Using both hands, he kept lifting the fabric, past my hips and my torso, over the sides of my breasts and the flesh on the back of my arms, until it was gone, tossed to the floor. I stood before him in just my bra and panties.

“So exquisite.” He exhaled as his eyes consumed my image, lingering over every morsel. He leaned in, connecting us, skin to skin, making my whole body tremble, and then he dipped his lips to my ear and began to whisper.

“I want you to close your eyes for me.”

I did.

“Promise you won't open them until I tell you to.”

I nodded.

“Tell me, Meredith. Say the words.”

“I promise,” I breathed.

“Good girl...” I shuddered at the heat of his breath on my skin. His hand was moving on my thigh again, only this time he was crossing from the outside toward the middle. “I want you to remember how it felt when we were on that train.” His fingertips were climbing higher. “Remember the sounds... tell me what you hear.”

My breaths were heavy as I answered, “The rumble of the wheels on the track, the rush of my pulse in my ears...”

“What do you smell?” He fingered the elastic on my panties, and I bit down on my lower lip and squeaked. “Not yet, baby. Focus on the smells.”

“It’s hot. It smells hot, like a mix of all the humans around us.”

“There are so many of them.” His tone is deep and layered. “They don’t know how wet you are, do they?” I shook my head no. “They don’t know how desperate you are for me to touch you.”

I shook my head. “No.” I panted. “They can’t tell.”

“Should I touch you, babe? Spread your lips apart and push my fingers inside you, even though any one of them could notice what we’re doing?” His cock jerked against my ass before I answered.

“Please.” I managed that one word before his fingers slipped past the elastic band of my underwear. Already swollen and tender, I cried out as soon as he grazed my lips. He went straight for my clit, drawing rough little circles around it with his three middle fingers. My body responded instantly, pressure coiling, my pussy clenching.

“That’s it.” He slid his fingers down, pushing them inside me, and I cried out. “That’s a good girl. Come all over my

fingers.”

I came hard and fast, my eyes still closed. I had to throw my hand behind me and grab his shoulder to keep myself upright as I fell into the abyss of pleasure. He carried me through my orgasm, pushing me deeper into every surge, until I was just a mess of whimpers. When it was over, I expected him to stop touching me, but he never did. He just slowed the movement of his fingers as he pulled at the waistband of my panties, forcing them to the floor.

“Put your palms on the dresser,” he commanded.

I had never been this compliant in my life, but with him, that’s what I wanted. I bent at the waist and heard the sound of him unzipping his jeans before I felt him kick them to the side. He used his free hand to unsnap my bra and it fell forward, encircling my wrists. Finally, the hand that was circling my clit moved, drifting to grip my hip as he used his other hand to align his cock at my entrance.

He groaned, “Now,” as he drove inside me. “Open your eyes, baby. Watch me fuck you.”

My eyes flew open, and he stared into them in our reflection. There was such affection in them, such reverence.

“Look at us, Meredith,” he purred as he pumped into me, rabid with desire. His nostrils were flared and he was clenching his teeth, but he kept his eyes locked on mine. I broke from his eye contact and looked at us together.

In my life I had thought of sex as base, an animalistic need that was best left unexamined. But watching Ezra piston his hips behind me as I felt the thickness of him inside me was anything but base.

It was transcendent.

It was like breathing freedom. My whole body was flying, wild with the thrill of getting to be alive. I'd had glimpses of the feeling before, the rush of driving down the highway with the windows down, listening to the perfect song, the relief of writing the final chord of an incredible song, the warmth of the sun on your cheekbones on a winter's day. I had tons of little moments that let me catch a tiny glimpse of what passion felt like. But it was always slipping away, falling just out of reach.

I owned it now. I could feel it seared into my soul.

It was the image of this man, behind me, taking my body unto his and pushing it until there was nothing but pleasure.

Ezra adjusted his position so that his cock drove even deeper inside me. My feet were barely touching the floor, but he held me up, kept me safe. His eyes glanced down at where our bodies met.

"Fuck, baby," he panted, reaching around to stroke my clit again. "I need your body to sing for me. I need to feel you clench on my cock."

All he had to do was say the words and I started to coil. I shoved my hips back over and over, rushing to meet his thrusts. His head dropped back, and he groaned, "Yes, Meredith. Oh, fuck yes. That's it, baby."

Inside me, his cock throbbed and swelled. We were both so close, tittering on the brink of our release. And I was just about to close my eyes and let the wave take me when he grunted, "Look at me."

We came staring at our reflection, shuddering through the climb together. It was insanely intimate and incredibly vulnerable. It was unlike any orgasm I'd had before that

moment and it was the moment when I knew that I not only loved him, I would wither away and die without him.

When we were finished, he collapsed against my back and mumble-moaned against my skin.

“Holy fuck.”

“Literally.” I could feel his grin against my shoulder blade. He kissed the spot where he’d just smiled and then lifted his head to snare my gaze again.

“I could die happy right now,” he boasted.

I giggled.

“Don’t laugh at me,” he play-growled, punctuating his words by wiggling his dick inside me. “This pussy is my fucking heaven. I’m moving in. This bish is my new home.” Speaking to my eyes in the mirror, he leaned down, sweetly resting his chin on my shoulder as he asked, “You got Netflix?”

I full-on laughed and there was nothing but joy on his face for a good beat, but then I stilled as his expression turned serious.

“I have to tell you something,” he said, rushing through the words. “Because recently I realized how important it is to hear it when it’s true, so I’m just going to say it and you don’t have to say anything. Okay?”

I could have nodded. I could have let him go first, but I didn’t want to.

“I love you,” I said.

He glanced away, shaking his head, “Oh really?” he teased.

“Utterly.”

In one smooth move, he stood up, spun me around, and kissed me deeply, before he relented and said, “Well, I fucking love you too.”

EZRA

Meredith quit. She didn't tell me she was going to. She just marched into Jane Chamberlain's office on Monday morning and handed in her resignation. I found out when Eric came stumbling into our Music Composition course, announcing himself as Meredith's replacement. For a second, I was upset. I knew she liked teaching and I didn't want her to give up a dream for me.

And then Eric handed me a folded slip of paper and said, "Ezra, it seems the administration would like to talk to you."

Grabbing my stuff, I headed toward the door, reading the note as I moved.

I'm hiding from the storm.

~M

I found her at the boathouse dock. Sitting on an old wood crate, face tipped up toward the sun, smiling. She was wearing her kind of flimsy sundress, one that buttoned up the front and swinging her feet like a girl. My girl.

“You’re awfully chipper for someone so recently unemployed,” I snarked. I was off to the side behind her, standing closer to where we’d hid from the rain just a few months earlier.

She looked over her shoulder and smarted back, “Didn’t like this place to begin with—stuck-up students with terrible attitudes.”

“Is that right?” I asked, taking a step in her direction.

“Mmmm... this one guy, he doesn’t even think seeing my tits is a big deal.”

“Really?” I smirked. “That doesn’t sound right, but maybe I’ll need to get a closer look to be sure...”

“Could be arranged...” She shrugged, hopping off the crate. She strolled in my direction, fingering the top button on her dress. I let my eyes drift down, hoping she was really going to give me a little peek.

She laughed. Boo.

“Huh,” She wiggled her eyebrows at me. “I guess they’re a bigger deal than you let on.” I pulled her into my embrace.

“They’re a big fucking deal, Mer. Is that what you want to hear? That I’m fucking cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs over your tits.”

“It’s a start.” She pushed up on her tiptoes to kiss me. “I mean, I gave up my dead-end job for you...”

I shifted my weight from one foot, “How did Janey take your resignation?”

“Well, I think.”

“What did you tell her?” I asked.

“The truth.” Mer smirked. “She asked why I was resigning, and I sighed, ‘Fucking Ezra Beckett.’”

“Mer...” I scolded, rolling my eyes. Jane Chamberlain of course thought Meredith was lamenting complicated students, like me.

“What?” She feigned innocence. “I didn’t lie.”

I shook my head at her, chuckling. “You know she had absolutely no idea that you were riding my dick into the sunset.”

“Words are very tricky, Ezra. So easily misinterpreted.”

I pulled her arm to stop her progression, pointing to a root I didn’t want her to trip over. We were both quiet for a minute, and then I said, “I’m sorry you had to quit, Mer. I know you liked teaching.”

She interrupted me, taking my hand and heading in the direction of the train station. “Thankfully, I have already found a gig that suits me so much better.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“What job?”

“Wait.” She stopped moving. “I’m getting ahead of myself.” She looked up at me and asked, “You wanna play hooky with me today?”

“I do.” I grinned at her.

“Good. I’ll tell you all about the scholarship foundation that Bruno and I are starting over a classic breakfast at Sarabeth’s.” She turned back to strolling hand in hand through the trees toward the train platform.

“Isn’t Sarabeth’s way uptown on the east side?” I asked, confused. “Why do you want to go there when there are so many great joints closer to your apartment?”

She gripped the arm of the hand she was holding and rested her head against my shoulder as we walked. “Oh, you know, I was thinking we might want to ride the subway.”

Cheeky little minx.

Need more Ezra and Meredith

[Click here to read a bonus Epilogue.](#)

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Thank you in advance.

XO,

Lola

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola West writes short, sweet, smart, silly, sexy romance. With a PhD in women's studies and a flair for the dramatic, Lola likes to keep it real. Her loves are cotton candy, astronomy, kitten heels and small-town hunks. Lola's heroes make you swoon and her heroines talk back. Also, she believes that consent is always sexy, even in books.

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