



WITH THE
Band

the

MAVERICK

LOLA WEST

THE MAVERICK

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*For all the women who fight
and stand up for what they believe in.*

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BRUNO

Age Fourteen

I FOLLOWED HER.

I shouldn't have. I didn't know shit about neighborhoods like Ava's, but I wanted to see how she lived. I wanted to get under her skin. I wanted to haunt her every thought because she was haunting mine.

Ava had interned for my parents' record company for six months but literally weeks after they hired her, there was nothing intern-y about her internship. She wasn't sorting mail and grabbing coffee. My parents weren't dumb—they immediately noticed she was special. Even though she was just a teen, she had a talent for herding people and managing situations. Give her the room and she had it all handled. Got a mascara-streaked manic diva on your hands? Ava could have her cleaned up and giggling in ten. A mother/manager having a self-aggrandizing tantrum about her important role in the life and finances of her son, the preteen heartthrob? Not to worry, Ava would quietly usher that Karen right out the door. Worried that a drug addled drummer needed to be sober long enough to

finish a record? Trust Ava would keep him in line. Her talents seemed absolutely endless and utterly innate.

I hungered for the details. I wanted to see the grit and grind that created the magnificent creature who slithered her way into my family's life. So, I waited for hours in the dark alley across the street from the entrance to the LSA Records tower. It was evening, after eight. Ava didn't squeeze in her dedication to the company around a school schedule. Even though we were the same age, merely freshmen in high school, Ava was so devoted to working for my parents that when they offered her their "diversity" internship, she promptly took her GED. She came to our house, with her passing scores in hand and announced that while it might seem odd, she wanted to dedicate herself full-time to their company. Looking all doe-eyed and innocent, she added that she hoped my parents would welcome her unyielding commitment. She actually used that phrase, "*Unyielding commitment.*" I smirked at her across the table, wondering if she bought her own bullshit, but also fully grasping the momentum of our chef adding an extra place setting of coq au vin before her. Somehow, she snuck her way into our home and our lives without ever seeming to slip from our sight.

But Ava wasn't always in plain view. The soft spoken, confident beauty who copied my table manners and laughed at my father's jokes, she had another life. One we knew very little about. I pretended that was why I was following her. I told myself that I was being cautious, that my curiosity was actually some kind of protective instinct. I was heeding my hearth, playing the role of the consecrated son, the protector of our temple, with no fucks given to the reality that our world was clearly less than holy.

I watched her through the pane of glass as she waved her goodbyes in the lobby, and then I kept my distance as I skulked along behind her, moving from shadow to shadow in my navy hoodie and old dark jeans. She strode through the night air, the heels of her boots click-clacking on the pavement of the city streets. I expected her to head down into the subway station, but she passed the nearest entrance and kept going. Three blocks farther down the avenue, she pulled open the door of a brightly lit, multistory corporate bookstore. Again, I lurked across the street, watching her through the floor-to-ceiling windows as she rode the escalator up to the second floor and disappeared toward the back of the building. She had to ride back down the escalator to leave, so I waited and watched some more. Fifteen minutes passed, and I pulled a soft pack of cigarettes and a lighter from my back pocket, tapped one out of the package, and lit it, drawing the nicotine and smoke into my lungs with a sizzle.

I almost missed her because she wasn't browsing or buying books. She was transforming. Around my parents, Ava always looked sweet, docile even. She dressed like my mother—almost no makeup, lip gloss and mascara paired with a simple black sheath dress or a white blouse and a knee-length skirt. Her clothes were cheap, what she could afford, but always clean and professional. The Ava coming down the escalator wasn't that girl. Gobsmailed by the change, I almost forgot to follow her.

This Ava was bold and brash. Think The Commodores, "Brick House." She strutted fast and powerfully toward the door with her shoulders back. This Ava was a badass. She had an edge, she'd cut a bitch. I sucked hard on my cigarette and stared. She was like watching a fire blaze. Her dark shiny ringlets that usually cascaded down her back and kissed the

waistband of her pants, were pulled tight into a ponytail, swinging from the top of her head. Her subtle professional attire was gone, replaced by ripped jeans, a tight white midriff-baring T-shirt, an oversized zip-front sweatshirt and heavy-looking Adidas-style sneakers. Her lips were blood red and she'd drawn thick black cat eyeliner around her eyes, making the shift from gentle to hard and seductive. Ava left her sheep costume in the bathroom, to become a wolf.

The wolf exited the building and then, like me, she pulled her hood up, concealing her new face from plain sight. She headed uptown, farther away from LSA Records, descending the steps into the subway and catching the six farther down the line. My parents had an address on file for Ava, but I wasn't sure it was real, so I risked being on the same platform as her. Quietly, I moved down the steps, catching a glimpse of her back before I disappeared behind a tiled pole. She might sense I was there, but with the bulk of my body and face obstructed, her eyes couldn't turn to linger on me and discern my identity. When the train pulled in, I boarded the car next to hers and at each station as the doors opened, I stood next to the exit, ready to jump out if she passed by.

It took about thirty minutes for me to see her again. She got out at Brook Ave. Station. Patiently, I slipped from the train at the last second, leaving as much space between us as possible. Unlike the downtown subway stations that I was used to, this one was above ground. So we had to climb down the stairs to reach the street. There were people around, a few guys hanging outside a glowing convenience store, and a cop car on the corner. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and sunk a little deeper into my sweatshirt. Ava's New York was not mine.

In Manhattan, I was a god. Even though I was barely breaching the gates of puberty, I was treated like a man wherever I went, welcome in places others were denied, fawned on by women twice my age. I never felt threatened. Never had to walk down a dark alley alone late at night. Never had to make a bed or worry about a meal. I was a prince. But two blocks away from the Brook Ave. subway station, I wasn't anyone special. I crossed the street, staying out of Ava's line of sight. She walked with purpose, her head held high. Her hood slipped down, but she didn't fix it. She just kept moving, past the decrepit brownstones with rickety looming fire escape ladders.

After four or so blocks, a male voice called out to her. "Where you coming from late, every day, little A."

Ava slowed and then stopped. I ducked behind a parked minivan. From a crouched position, I peeked over the passenger windowsill and watched the scene unfold. The man who had been sitting with a group of other men on the wall that framed the steps up to a brownstone's door, hopped down and approached her. He was tall and lanky, an awkward-looking white guy dressed in jeans, a long-sleeve black cotton T-shirt and a thick gold chain. He had a scar on his forehead that sliced through his left eyebrow. He was older than her and me, maybe twenty, and he carried himself like he owned the planet.

The streetlamp above shrouded them in a circle of light, making it possible for me to see everything that was happening. Ava obviously knew him but for the first time in my life, what I read in her posture wasn't comfort, confidence, or familiarity. Her shoulders were tight and she had her arms folded over her chest, but she couldn't look the man in the eye. She was scared and I hated it.

Somehow, she kept her voice steady when she answered him, “Nowhere.”

One of the lackies on the stoop called out, “You got you a sugar daddy?”

There was a cacophony of raucous laughter as Ava shook her head no.

The man standing in front of her didn’t laugh. Instead, he dipped his head down to look her in the eyes. He stared at her, searched her face hard, and then looking back at the crowd behind him, he said, “You know what I heard, boys?” He didn’t wait for them to answer. He turned back and said, “I heard, little A has a big new job. I heard we should be proud. That she’s moving up in the world, using that big old brain of hers to fix problems for people who are high and mighty compared to the likes of us.” He was clearly being condescending.

Ava stayed calm and tried to downplay her gig with my parents. “It’s just an internship, Wilson.”

Wilson smiled sickly at her, and then he pulled her into his chest and kissed her forehead. He whispered something in her ear that made her posture grow even stiffer. I couldn’t hear his words, but nonetheless my stomach turned. His affection wasn’t kind and it wasn’t welcome. When he let her go, she took a step back. With narrowed eyes, he continued to smile as he crooned, “I got a package I need you to take into the city with you tomorrow.”

The door behind him opened and a kid, who couldn’t have been ten yet, came out with something wrapped in brown paper. Bypassing Wilson, the boy handed the package directly to Ava. She took it tentatively, her eyes wide and her nostrils flared.

Wilson laughed, and then he reached out and caressed her jaw. “Such a pretty little thing.” I wanted to fucking kill him. I wanted to gouge his eyes out with my thumbs, but I didn’t know the first thing about fighting and I wasn’t ready to die so I stayed put, letting my cowardice burn my throat. Ava stood tall, awaiting his instructions. Her failure to crack seemed to irk him. The smile melted from his face and he stepped back toward the stoop as he said, “Geo will meet you at Spring Street and Cleveland Place around nine. Don’t be late and don’t be early.” She took her backpack from her shoulder, unzipped it, and put the package inside. Before she left, he pointed to her attire and said, “No need for this, *I’m a hoodlum getup*. Dress like the corporate cunt you’ve become.”

Obviously, I wasn’t the only one following Ava Childs.



THE NEXT MORNING I cut school and headed for Spring Street. I left the house at seven—because that’s when I always left the house. I didn’t want my parents to know where I was going. Spring St. wasn’t too far from our home in Soho, so I walked. I figured I’d get a cup of coffee and some breakfast, waste time, but on the way there I noticed a strangely large police presence. Four patrol cars all within a block or two of the subway entrance. Part of me felt like an idiot, like a character in a spy movie totally blowing shit out of proportion, but deep in my fucking gut I knew, Ava was getting set up.

So I took the train to Bleeker, the stop before Spring St., and I paced the fucking platform, scanning every passing car for her face. My clothes felt heavy and hot. I was sure I was going to miss her, that there was nothing I could do to stop the inevitable, but then there she was, all pretty, with shiny pink

lips and long flowing hair. I jumped into the train car, and then as the train moved, I made my way through the morning crowd until I was standing just an arm's length behind her. When the doors opened and the crowd started to shift, I grabbed her backpack off her shoulder. Shocked but quick, she turned aggressively in my direction, ready to fight or chase me to regain possession of her bag, but rather than run, I slipped in next to her, wrapping my fingers around her upper arm while I shifted her bag to my opposite shoulder. It occurred to me that I'd never touched her before and I was unprepared for the softness of her skin. The smoothness of her stunned me, leaving me breathless for a moment.

Ava was under no such spell. She tugged at her arm, trying to pull away as she spat, "What the fuck, Bruno?"

Under my breath, I said, "I think it's a trap."

Ava's brows drew together, and she swallowed before playing dumb. "What? What is a trap?"

"Meeting Geo," I whispered.

She blanched as we stepped out of the train and started to move down the platform. Then, her voice shaking, she asked, "Why do you know about this?"

I almost laughed. Ava didn't like being in the dark, so in this moment when my sneaking and spying clearly wasn't of the utmost importance, it was still where her mind fixated.

With a smile, I sassed back, "Doesn't really matter right now, does it?"

With no response, she bit her lip nervously.

I paused our movement briefly, my mind racing. Ava couldn't get caught with whatever was in her backpack. She was a nobody. Worse, she was nobody who worked for a

somebody. She'd be a splashy news story. A warning to the world that giving someone smart and poor a lift into the land of the rich and famous was a terrible idea. They'd throw the book at her. She'd wind up in juvie for sure. She'd lose everything. On the other hand, I was a prince. Most likely, I'd come out the other side smelling like fucking roses. So I asked, "What's in the bag besides the package?"

Ava shook her head. "Nothing."

"It can't be tied to you?"

Her fear dropping away for an instant, she rolled her eyes at me. "I'm not an idiot." There was a beat before she added, "But I have to give it to Geo. I'll be dead if I throw it away or something."

The stairs were just feet in front of us. We could not walk up them together. I stopped, turned to her, and asked, "What does Geo look like?"

She shook her head. "No, Bruno."

"Dark hair? Light hair? Tall? Short?"

She shook her head again. "Uh-uh."

She was fucking gorgeous, all fat lips, smooth tan skin, and velvety black eyes. I reached out and tilted her chin up so she was forced to look at my face. She didn't have to answer the question. I could just call out the man's name once I was standing on the corner. I was going to do this. I was going to take the fall for Ava Childs. But first, I was going to fucking kiss her.

The swarm of people had started to part around us like a rock in a stream. I took a tiny step closer to her and she swallowed nervously, but nothing about her body language said no. In fact, she seemed to move closer to me. Heat

flooded the space beneath my sternum as I lifted my hands to cup her jaw and pull her mouth to mine. Her lips were soft and pliable; there was no question she welcomed my touch. She pushed up on her tiptoes, pressing tighter against me. And then, before I lost my nerve, I broke free and backed away toward the steps that led to the street.

Staring at my face, somewhat dazed, her hand fluttered up to touch where my mouth had met hers and she smiled. I smiled back. It was good kiss. I was going to kiss her again. I took another step back and another. It occurred to me that kissing Ava Childs was a thing worth dreaming about—and the promise of more than kissing would definitely keep me awake nights. As I bumped into the stairs just behind me, Ava suddenly realized what was happening. Stepping forward, she shook her head manically, but with one last glance, I turned and ran.

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AVA*Age Fourteen*

I STOOD to the right of Rose Difrancos desk in her home office, holding papers she requested from the office. She was talking on the phone in all her glory, laughing, flirting, working the magic that made her an absolutely incredible professional mentor.

Closing the deal, she said, “So what do you say, Roger, can you find the time to get my new single in your lineup today?” Silent while Roger replied, she held out her hand to me and I placed the manila envelope I was holding in it. *Thank you*, she mouthed. And then returning to her call, she shook her head and said, “Oh, come on, Roger, you can do better than that. This one is great. You know it is.” Still engaged in Roger’s response, she held up her hand, giving me a smile and a little wave. I was dismissed

Back straight, I walked out of her office, quietly shutting the door, not wanting to interrupt her flow. I knew I should head back down the hall, to the foyer, and out the door, but instead, I looked at the giant abstract painting on the wall behind the industrial-looking metal stairs that led up to the

second floor of the Difrancos apartment. Bruno's room was up there and maybe Bruno was too.

I hesitated. I had no right to climb those stairs. I had no right to be in their house for any reason but my job, but I had to talk to him. I had to see him before he left. Swallowing back my anxiety, I looked left and right, checking to see if there was anyone watching. With anxiety crowding my breaths, I crossed the hall and headed for the steps. As I climbed, I walked on my tiptoes so my heels wouldn't alert anyone to my decision to wander around the Difrancos' apartment. I knew what it would look like. When the girl from nothing goes astray in the rich family's house, people start checking their jewelry boxes and money clips to see what's missing.

It didn't matter that I'd die before I took anything from the Difrancos. A girl like me didn't have the luxury of curiosity. It was my job to follow directions. Do what I was asked and never stray, but just this once, I had no choice. Like a beast hunting unsuspecting prey, I made my way down the hall, silently pressing my ear to each door, hoping to hear the movements of Bruno inside. I'd never been to his room before. I only knew that any time I'd been invited to dine in this home, if Bruno excused himself, I would hear the squeak of his designer sneakers moving around above me.

Just when I was beginning to feel stupid for taking a risk without even knowing if he was home, I heard music drifting from under the door at the end of the hall. Taking one more peek behind me, I scurried toward the door and listened. Jazzy, psychedelic pop—The Mild High Club. I smiled to myself. Bruno sustained on music. It was almost inexplicable. He needed chords and vocals and symphonies the way other people needed nutrients. Mostly, he fed on delicacies, bands and artists that were so good that their creations were capable

of changing your mood in moments. Infectious talents. He favored things that his parents didn't give a shit about. The Difrancos might have loved music once, but at this point they were consumed by the high of success and pop music was guaranteed bank. I couldn't fault them for that though. They weren't bad people, just shallow but also kind.

As quietly as I could, I moved through the hall, then I turned the doorknob and slipped into the room, pulling the door shut behind me. Bruno was standing next to his bed, folding clothes and shoving them into a suitcase. I loved to look at him. He was tall for our age, with shaggy brown hair and lanky long muscles. He was good-looking, but not in a way that you'd see in magazines. He wasn't pretty. He was chiseled, a strong jaw, a Roman nose, dark eyes, lips so red they looked bitten. He didn't smile much but when he did, it was mischievous, like he knew things you didn't want him to. I was drawn to him. I had been since the day I first saw him in the waiting room of the LSA offices.

And I was in his debt.

"Bruno," I said, not knowing how else to alert him to my presence.

He turned. I had my back pressed to the door. I wanted to be seen by him but also felt the need to be invisible because I was absolutely somewhere I didn't belong. He stared at me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, just that his reaction to me was cold, so cold.

"I'm sorry," I managed.

He shrugged, turning back to his packing. Not looking at me, he said, "I told you the law would be on my side."

It was true. The police picked him up with enough cocaine to charge him with intent to sell and somehow the charges were dropped and his record was expunged. However, the press went crazy. Every rag, every website, every phone in the country was flashing with pictures of him in handcuffs, being booked, getting arraigned, and the DiFrancos were not pleased. They decided to send him to some creative boarding school upstate. He was packing to leave, thrown out of his life because of me.

“I’m sorry,” I said the words again because I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say or how to act around him. My talent was handling situations and keeping people calm, but somehow Bruno was the exception. No one had ever done anything nice for me. I couldn’t even remember a time when my mother fixed me dinner. And this guy, with the shaggy hair and the six-hundred-dollar designer sneakers, he got arrested for me. He took his parents’ wrath for me. He was losing access to everything he knew and loved, for me.

Slowly, he put another shirt in the suitcase on the bed, and then he turned and moved toward me. Each step seemed deliberate, like he was giving me a chance to run, but I wouldn’t run from him. No matter what he wanted from me, I would give it. I owed him.

When he got so close that I could see each individual eyelash, he reached out and played with the chiffon ribbon that tied the top of my blouse closed. I didn’t move. He pulled the fabric, untying the knot so that the collar of my blouse fell open, exposing my décolletage. He ran a finger over my collarbone as he said, “You’re beautiful, Ava.”

My tongue felt thick in my mouth. I grew up hard, and in his own way, so did he. We knew about sex, but for the first

time I understood why people were enticed by it. Just the flutter of his fingers on my skin made my knees shake. He traced his finger up the side of my neck, across my jawline, then over the edges of my lips. His eyes followed the path of his finger.

I held my breath, felt my lungs start to burn with the need for oxygen, hoping the moment wouldn't pass, hoping he might lean in and kiss me a second time. But instead, he said, "It's too bad I have to fucking hate you."

I closed my eyes. I didn't blame him. There was no other choice.

But it didn't matter if he hated me. I was thankful and I wasn't going to waste the opportunity he gave me.

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AVA*Age Twenty*

A TEXT.

He sent a one-word text at one thirty in the morning—*help*. That's all it said. He couldn't even be bothered to capitalize the *H*. He had absolutely no concern for my agenda. None. I could have been at an event. There were a million happenings in our world that lasted all night—concerts end late, rock stars party hard. Sure, after six years as his parents' right-hand woman, I mostly had control of my time, but I absolutely had responsibilities. Places to be, people to take care of. Honestly, I could have been sleeping—most people would be sleeping—but he didn't care. He didn't even care enough to clarify what kind of help he needed or where I could find him. And still, irritatingly, when Bruno said jump, I jumped.

The truth was Bruno knew where I was and what I was capable of. He knew I could ping his cell phone. He knew I was toiling away on the top floor of the LSA Records tower in Midtown Manhattan, doing everything I could to make his parents happy, and that it would take me hours to get to him in Boston—even if I took the helicopter and the private plane—

but he didn't care. He sent one word, and on the promise my old and ugly debt that bound me to him forever, I jumped.

Three hours later, with the company plane still warm on the tarmac, I found myself standing in front of a funky-looking brick building in Boston's South End. It was obvious that there had been a party. Bruno was a junior at the Randell School of Music. He got in on his own merits, didn't use his parents' name in any way. He wanted nothing to do with their legacy or LSA Records, but it wasn't beneath him to spend their money. He pontificated about changing the industry and starting a label of his own, but as far as I could tell he spent most of his time making messes, not albums.

On a huff, I trudged up the steps past the lingering collection of cigarette butts and red SOLO cups. There was no need to ring the bell. The door was open. Inside was worse than outside. It was dark and there had been a DJ, but he was gone, leaving behind an empty booth and flashing red and green lights. I coughed, choking on the stagnant air as I stepped over a dude who passed out a few feet from the threshold.

Growing up surrounded by twisted, broken prickery things meant I'd been in worse places. So at first I was unfazed by the rush of adrenaline that surged under my skin. I let my eyes adjust to the moving shadows and willed my senses to heighten and my mind to grow steely. Bar the one slipup, I knew how to move through mountains of shit unscathed and unseen. It was a skill that had served me well, landing me the job with the Difrancos and keeping me in their good graces for over half a decade. Shields up, I scanned the first floor quickly. Bruno wasn't there. But it was clear this wasn't just a bunch of college kids throwing a kegger. This was a trap house. Sure, it was a highfalutin one, the kind rich kids

frequented. Either way, I knew junkies when I saw them. That detail, that I was in a drug den, made me pause and started the icy trickle of panic in my blood. I called out, “Bruno?”

After the day he saved me, being the defiant rebellious son of the owners of one of the most successful record companies in the world made Bruno deliciously decadent tabloid fodder. As a teenager at boarding school he had some freedom, but whenever he was in New York, cameras tended to follow and he put on a show. Sometimes he threw a punch, knocked out a paparazzo, or a bouncer at a bar. Sometimes he drunkenly bared his ass or sloppy-kissed whomever was nearby, gender norms be damned. He humped statues and climbed buildings. It was all very rock ‘n’ roll. He was a nuisance, a youthful ne’er-do-well. But he was rarely in real trouble. There were a few times when I needed to get him out of a situation or two without the flash of cameras—but mostly an SOS from Bruno was a frustrating inconvenience, not a real emergency. And since he transitioned to the life of a co-ed, he seemed happy to stay out of the limelight.

Still, the trap house felt different, and for the first time in a long time, I was forced to remember that he wasn’t my enemy. I didn’t hate Bruno Difrancio. As much as I tried to smush and smash my feelings deep down into the section of my heart that was locked up tight and one hundred percent VIP access only, I cared deeply, too deeply. With my heart pounding in my ears, I raced up the flight of stairs in front of me and called his name a second time. “Bruno?”

Still no answer.

Pulling a determined breath in through my nose, I braced myself as I threw open one door after another on the second floor. A bathroom with vomit spewed next to the toilet and a

passed-out girl in the tub. A dark room with a black light buzzing, the crackle of a bong, the flash of glowing purple teeth and a slow, stoned drawl, “Hey, babe.”

Not Bruno.

Another bedroom, dark too, the breathy sounds of fucking. The blue glow of the moon reflected on the pale skin of a young woman’s back as she bounced and bucked on the lap of a man beneath her.

“Bruno?” I asked sternly, trying to decide if I would be relieved if he was her ride.

The woman looked over her shoulder, and then turning back to him, she giggled and asked, “You Bruno?”

“Fuck no,” the stranger growled, and I moved on.

I found him on the third floor behind a locked door. I twisted the knob and pushed, rattling the handle. When it didn’t give, I quietly pleaded, “Bruno? Are you here?”

I could feel his presence just behind the rattling wood between us, but I wasn’t one hundred percent sure about his physical and emotional state. Resigned to the fact that I might have to take the door off the hinges, I spoke plainly. “If you’re in there, don’t make me make a scene if I don’t have to.”

I heard the creak of the floorboards and his heavy footsteps moving toward me. The old metal lock above the knob twisted, but he didn’t make the effort to pull open the door.

I didn’t know what I was going to find, so I looked both ways down the hallway, assessing my level of exposure. I knew that my movement through the house was meaningless. No one would remember me specifically. I was just another chick, a flutter of movement in a night of blurry images. But this moment mattered. No one could see me and Bruno

together. Together we would become recognizable. I inspected the spaces to my left and right, looking for movement, listening for slowed breaths. Was there anyone watching from the shadows? Were there prying eyes, needing a few dollars for their next fix, willing to snap a photo to sell to the highest bidder? No. It was utterly quiet. Certain that we'd gone unnoticed, I slipped in, relocking the door behind me.

Bruno sat on the floor, his back pressed against an old gross mattress on a metal bed frame, his head hung between his knees, his dark hair long and loose, and limp, the hard cut of his nose still visible even as he covered his eyes with his hands. He was a big dude and he looked awkward and gangly, sitting on the floor. The room was sparse. The wood floor was scratched and the walls were tagged with spray paint. The bed had sheets, but they were ratty and unkempt. A partially dressed woman was curled in a loose fetal position on the far side of the bed. The back of her gray cotton shirt and T-shape of her thong faced me, and I could see the rise and fall of her rib cage. I wasn't worried about her. She was fine, but the young man next to her was not. His lips and the skin around his mouth were blue and his eyes were open but empty and unfocused. He was definitely dead.

He was also Bruno's best friend, Garrett.

My breaths shortened as Bruno's suffering gripped my heart. I let my eyes gently close for a second, holding back the need to drop down on the floor by Bruno's feet and pull him into my chest. But he didn't call me because he wanted a hug. He had a gaggle of close friends and he could have reached out to any of them. He called me because I was the cleaner. I made the mess go away.

When I was sure that I'd stilled my emotions enough that my affection for him wouldn't shake in my voice, I asked, "Has she been asleep the whole time?"

Bruno nodded.

Taking a small step toward him, I continued my line of questioning. "Did she know you were here?"

He didn't look up at me, but he pushed his hand through his hair when he said, "I found them like this."

And there were the facts. As long as the girl stayed asleep, he had an option, a window of opportunity.

I stood very still and even to me, my voice sounded cold when I asked, "Did you touch him?"

The question was not unsimilar to the kinds of questions he had asked me all those years ago in the Spring St. station, but still, Bruno's eyes snapped up, hot with anger. Snidely, he whisper-yelled, "He's fucking dead, Ava. I didn't need to take his pulse or give him a high five. He's dead."

I didn't react to his emotions. I'd be more upset if he didn't have them. If he needed to be angry at me, that was fine. Avoiding his need to argue, I sighed and said, "Two choices. One, you get up and we walk out, and you let her find him. Or two, we call the cops and you're in the middle of a shitstorm."

The anger drained from his face and his bottom lip trembled as he spoke. "I don't want to leave him here. I can't leave him here. I have to take care of him."

This was why he texted me. Because he had to leave Garrett and he didn't know how.

I crossed the room and crouched down in front of him. As quietly and gently as I could, I said, "His death will be in

every paper. His parents will have to read about his mistakes. Reporters will hound you and your friends while you grieve. There will be new rumors about your drug use and your links to the drug trade. It will be a fiasco. You know that.”

His voice trembled when he said, “I was hoping she’d wake up. I wanted her to wake up.”

“I know you did, but she’s still out cold.” I held out my hand. “It’s time to go.”

He didn’t take my hand. He just stood.

I was perfunctory, that was my role. Quiet as I could be, I said, “I am going to scan the hallway. When I give you the all clear, you go straight down the stairs and out the front door. Outside, make a right, go two and a half blocks to Worcester Street and there will be a car waiting. I’ll be ten paces behind you.” I took the baseball cap I was wearing off my head and handed it to him. His nostrils flared, but he took it and fiddled with the plastic snaps, adjusting the size. I added, “Don’t stop. Don’t look back.”

Ignoring my intention to give him an all clear, he pushed past me, heading for the exit. “I know the drill. Be invisible. I am no one, nothing to see.” Behind us the girl made a noise, a little sleepy sound. He started to look back toward the bed so I stepped left, bisecting his line of vision. He was forced to look at me, not her. I brought my finger to my lips—shhhh—and with a stern look, I urged him to get going and get the fuck out. He swallowed, turned back, and pressed his ear to the door, listening for possible witnesses. When he was satisfied, he went, casually, without looking back.

In the room alone, I counted to twenty. Then I turned, taking one more glance at Garrett. I didn’t know him well, but I knew he had a bad story, a fucked-up childhood that kept him

twisted and sinking, even after he made it safely to the shore. I pitied him. I felt sad he was dead in a dirty bed next to a girl who might not even care enough to report his death. But if she didn't, there would be an anonymous tip because Bruno loved him, so I would make sure that he was discovered. He would be well cared for. I'd do it for Bruno.



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, in the back seat of a Lincoln Town Car with blacked-out windows, driving through the dark and quiet Boston streets, I watched him, waiting for him to break down. He didn't. He remained stoic and stern, his lips tight. When we pulled up outside the door to the apartment he shared with his college friends, I couldn't help myself and said, "I'm so sorry, Bruno."

"Don't be," he said. "You did your job. I can always count on you to be utterly unscrupulous when it comes to protecting LSA's image."

Without another word, he got out of the car and didn't look back.

BRUNO

Age Twenty-two

SNIDE and surly as blue balls, Kelly chided, “Honestly, why do you two play that game all the time?”

Two of my roommates, Josh and Eric, constantly hovered around our loft’s pool table, playing endless rounds of weak-ass eight ball. Neither ever won because they were just so terrible. In general Josh and Eric were a conundrum. Somehow both were musical phenoms and totally dork city. Eric was a straightforward dork. He liked *Star Wars* and numbers and was basically still a virgin, bar one night a few years back with an apparently unforgettable lavender-haired pixie. Josh looked like Elvis had a baby with Prince Charming and then a farmer raised that child on corn bread and hay bales. He was also the guy who would still laugh at someone attempting to burp the alphabet. Literally, they were the equivalent of Olympians when it came to manning a recording studio. Either dude could rock a soundboard and mix music like no one else I’d ever met, and I’d known the absolute best. But at a pool table, they were just nonsense, fledglings trying to look like men.

Happily racking the balls for his pointless game, Josh replied to Kels' question with a question. "Fun?"

Kelly laughed and shook her head. "Yeah, nope."

Nothing about Kels was soft. She was a bitch and I loved her for it. Like a pirate king, she lounged across the room from the pool table, surrounded by my other roommates, James, Meredith, and Marcus. They nursed beers as they nestled on our multicolored crazy-ass Missoni sectional couch, which belonged in an opium den. The couch cost more than most people's cars. When I bought it, I thought it was beyond rad, loud and outlandish, but after three years under the butts of nine rowdy music majors, it felt dated to me. We'd graduated from college earlier in the day and like my collegiate experiences, my time with the couch was about to go the way of the dodo bird. I imagined that in the next few weeks, when we moved out, I'd donate it to a homeless shelter and delight in how that choice irritated my father.

Eric stood poised at the far end of the pool table, chalking his cue like it was going to make a difference. Eventually, Josh lifted the triangle and Eric bent, aiming at the cue ball, pulling his arm back and jamming his stick in a pathetic attempt to start the game. The cue ball careened forward, jumping the rail and cascading toward the couch crowd. Completely unfazed, Marcus crossed his legs but didn't look up from his phone. James and Meredith jumped, tucking their ankles tight against the couch, and Kels made a face and jutted out her hands, silently saying, *Do you see this nonsense?*

James, who was perhaps the smoothest of us all, laughed. "I'm with Kels, man," he prodded, tilting his head inquisitively. "What the two of you are doing cannot be understood as fun. It's more like self-flagellation."

As usual, Mer took a tiny crumb of conversation and jumped right into theorizing.

Shifting into the smush of the couch, she pontificated, “To survive the changing landscape of the patriarchal culture, lots of men need to feel mastery and inadequacy in manageable doses. Soooo...” She drew out the *O* sound before dropping her conclusion. “You might be onto something with that self-flagellation bit.”

Kels rolled her eyes and took a swig from her unlabeled beer bottle. She always picked at the labels. It was a quirk and it made me smile because I liked knowing people’s quirks. I knew all my friends’ quirks. I took comfort in their familiarity. Being surrounded by people I understood, people I could count on kept my anxiety at bay. The thought that we would part, that college was over and we were going to have to go our separate ways and forge our own paths, felt a little like being strangled. I’d survived such a scenario once before—when I graduated from boarding school—but this felt different. Back then I knew I was going to college—that there was a place for me. Now, there was nothing ahead, no landing strip, no final destination, just the unruly expanse of wide-open space. Facing the future without them—without Garrett—that was some heady shit. And I wasn’t having it. Not on a day when we should have been celebrating.

So rather than choke on a future of infinite options, I opened my phone, selected “1999” by Prince, pushed off the breakfast bar I’d been leaning on, crossed the room, and turned the knob on the wall that was connected to the surround sound system. Upping the volume of the music to max, I started gallivanting around our apartment, singing at the top of my lungs, “Toooo-night we gonna party like it’s nineteen ninety-nine, doot-doo-doot-doo-doo-doot.”

Kelly smiled and shook her head before getting up and starting to dance with me. For a second it was just the two of us jumping up and down and jamming—both singing into her bottle-slash-makeshift microphone. Midway through the second verse, James and Mer followed suit. They also sang, elevating the musical prowess in the room. Josh and Eric bopped around the table as they fussed with the pool balls. Marcus didn't get up, but he was bouncing in his seat. It was a quick shift, and it felt powerful and playful. My friends were showing me that even though we were all still carrying the loss of Garrett, they also wanted to just have fun together, to really celebrate this momentous day in our lives.

We danced like maniacs for a few songs, egging each other on and being ridiculous, and then the doorbell rang. It was weird for the chime of the buzzer to just happen out of the blue. Usually there was a call first. We had a doorman, Stew. He was a fucking Nazi and there was always a call before someone was allowed up to the penthouse. Nobody got past him without consent. But I didn't think much about that as I crossed to the door. I was still laughing and whooping it up. I wasn't even facing the entry when I pulled it open, but I stilled when the playfulness on my friends' faces vanished as they took in our visitor.

Turning, I found Ava standing on my threshold. Ava's presence explained Stew's lack of rule adherence. She was on the permanent list. She was on every list that required access to a Difrancio. She and I were a long way from the naïve boy who kissed her and then took the fall for her. Ava was my nemesis. Well, sort of. She was my parents' golden girl. The child they wished they gave birth to. The saint who never did anything wrong, never questioned their authority, never got caught with a kilo of cocaine in broad daylight. Sure, I didn't

go to jail. I had a moneyed lawyer who got the charges dropped, but my parents never forgot it happened and Ava didn't see fit to tell them otherwise. So my motto was fuck Ava Childs and her pretty fat lips and her curvy hips. Also fuck my parents who didn't give two shits about me but dedicated their lives to making autotuned garbage pop music sung by airbrushed Barbies and plastic Ken dolls. I couldn't care less about any of them.

My animosity toward Ava didn't mean that I failed to notice something was off about her. She looked haggard, like she'd been caught in a rainstorm, a mere shadow of the full-blown bossy bitch I loved to hate. I didn't let myself care. The Ava I knew never had a single hair out of place. She was about appearances and projecting the version of the story that best served her. So, if she looked frazzled and pale, she had a reason. She was a magnificent mirage, everything and nothing all at once. Also, she was supposed to be on a plane to Cannes.

I narrowed my eyes and glared at her as I spoke. "Did you miss the flight to the all-important film festival that trumped my parents' need to see their own son graduate from college?"

Her eyes widened and glassed over as she nodded.

I shook my head and turned, heading toward a new beer and leaving her in the open doorway behind me. From my new perch in the kitchen, I begrudgingly spat, "What do you want, Ava? Or more specifically, what have my overlords sent their pretty little lackey to take care of?"

Behind me I heard the door click closed. She entered with unhurried, unsure steps, and again it registered that she was not herself, but I didn't drop my guard. Pulling an amber bottle from the fridge, I used my shirt to twist off the cap.

She cleared her throat uncomfortably and then asked, “Could I speak to you alone for a moment?”

Eric started to put down his pool cue and Mer turned toward the room she shared with Kelly. James, who was closest to the wall, adjusted the knob to turn down the music volume. My friends were shifting to give Ava and me the privacy she was requesting, but it was unnecessary.

“There is no need for that,” I said coldly. “Whatever you have to discuss, you can say here.”

Josh came up behind me and squeezed my shoulder before gently saying, “She looks shook, man. Maybe tone it down just a notch.”

Fuck that. I stared at her and then flippantly said, “Nah, Ava loves to be a fucking buzzkill. She gets off on that shit.”

Out of nowhere, tears streaked down Ava’s cheeks, leaving melted black stripes of mascara in their wake. That was new. I’d never seen her cry, never. The sight of her unhappy made my feet heavy in my shoes and I bit the inside of my cheek.

On a tiny gasp Ava shook her head and whimpered, “Please stop, Bruno.” Then she stilled and closed her eyes. Her head dropped back a touch and for a second I imagined kissing her neck, right where I could feel her pulse beneath my lips. She pulled a heavy breath through her nose as she composed herself. When she faced me again, she was the Ava I knew best, my parents’ corporate drone. In a tone utterly devoid of emotion, she said, “Following a distress call, air traffic control lost all communication with your parents’ plane at 1:57 p.m. this afternoon.”

To my right, Mer gasped, her hand jumping to cover her mouth.

It was after five. My stomach rolled, but I stood tall, unflinching, holding Ava's gaze. "And?"

Mirroring my stance and demeanor, she was robotic when she responded, "There has been no contact. I kept the press at bay because I wanted you to hear it from me, not a newscaster."

They were dead. My parents were dead. I didn't blink. Instead, I held her gaze like a lifeline. "So, they're dead then?"

Her lip trembled, but she kept her tone unwavering. "Presumed, yes."

She'd slipped. I could see the care in her eyes. I didn't know if it was for them or for me, but I hated it. I kept looking right at her, and I heard the dark sarcastic sickness in my voice when I snarled, "Lucky you weren't with them, Ava. I'm pretty sure you're still suckling at my mom's teat so wonder of wonders."

Kels shook her head and threw me a nasty look. "Dude, what the fuck?"

A weird, uncomfortable laugh bubbled up from deep in my gut. I threw my arms in the air and manically said, "Looks like I'm alone." My parents were dead. They were fucking dead. They didn't come to my college graduation and they wouldn't be at my wedding. They'd never meet a grandchild or see me win a fucking Grammy. Nothing. My relationship with them was over. Loud and angry, I punched my beer bottle into the counter as I snapped, "Guess that bridge is gonna stay burned, huh?"

The thick brown glass shattered, slicing into the side of my hand. My blood ran free, pooling on the white stone countertop. I heard Mer gasp again, but it was Marcus that

rushed in my direction, grabbing a paper towel on his way. “I got you, man,” he said, grabbing my hand.

I stared at the blood flowing from my skin and he inspected it and then removed the glass and cleaned the wound. He spoke as he worked. “This cut is nothing. You don’t even need stitches.” He continued as if what he said next was a normal segue. “You’re not alone, bro. We got you.” I looked up from my hand. Kels, James, Mer, Josh, and Eric had circled around Marcus and me. He kept talking. “As long as you need us, we are here.” James handed him a butterfly Band-Aid and he fixed it so it pulled the skin on my hand together before repeating, “You’ll never be alone. We’re your family.”

Then they all hugged me—a silly giant group hug. They murmured sentiments similar to what Marcus had said. I didn’t feel alone. I felt sickened but not alone. Marcus was right, I wasn’t alone.

Just over Kelly’s shoulder I saw Ava. She was looking at me, right into my eyes. She held my gaze for a minute and I could see her grief. I could see that every breath she took was labored, that a piece of her went down on their plane. I kept staring at her until she gave me a sad little nod and turned away. I watched her exit the apartment, silently shutting the door behind her.

I wasn’t alone, but Ava was.

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AVA

With his arms spread wide and his venomous grin, Charlie Albrecht crossed the boardroom, headed in my direction.

“Ava, sweetie, you must be devastated,” he crooned, seeking to pull me in for one of his uncomfortable grabby hugs.

I was devastated, but that didn’t mean I wanted him to touch me. I put both hands up in front of me, making contact with his pecs as I smiled and said, “Remember, not a hugger, Charlie.”

Anger flashed behind his eyes, but when it came to being the worst kind of entitled bastard, Albrecht was phenomenal at maintaining his composure.

“Why do I always forget that?” he asked, shrugging jovially and then added, “I guess having preconceived notions about the warmth of Latin people is really a thing, huh?” He pouted slightly, feigning something akin to forlorn. Then, glancing at the other members of the LSA board of directors, he shifted his head quizzically and rhetorically asked, “Is that the politically correct term for Hispanic people now? Latin? It’s not, is it?” He turned back to me. “Jesus, forgive me. Always putting my foot in my mouth. What is the best way to discuss your heritage? What should we call you?”

Fucking cocksucker.

I hated Albrecht since day one. His father was a decent man—but when he died he left his shares of LSA to Charlie and ever since, this man had been trying to undermine my position and make a fool out of me.

“I prefer Ms. Childs; that would be absolutely perfect,” I said tightly, clearly less capable of maintaining my composure. Honestly, nothing to do with stupid Charlie Albrecht’s nasty attitude, my insides were all churning acid and too many Tums because I had no idea how Bruno was going to react to his parents’ will.

In the movies, families gathered in some posh-looking library-like room and they read the last will and testament of their loved ones. In real life, someone is chosen as the executor of the will and when a person or people die, the will is entered into public record. The people involved get a phone call.

I got a phone call and basically the Difrancos’ will was my nightmare. They left Bruno all of their money and a twenty-five percent stake in LSA Records with two stipulations. One, I was promoted to COO of the company and couldn’t be fired under any circumstances. And two, I had to sign off on all his decisions. If he violated either stipulation, his twenty-five percent stake in LSA would revert to me.

In addition to my promotion which came with a hearty salary, they left me the apartment I already lived in, some paintings and jewelry I loved or complimented in my time with them, and a twin twenty-five percent stake in LSA Records. I also had control of their remaining one percent of LSA Records, which I could either keep or give to Bruno as I saw fit. In other words, it was my fucking job to decide who

would be the majority stakeholder of LSA Records, Bruno or me. What were they thinking? Who did something like that? Left an employee—albeit a very faithful one—in the position of deciding if their son deserved their company. It was insane.

I got the call on Friday. And I expected to find Bruno banging at my door by midnight. He and his friends had moved into the apartment he grew up in a few days after his parents' plane went down. I hadn't seen or heard from him since the night I informed him of their deaths, but even before I knew about the will, I couldn't go outside without feeling anxious that I'd run into him. And after, it was like I was paralyzed. I didn't leave my apartment all weekend, in fear that he'd be waiting to ambush me in the lobby or on the sidewalk, but nothing. Not a call or a nasty text. Nothing, just radio silence. There was no dramatic blowout where Bruno foamed at the mouth and screamed in my face because he had discovered that I was basically his warden.

And then on Sunday evening, I received a call from Andrew Warner, a good and kind albeit somewhat reclusive member of the LSA Records board of directors, notifying me that the board wanted to meet the following morning to discuss the future of the company. At first, I thought Andrew called just to relay that message, but then he paused before what would have been the natural time to say goodbye and instead said, "It's a big job they gave you, Ava."

My hands started to shake. I knew he was talking about the shares, not the actual COO position. All I could say was, "Yep."

His voice was warm and heartfelt when he said, "Not that it's any of my business, but if I were you, I'd try to remember who you were to them."

I was so unhinged about the whole thing that I said just a little too much in response. “Who am I exactly? I’m not their daughter. I’m just an employee that they trusted. I can’t understand why they left this to me.”

In response to my borderline hysteria, he peacefully asked, “What was it they trusted you to do? What was your job?”

“Everything,” I lamented. “I make sure everything at LSA goes smoothly. And if it doesn’t, I fix it.”

“I’m just a human, Ava. I learned that the hard way—but I’m guessing that if that’s what they’ve trusted you to do in the past, then that’s what they are expecting from you now—to fix it.”

I got it that he was trying to be wise, to manage me in some guru-esque way. I’d been managing other people my whole life, but for the first time, I wasn’t sure what the play was. I didn’t see the solution.

That terror was what had me practically growling at stupid conniving Charlie Albrecht in the LSA Records boardroom, just down the hall from my old office and my new one. A handful of other board members were already gathering around the table. They were all men in suits. Rose, Bruno’s mom, used to joke that if it weren’t for her, LSA board meetings would be mistaken for really stuffy and boring stag parties

Her job was my job now, to be a lone woman in a sea of men who might or might not see my presence as justified. Taking a deep breath, I rolled my shoulders back and walked around Charlie so I could face the other men when I said, “Morning, gentlemen.” There were some smiles and head nods before I continued. “Obviously, I am in a new role, but I’ve yet to hire my own replacement, so while we wait for Bruno and a

few others, I'm going to go ahead and make sure those who are out of town are patched in on Zoom."

The men nodded at me.

"Glad to see you don't suddenly feel anything is beneath you," Charlie chided just as Bruno and his posse of friends walked into the room. They looked like who they were, all rebel and rock 'n' roll. No suits among them, just denim, worn cotton, punky haircuts, leather, and studs. Well, except for the tiny blond. If I remembered correctly, her name was Meredith and she always looked like a sunny sweetheart just off the bus from band camp.

Bruno winked. "Stop trying to get us to picture Ava beneath you, Charles. No one wants to gag before they've even had their coffee."

Over the speakers that I'd just connected, Andrew choked on a startled laugh and followed his chortle with, "Bruno, so glad to see you are still as unruly and obnoxious as your father used to be, although I'm sure Ava would rather begin her day by avoiding the world of the #metoo hashtag."

Bruno, who still hadn't looked at me, spoke toward the screen that was projected on the wall behind me and smiled. "Andrew, lovely to see your effigy. Please send Summer and Bella my well wishes. Also, congratulations again on your nuptials."

Bruno seemed almost joyful. But I wasn't buying it. At any minute, he was going to set my house—and his—on fire. This was the calm before the madness. He turned to me and there was no hello, just a tip of his chin as an acknowledgement before he said, "So sorry you have to deal with endless flirtation from Schmucky Chucky over there, Aves."

Charles, who sounded reasonable, but was betrayed by the fuming redness creeping up his neck and into his cheeks, signaled to Bruno's entourage and said, "We don't usually allow strangers in board meetings."

Making it completely clear that whatever power Albrecht possessed didn't scare him, Bruno winked condescendingly. "Well, Chaz-Matazz, as CEO of this glorified teenybopper factory, I am going to make an exception today."

Looking at my shoes, I swallowed a giggle.

All game face, Bruno boomed, "These men and women behind me are the future of LSA Records." His demeanor shifted and his voice tightened as he looked to me and through clenched teeth and said, "That is, if Ms. Childs sees fit to sign off on my decisions."

The men at the table became incapable of direct eye contact as they shifted in their seats and sporadically attempted to throw off their own discomfort by clearing their throats.

I made a big deal of putting my attaché case on the table; it was a gift from the Difrancos, and I always carried it to work. Then I used the time it took to pull out my chair, sit down and awkwardly adjust and readjust my seat, to breath deep and attempt to conceal the cauldron of discomfort brewing in my belly. Finally, I looked up at Bruno. Seemingly confident, I smiled and said, "I'm excited to hear your ideas."

His nostrils flared and his lips twitched, but he did not explode. Again, he just tilted his chin, a tiny nod of resigned acceptance. I didn't even begin to understand his behavior. The Bruno I knew was not like Charlie Albrecht—he didn't conceal his real emotions. He raged. He came at the world swinging, fighting for what he thought was right. So, this calm

acceptance of his parents' seemingly heinous and careless will seemed bizarre.

Composed and in command, Bruno laid out what he had planned for LSA. He wanted to take the company in a new direction.

“I want to bring us back to our roots. My parents started this place in their first apartment on the Lower East Side because they loved music, and then they got lost, caught up in the desperation to outride the ever-changing industry.” He spoke passionately as he paced back and forth at the far end of the table. “Most of you have been involved with music your whole lives—and I know you know that we can do better.”

I loved watching him like this. This was the Bruno who captivated me when we teenagers. This was the fuel behind the only kiss that ever made my lips tingle. This was the wild heart that ran up the subway stairs to take the fall for some idiot girl—just because he knew his outcome would be better. This was the man the boardroom needed to see—not the boy who frivolously spent his parents' money and knocked out paparazzi. This version of Bruno was inspired and inspiring. One interaction with him like this and his love for music and the industry that distributed it would never be in question.

Honestly, I'd been around a while and it was always clear that when it came to the Difrancos, Bruno was the most talented. He could spot the magic. He just knew which musicians had the talent to go all the way, even when we were kids. As a parlor trick at parties, his parents would play unreleased songs for him and ask him to predict if the musician would be a success. He was always right.

He continued. “I want LSA to be the place where musicians think their artistry is of utmost importance. I want

us to earn our Grammys again. I want this to be the place where we nurture the next great phase of music history. I want them to write about our studio and our people as the space where the greats of the twenty-first century were produced and recorded.”

As I sat there watching him, everything Andrew said started to make sense. I knew he could and should run LSA—at least the creative side of things. His parents knew that too. I knew they did. But Bruno was wild and unpredictable. He needed me. He needed my help. Together we could make LSA bigger and better. I couldn’t just hand him the keys to the castle—he had to earn them by recognizing that running this company wasn’t just about vision. It was also about image and numbers and finances. That was why the Difrancos left that last one percent of their company to me. They trusted me to help Bruno find his way.

Responding to Bruno’s impassioned rant, Charlie rolled his eyes and patronizingly snapped, “So, let me get this straight. We should let you take a perfectly functional company and change it into some bohemian hippie commune where musicians feel happy.”

Bruno didn’t back down. “Chippy, let’s be honest, I’m not counting on your vote. I’m pretty sure that you’d shoot me down even if I was handing you wads of cash. But I see the point you’re making, so let me clarify. I don’t want to undermine what’s already working; the bubblegum pop stars will stay, but over the next five years, the goal would be to not add more.” He emphatically argued, throwing his hands. “Our current roster of pretty, pretty princesses and boy bands more than pay the bills around here, but if you look at the last few years of billboard chart-toppers—genuine musicians and songwriters are capable of generating that kind of money and

then some. I know that most of you are about the bottom line, but why not make us better and more profitable?"

Projected on the wall behind Bruno's shoulder, Andrew sighed. "Listen, kid. I love you and trust you, but even to me this sounds idealist."

Bruno turned to look over his shoulder and said, "Let me prove it can be done."

"How?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Once again when he looked at me, his nostrils flared. "Give me four months and I'll give you three chart-topping singles—one from a musician currently on the LSA list, one from a complete unknown, and one from that guy." He pointed to his friend James Baker, who was a stunning, tall Black man. I knew James to be an exceptional vocal talent. But up until this moment, he had avoided being signed by anyone even though he'd absolutely had inquiries.

"That's impossible," Albrecht haughtily laughed. "No one can produce three chart-topping singles in four months."

"I can." Bruno smirked. "With this team."

"No one can," Albrecht said firmly. "But go ahead, take your team of novice unknowns and give it a shot. I have no issue with you looking like a fool on the national stage. It will make it much easier to explain why you're being ousted from your parents' company."

I watched as Bruno's fingers curled into clenched fists. Charlie got under everyone's skin. That was why Bruno had gotten away with teasing him up until this point, but if he lost his cool and actually yelled at him, the wagons would circle around Charlie, leaving Bruno out in the cold. I had to jump in front of it, so to shift his ire before he lost his cool, I turned the

conversation to me. Narrowing my brow, I asked, “Is this a game to you, Bruno?”

“No,” he growled.

“Do you want your parents’ company?” I questioned. I knew I would frustrate him further, but I wanted the board to see that this mattered to Bruno, that he wasn’t trying to destroy anything.

“Jesus, Ava,” he snapped with an utter undermining familiarity. “Of course, I want this company. I was reared to be a part of this world.”

I leaned in harder, maintaining a nauseatingly docile tone and sweet professional poise that was only required of you if you were a woman in this industry. “I’m not trying to frustrate you. I speak for us all here when I say we aren’t sure that you’re ready.”

“And you are?” He snapped. “This isn’t just some situation you need to handle—this is artistry. What do you know about that?” He was on fire—yelling angrily. But no one was going to think it was an unruly outburst. As long as Bruno yelled at me and only me, the board would excuse him because if their parents left their company to some unrelated “Latin” woman, they’d be pissed too. He raged on. “I’ve been studying music and surrounded by music my whole life. This world is the only one I know. It’s the only thing I’m really fucking good at.”

I knew he could do it, so I said, “Fine, then forfeit your role to me if you fail. Put it all on the line, Bruno.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You want it so bad, huh? To take everything?”

“No.” I shook my head. “You can keep your shares of the company. LSA will always make money for you. I just want

you to prove to these men and women that either you will run this place your way, or they will run it their way. Compromise is not an option for you.”

It wasn't. I knew what I was saying was true.

He huffed, “It’s not. I will not be the CEO of bubblegum pop stars. I can’t do it.”

“So it’s settled. Three chart-topping singles in the next four months and everyone here agrees to let you run this company. Anything else and you walk away.”

Andrew tried to interrupt, “This is...”

But Bruno drowned out his voice by snarling at me, “Done.”

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BRUNO

Ava excused herself almost immediately after trapping me into relinquishing my role as CEO of my parents' company. She left me to smile and make small talk with the stupid fuckers in suits. I played the game, introduced my friends, exchanged worthless pleasantries, and continued to bust that asshole Charlie Albrecht's balls until no one questioned my need to move on to other priorities.

"I have three hit singles to make," I joked on a wink as I backed out of the room.

Once the door closed behind me, I stormed down the hall. Instinctually, I headed to Ava's office, but she wasn't there. Instead, the cardboard file boxes on the desk told me where to find her—my mother's office. That's whose job she took; my mother was the COO of LSA Records. Ava had some nerve. She'd had the job for a couple of days, and she was already moving into the big office. I spun on my heel, exploding down the hall in her direction.

Lorelai, my mother's secretary, was red-eyed and crying at the desk in front of the office door. I assumed she was as upset as I was that Ava chose day one to move in and take over, but I didn't stop to chat. I barged past her, surprised that Lorelai

made no attempt to stop me. Instead, she whimpered, “She’s expecting you.”

Slamming the door behind me, I practically growled, “Didn’t take you any time did it?”

Ava was standing at the window, looking out at my mother’s view of the Empire State Building. She was wearing one of her stupid black pencil skirt and pale-pink blouse combos. The blouse matched the pale-pink streaks in her hair. Like always, she was gripping her fucking outdated attaché case. I kept my eyes north of the curve of her ass; there was no need to be both angry and frustrated.

She didn’t turn to look at me when she said, “She loved this view. Do you remember how she used to tell us that in another time you could see the Twin Towers from here?”

What the ever-living fuck? Did she think we were going to have a little chitchat and reminisce about mama DiFranco? ’Cause that wasn’t happening, not ever.

“What the hell was that in there?” I spat at her back. “Did you suddenly forget that you owe me?”

She dropped her dumb briefcase and charged toward me, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me into the tiny soundproof studio that was more for show than actual use. My mother used to tell people she used the space to think about and put her spin on albums, but that was mostly bullshit. On occasion, she took a break behind the quiet of those walls, curled up on the armchair against the wall and listened to music while drinking wine.

Clearly, Ava’s only use for it was soundproofing. Knowing that we were somewhere where we couldn’t be heard, she screamed, “I can’t fix that, Bruno.” Her face flushed bright red

and her features pinched, causing stress lines to appear around her eyes. “I can never go back and make that better. Never. And I get it. I wouldn’t stop hating me either. But…” As if she couldn’t contain the empathic emotion coursing through her body, she pushed her pointer finger into my chest, punctuating each of the rest of her words. “I. Am. Not Your. Enemy.”

Crazy Ava. That was what I was going to call this new version of her that cried and screamed. It was a side of her that I’d never laid eyes on before the plane crash. Ava was poised and calculated. Crazy Ava was a mess, blubbery and red-faced. This was the Jackson Pollock version of Ava—all splatter paint and chaos. I should have hated or feared this version of her. Logically, an unhinged person with Ava’s expertise in human manipulation should have been terrifying but I kinda liked her untethered. It made me think that maybe there was still someone real hiding under her corporate facade. It reminded me of the girl on the subway platform who was disoriented by my lips.

“You’re not?” I asked sarcastically, taking a step toward her and backing her up against the studio door.

Looking flustered by my proximity, she shook her head no.

I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to crowd her space, but I moved even closer to her. I was so much taller than her and I wasn’t trying to threaten her, but my behavior could have absolutely been interpreted that way. I pressed a palm flat to the door on either side of her shoulders, caging her between me and the exit. Compliantly, she dropped her hands by her sides, offering no opposition to the intimacy of our closeness.

When I spoke, my voice came out husky and warm. “Really? Because I think you just made me sign over my right to be CEO if I fail to produce three hit singles in four months.”

“You didn’t sign anything,” she whispered, her breath heavy and fast.

I hadn’t been this close to her in years. She smelled incredible, like silky soft baby powder and honeyed tangerines.

“No,” I uttered, “but I promised. And as you know, I am a man of my word.”

“Always.” Her eyes were wide and glazed over. Her hand fluttered up and she touched my face, holding my chin. I swallowed. Had we touched since the day before I left for boarding school? No, probably not. Why would we touch? I hated her, right? I did. I knew I did. But there was no denying that I loved the feeling of her fingertips on my skin. It had been years and still I knew I’d never felt anything like those swollen lips of hers. Even with anger broiling in my chest, I hungered to kiss her a second time.

And then she said, “The promise doesn’t matter because I know you can do it.”

I wanted to see manipulation in her eyes. I wanted to believe Ava was my enemy. She’d let my parents believe I was a fuckup for years and honestly, in some ways, I lived up to their expectations, the whole time knowing that two words from Ava could change everything. I still hated Ava. I was always going to hate Ava, even if she did right by me. But when everyone else failed me, she was always there, and what I saw in her eyes wasn’t hatred or anger or any evil plot. I saw a woman who had hope, a woman who believed in me. Ava was certain I could produce three hits in four months. She wanted me to succeed, genuinely.

Fuck that.

Ava was nuts. I'd been manipulated by her again, not standing in the studio but a half hour earlier in the boardroom. She played me like a fiddle. She made the board members believe that she and I were enemies so that they would be astounded by my success. She was always working, always plotting. If she wanted me to succeed, there was a reason. There had to be.

I backed off, dropping my hands and moving deeper into the studio in the direction that led to the doorway to my father's office—my office. Shaking my head, astounded, I asked, "What is wrong with you? Why is everything in your world always spin?"

She sighed, annoyed, and spoke sternly, throwing her hands up emphatically as she made her points. "They have to believe that you have oversight. They have to think that they can control you. Correction, that I can control you."

Again, the anger I felt toward her surged, rising from a simmer deep in my gut to a roar on my tongue.

"You can control me, Ava. I'm not allowed to take a shit at LSA Records without your permission." The words came out of my body like fire from a dragon. I physically bent toward her, propelling my vitriol at her face. I couldn't help it. I blamed her for all the dark, sticky sorrow that had clawed at me since I got the call about my parents' will. Even in their death they didn't trust or have faith in me.

She took it. Closed her eyes and let every ugly feeling I was sending her way land and lick at her skin until it was absorbed. She bore my anger like a brand, like I owned the right to treat her however I wanted. Watching her stand there, quietly accepting punishment for my parents' sins, made my mouth sour.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes. Through tears that threatened to spill, she spoke with composure. “I will not give you carte blanche to do whatever you want, Bruno. But I trust you and will listen to you and let you take risks you believe in. And I hope...” She paused because her attempt at composure waned and her voice shook. I watched her chest rise as she drew in a deep calming breath before repeating her last words and then adding, “...that over the next four months you will learn to trust me.”

Unlikely.

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AVA

Three days after I acted like a softie and a fool in the executive studio, Lorelai buzzed me to say that Kelly Magill and Marcus Daily were waiting to speak with me. With my consent, all of Bruno's friends had either been employed by LSA or signed with LSA mere hours after the board meeting, but I had not spoken to any of them, and we had no arranged meeting, so I was surprised they were looking to meet with me.

My transition to COO was a massive shift. Everyone associated with our label was nervous that we wouldn't survive the loss of the Difrancos—and since Bruno was busy being Bruno, it wasn't just my job to oversee basic everyday operations, but I also had to manage all the existing creative projects and their emotional fallout. I was drowning in calls and chaos, but I still clicked the intercom button on the phone and said, "Send them in."

I didn't know much about Kelly or Marcus, but I liked that they strode into my space confidently. They seemed completely unfazed by the heated situation that surrounded LSA's new management and for that reason alone their presence was a relief.

Trying to appear as kind as they looked, I signaled to the chairs in front of me and said, "Please, have a seat. Can I get

either of you some water or perhaps a coffee?”

Marcus’s phone dinged and without responding to my offer, he pulled it from his pocket and fixated his eyes on the screen.

Kelly waved off his behavior. “Ignore how fucking rude this shitbag is—he spends his life with his face hypnotized by that phone, but he’s listening.” I smiled and snickered, wanting her to see me as friend not foe.

She furrowed her brow. Clearly, not totally buying my convivial attitude, she accepted my offer by saying, “We’ll both take coffee. Creamy and sugary for me. Black for him.”

I relayed her request to Lorelai and then turned back to her to ask, “So, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Kelly casually leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She wasn’t what you would call a pretty woman, but she was strikingly handsome, with angular features, red hair, and a personality that seemed unrelenting. On a dramatic sigh she sweetly conceded, “Listen, we all know this shit is complicated.”

Her voice was laced with compassion, but just like she wasn’t totally buying the friendliness I was selling, I wasn’t one hundred percent on board with the pretty, pretty compassion she was offering me. Kelly and I obviously had some of the same talents—the ability to work a room and get stuff done. I leaned back in my chair, putting more distance between us, deciding it was okay if we weren’t going to be friends. At the very least, we’d respect each other.

“What’s so complicated?”

Marcus’s fingers that had been tapping away at his screen stopped moving. He looked up at me and grinned and then

shaking his head, he returned to his screen.

Turning to him, Kelly prodded, “What are you smiling at?”

He didn’t look at either of us when he said, “I like her. She’s coy.”

Kelly rolled her eyes at him and then subtly stomped her foot and clicked her tongue. Her behavior was a mature physical expression of a preschooler’s tantrum. “What the fuck, Marcus? What happened to good cop/bad cop?”

Still tapping at his screen, Marcus said, “Just because you pontificate a plan in a cab next to me, does not mean I agree with it. If you expect me to adhere to said plan, you need to get my explicit consent.”

Cheeky bastard.

Smiling condescendingly at her, Marcus added, “You can’t play a player, Kels.”

Kelly crossed her arms over her chest and slumped down in her chair as she huffed, “Well, we certainly can’t now.”

The two of them were spiteful and spatty like siblings but the kindness and care between them was obvious. I winked at Kelly and said, “I like him. He’s totally an asshole.”

We were all laughing when Lorelai came into the room with their coffees. Mine was a hearty laugh born from somewhere deep and real in the depths of my core.

Feeling happy, I said, “You don’t need to play me, Kelly. I understand why you’d be wary of me, but you don’t have to be. Just give it to me straight; what do you need?”

Kelly sighed again. And then she said, “We need to do our jobs.”

“Okay...” I left my sentence open and waited for her to explain.

Pointing her thumb at Marcus, she said, “He’s probably going to be the best talent manager this place has ever known. He finds talent and handles them with kindness and honesty. He’s literally obsessed with the need to discover talent. That’s why his face is always glued to that stupid screen. He’s hunting the internet for inspired nobodies. And right now, we need a nobody.”

I clarified, “Bruno needs a nobody.”

Marcus revised my clarification. “We need a nobody. Bruno’s LSA Records is the only version of LSA Records we’re willing to support.”

Nodding, I said, “Fair enough.”

Kelly went on. “But to really find talent, he has to see them perform live. That means he either needs access to the company jet or money in an expense account that will allow him to move around the world freely.” I could see in the shifting of her gaze that she was skeptical, perhaps even certain that I would turn down this request that she was making for Marcus.

I stood and walked toward the door to my office, then called for Lorelai to come back in and take notes. I could have called her on the intercom, but I liked the show of getting her myself. Once she was in the room and seated on the couch behind Marcus and Kelly, I paced behind my desk as I announced, “Marcus Daily needs a corporate American Express card. Please have it expedited. I want it in his hands in the next forty-eight hours. Also, in general, tell HR that Bruno and friends are free to book the corporate jet for LSA business.”

“Really?” Kelly questioned.

I nodded and then pushed her to go on. “What’s next?”

Kelly glanced at Marcus, and he said, “Fourth floor.”

“What about the fourth floor?” I asked.

“Bruno wants it,” Kelly said. Of course he did.

“That’s literally our best production space.” I laughed. “Booked solid with reservations for recordings for the next year or so.”

“He wants it.” Kelly shrugged.

I sighed, and then looking at Lorelai, I said, “Have Robert and Cheryl work on rescheduling the next four months of bookings in the fourth-floor studios.”

Kelly looked at me dumbfounded. “Really? It’s that easy.”

I looked her in the eyes when I answered. “I want him to succeed, Kelly. Just as much as all of you do.”

“Told you,” Marcus said, maintaining his totally engaged disengagement. He was so odd, but strangely likable. After a few more clicks on his screen, he stood and slipped his phone into the back pocket of his jeans before jutting his hand out, looking to shake mine. I gripped it and shook it firmly, then he said, “Pleasure working with you, Ava. Plan on doing it for like”—he paused to wink before he said—“ever.”

My cheeks heated. He was actually charming in a sort of douchebag way, not unlike a really good salesman. Without saying goodbye, he turned and headed out of my office, leaving Kelly behind. Awkwardly, she didn’t stand or move to leave. It was clear she wanted me to feel uncomfortable.

Behind her, Lorelai shifted in her seat and cleared her throat, then asked, “Will that be all, Ms. Childs?” Since I became her boss, Lorelai insisted on calling me by my last name and I hated it.

“It’s Ava,” I mumbled for the four thousandth time, “...but yes, and thank you.” Looking relieved to get away from the vibe Kelly was fostering, Lorelai rushed out of my office.

Once the door was closed, I smirked at Kelly. “I think you scared her.”

“Who? Your secretary?” She scrunched her nose and shook her head, still awkwardly staring at me. “Nah. I mean, I’m pretty sure you scare her, but I’m not a threat... to her.”

I chuckled. She was a trip. Delighted, I pointed at her and asserted, “I like this. Please, by all means, be protective of him. He deserves to have people care about him in that way.” Before going on, I moved back to my desk chair and took my seat. “But I’m not going to lie; I’m curious just how deep your affection goes. Are you in love with Bruno?”

Kelly tucked her chin in revulsion and gagged. “Fucking gross.”

She wasn’t. It was clear.

“What about you? You spend your life pining for the boss’s son?”

I waved my hand in front of my face, signaling stop, and said, “Girl, please.”

We both giggled, but the mood remained tense.

She cracked her neck, left then right, and then in a tone that was intentionally kinda creepy, she said, “We’re different. But we’re also the same.” I didn’t respond. “Did you know

I'm the youngest of six siblings? Only girl. Irish bruisers. Tough bunch. Bad guys, you might say." She stood. "The lot of us scoundrels," she winked. What she said next was presented as an afterthought when it was really the main point. "I like edgy, scrappy women, but in the end, if you do him wrong, it'll be scoundrel against scoundrel."

"Noted," I said coolly and then unwilling to let her threats lie, I asked, "What is it you do, Kelly?"

She shrugged, stood, and backed out of the room with her eyes on me the whole time. She left my question unanswered—on purpose, of course.



BRUNO WAS AVOIDING ME. I didn't like it, but I wanted to give him some space. A week passed, then two, and still I heard nothing from him. Instead, he sent his people directly to me. It was strange, really. In some cases, it was logical. For example, Meredith, the blond who could have been related to Little Bo Peep, arrived, sweetly requesting consent to find and hire musicians to record with James. Clearly, she needed my consent to hire and fire people. So I set her up with HR and told them they could assume her choices were approved by me.

Some of the other requests felt sort of unintentionally demeaning—like I found myself wondering why Bruno's people were coming to me. For example, Eric Preston, a sound engineer, appeared in the doorway of my office looking seriously upset as he demanded to know where we kept the "damn" office supplies and to get an employee badge or equivalent credentials so that the militant doorman would stop treating him like he was "trying to commit corporate

espionage.” Marcus, who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere, also emailed me daily, asking questions about connecting him with people in marketing or any number of departments. He had no qualms about expecting my help, so eventually I just asked him if he would like an assistant who was familiar with the workings of LSA. I received a resounding yes.

My favorite approach by a member of Bruno’s pack was my meeting with Josh Devereau, who lived up to his name by looking like a raven-haired lumberjack on the cover of a romance novel. He booked an actual appointment and presented a very detailed PowerPoint on why he thought it made sense for James to record a full album, not just a single. His final slide was a picture of James and underneath it, he wrote, *James Baker has the voice of Sinatra and sex appeal of Idris Elba and Lenny Kravitz.*

“And?” I’d asked, laughing.

He shrugged. “I mean, the man is hotter than habanero hot sauce.”

I made a show of consenting to the album because I didn’t have the heart to tell him I’d already assumed James would be recording an album, not a single.

Eventually, the infamous, hotter than hot sauce, James Baker found his way to my office one afternoon to ask me if I thought it would make sense to assign him an image consultant. He seemed kinda shy and skittish about the whole thing, taking a seat across from me and bouncing his knee the entire time.

“I don’t know,” he said, pausing to nibble at the cuticle on the middle finger of his left hand. “It just seems like if I am going to have a number one single, then I probably need a

look.” He made invisible air quotes when he said the word *look*. The energy that he was giving off made it obvious to me that the whole having a ‘number one’ single made his stomach turn.

“You okay, James?” I asked kindly, leaning over my desk in his direction and resting my chin on my palm. “Cause, honestly, you look a little peaked.”

“Uh, yeah,” he fretted, and then standing, he waved his hands nonchalantly. “Forget about the image consultant. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s a good idea,” I said confidently.

“It is?” He stammered the question and then collapsed back into the seat behind him, dropping his face to his hands as he blubbered, “Crap, what am I doing?” His legs were so long that he reminded me of a daddy longlegs spider, but like a habanero-hot one.

“Getting catapulted into the public eye not your bag?” I asked.

“No, I’m good,” he said while he pressed the palms of his hands against his closed eyes—clearly an attempt to relieve pressure.

“Can I get you an aspirin?” I offered. This time he just shook his head no. I hit the intercom button on my phone and said to Lorelai, “Will you get Mr. Baker an appointment with Gail Byron, please? Sometime this week.” To James, I said, “Byron’s the best personal brand consultant I know.”

James thanked me at least fifteen times, and I remained cordial and pleasant with him, but inside, the magic emotional wall that kept me from bothering Bruno crumbled. James wasn’t even close to ready for what was about to hit him.

Having a hit single was going to come with press and fans and being recognized on your way out of the bathroom at the gas station. You had to prepare people for that—and it seemed to me that while James might have had more vocal talent than the average bear, he was mortally uncomfortable with the idea of being famous.

He had to be handled. You can't just throw a lamb to the wolves. You surround the lamb with a lamb-friendly wolf brigade. For James, a great image consultant and a PR team were the metamorphic equivalent of an army of wolves. And it should have been Bruno handling that shit. James was his man, not mine.

So after seventeen days of no contact whatsoever, I stomped my way down the hall, punched the button to call the elevator, and made my way to the fourth floor, growing more and more inflamed with each passing moment. From the outside I'm sure I seemed fine. Nothing to see, just your average under-twenty-five COO of a major recording company strutting through the halls, boarding the elevator of her domain with a smile. But inside I was on tirade.

Who does he think he is, a king? Why am I taking care of ID cards and image consultants? I'm the COO for Christ's sake. I don't have time for this shit. And honestly, what is he doing? For over two weeks I've approved everything his people have asked for and has he come to me to discuss even one idea? Has he said thank you or offered one iota of softness? His life is in my hands, goddammit, and I'm doing everything I can to make him see that I support him, and still he's treating me like an infectious disease!

The doors to the elevator opened with a ding and I walked right past the empty lounge area where artists' entourages

usually spent hours making phone calls and playing Wordle, straight to the control room. I threw open the door and was appalled to find Bruno, Meredith, Eric, Josh, and James all strewn about the place, on the couch, in the chairs, looking entirely unmotivated. There were two grease-spotted white pizza boxes next to the soundboard and a half dozen open beer bottles on the hand-carved wood table in front of the deep-brown leather couch. James and Meredith were still munching, and Eric was picking at the label on his beer. With a tight smile and my hands on my hips, I bossed, “Does anyone work around here or are you all just trying to make me look like a fucking idiot?”

Four stunned faces stared at me, but Bruno remained unfazed. He smirked. “We work but we also fucking eat lunch and enjoy lives, Ava-nator.”

“You know you’re not even supposed to have food in here.” I was barking. I sounded bitchy even to myself, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t tolerate the way he was treating me or the way he was running the show. I had to get through to him and if that meant being the boss bitch, well, I could handle it.

He didn’t give an inch. “Luckily, I’m the CEO of the company so I can change the fucking rules.”

“You can,” I smarted, glaring at him. “But if you don’t get your fucking shit together, someone else will be running this company in five months.”

Pissed, he glared back at me, unwavering. Neither of us so much as blinked. We’d entered a childish battle of wills, a staring contest.

As an arguably intentional attempt to distract us from our showdown, Meredith sighed, lifting the floppy slice of pizza

that she was still holding to her mouth, and then lamented, “You know, women always have to work harder than men.”

Waiting for her statement to fall like the bomb she intended, she took her bite of New York’s finest and leaned back in her chair to chew.

I rolled my eyes at her because even though what she was saying was one hundred percent right, it was also clear she was just looking to shift the tension in the room. However, Bruno surprised me by turning on her. “Oh my God, Mer. Will you, for once, just shut the fuck up?”

She shrugged, her mouth circling as she finished the last morsel of her bite, and then she smiled. “Probably not.”

Bruno’s demeanor shifted and his face softened as he started to snicker. “Totally, not.”

Then Josh stood, mumbling something about having to pee.

In response, Eric said, “Strange, me too.”

Eric rose, and in tandem, they shifted their bodies to make themselves smaller as they slipped past me, escaping into the lounge.

James took Meredith by the hand, signaling for her to put down the pizza, which she did after hastily taking three or four bites, and then he said, “I’m not going to pretend I have to pee. This is between you”—he pointed to me—“and him.” He pointed to Bruno. “So, Mer and I are gonna give you some space.”

Pushing a harsh breath out my nose, I managed to sound marginally sane when I said, “Much obliged.”

They stood and walked toward the door and as soon as Bruno couldn't see her face, Meredith winked at me. I wasn't looking for support from Bruno's friends, but something told me that having Meredith on my side wasn't a bad thing.

When I heard the door behind me click, I snapped for real, unloading all my annoyance at him in one rambling rant.

“What. The. Ever. Living. Fuck. Bruno?” I dropped my voice to a whisper-scream and signaled to James by pointing to the door he just exited. “That man is terrified of being famous. Do you know that? Do you know Josh made a PowerPoint asking to let James make a full album? Why would we sign anyone for one song? Also, Marcus emails me every day. Every day. Are you even trying to manage your friends? Running a company isn't just all pizza and beer and music. You have to do things. You have to manage people. Otherwise, they won't trust you. This isn't a game. It's your whole fucking future.”

Cocky, Bruno lifted his arms, spreading them wide and draping them across the back of the big ol' couch. I couldn't help but notice his hands. They'd always been masculine, even when he was a teenager, just thick and strong. He had the kind of hands that made me feel like he could palm my lower back and make all the stress melt away.

“Are you done?” he asked calmly.

My inability to affect him was annoying, but I held my ground, echoing Meredith's sentiment when I said, “Probably not.”

Picking up my callback to Meredith's response, the corner of his smile lifted and he let a little chuckle escape though his nose. Then he nodded to himself before saying, “My friends like you.” He looked off to the left, not making eye contact

with me, and he spoke slowly like it was hard for him to get the words out. “They trust you and see value in the things that you do.” He paused. And then he turned back to look at me when he said, “But I know that’s always been your forte. You are good at everything. You’ve always known how to manage the world. How to make friends. How to impress people.”

I started to speak to somehow attempt to rebut or explain what he was saying about me, but then I stopped. I didn’t have to justify being good at working at LSA. I’d earned my role.

He continued. “I’m good at this. I’m good at managing the people that make the music and knowing talent when I see it. You know that. You know you can trust me, Ava. I’ve proved that to you, more than you’ve ever proven it to me.”

I swallowed, then looked down at the floor. He had. Of course he had, but I still needed to be in the loop when it came to the work he was doing. I needed him to stop shutting me out if I was going to be able to support him.

Holding my head high, I said, “I don’t want to fight with you or yell at you, but this isn’t working. You can’t keep me on the sidelines. If you’re going to have three hit singles in four months, then you need to let me help you. That’s how you get it done, with my help.”

He stared at me, his face completely placid, giving me no inclination of his thoughts whatsoever. Finally, he said, “I’ll think about it.”

BRUNO

Five days after she busted into the control room, I'd texted Ava in the middle of the night.

DAVIS WILL BE THERE to pick you up at 6:30 a.m. Be ready.

SHE DIDN'T TEXT me back, but the little notification beneath my text said *Read* so message delivered. I knew I was intentionally being a dick. All night I reveled in the image of Ava disturbed and groggily twisting in her sheets, rolling over, grabbing her phone off the night table because she was fucking obsessive about being responsible to LSA, and then raging with irritation when she saw my name followed by an order. I liked waking her up. I liked knowing that her teeth were clenching and I was the cause. It didn't matter how I wormed my way into her thoughts; just being there made my cock twitch.

It always had. No matter how much bad blood there was between us, I couldn't control how I felt about Ava. My body was drawn to hers. If I couldn't have her, I wanted to hate her and frustrate her. Lately, knowing everything luscious about

her was just an elevator ride away, my need to possess her was in overdrive. But I wouldn't look past the reality that Ava was dangerous. She was trouble for me. She made me lose sight of my own goals and needs. And when it came right down to it, she would choose herself over me every time.

But she was talented. She was great at her job and she was right about one thing. If I was going to wrangle my friends and put out three hit singles in four months, I needed her expertise. I needed her on the inside. So, I decided it was time to man up, get my ego and my fucking dick in check, and let her in on my plans, but once I did that, I couldn't let her out of my sight. I had to know her every move, or else she'd have the opportunity to screw me.

Hence, the cryptic late-night text and my current situation—sitting on an idling plane, drinking coffee and waiting for her to arrive. I was buzzing, eager to watch her climb the aircraft stairs and appear in the aisle. I was betting she was gonna be pissed. A flustered, inflamed Ava was a specialty of mine. And I couldn't help but grin when she stomped up the steps, snapping, “You can't just whisk a woman off on a plane. This isn't some movie, Bruno. I have appointments and responsibilities today.”

Before responding, I took a sip of my coffee and then calmly placed it on the white tablecloth draped over the tray table in front of my comfy leather seat. She looked fucking sexy. Her dark-chocolate hair with pink highlights hung loose in ringlets around her shoulders and bounced as she scolded me. She'd forgone her usual professional office bitch uniform, instead, rocking a more casual look with skintight black jeans, a fitted white tee that was cut low enough for me to see a glimpse of her cleavage, and a cropped denim jacket that left her hips available to admire. Besides reminding everyone

everywhere that she was hot, Ava's outfit told me she wasn't planning on going into the office at all, so the smack she was trying to sell me was an empty threat.

"Don't fuck with me, Ava," I smirked. "It's early and I'm tired."

She maintained her huffy stance and said, "I'm not fucking with you. I have appointments."

I rolled my eyes. "I bet you do. But you also already know you're gonna cancel them. Because there is no way you're planning on going into the office dressed like that."

Her cheeks flushed and for a second, I wondered if maybe it hadn't occurred to her that she'd already made the decision that she was going to follow my lead for the day.

Scratching her forehead and closing her eyes, she said, "I wasn't expecting the plane."

There is no way she didn't know I was taking the plane. The agreement my parents set up made sure of that because Ava had to sign off on everything I did that cost the company money. An outing in the company jet certainly fell into that category. But rather than be annoyed, I just laughed. "You're lying again."

The fight went out of her. It just blew away like the candle flame being snuffed out on a birthday cake. She bit the corner of her lower lip, and looking defeated, moved to take the single seat across the aisle from the two seats I'd chosen. Once she was buckled in, I thought she'd ask where we were going or what we were doing, but all she said was, "Thank you for including me, Bruno."



TWO HOURS OF TOTAL SILENCE. Two hours and she didn't say a fucking word. She'd barely moved. Just leaned on her armrest and stared out the window. All that was out there were fucking clouds. They weren't even the billowy, who-wants-to-figure-out-if-I-look-like-a-zoo-animal kind. They were just wispy white skid marks in the sky and she had stared at them like a shitty forlorn puppy for two hours. I kept reminding myself that she was actively trying to break me, but her game was working. The silence was killing me.

The flight attendant, who honestly had nothing to do, came by for the umpteenth time to refill my coffee and just to hear the sound of my own voice, I asked, "How much longer until we arrive at our destination?"

While pouring, she smiled sweetly at me and said, "We should be landing in Oregon in a little over two hours, Mr. DiFranco."

Seemingly shocked, Ava gasped. "Oregon? We're going to the West Coast?"

Giddy that she said anything, I grinned and said, "Oh, thank fuck."

The flight attendant, who thought I was responding to the information she offered me, awkwardly asked, "Are you uncomfortable, sir? Is there something I can get you to make the time pass? Perhaps a magazine or would you like to watch the television?"

I laughed and Ava did too, knowing full well I'd finally won a round. Then, shifting her weight in her seat, she looked

up at the confused woman between us and said, “Marcy, I think I’d love a cup of coffee now.”

Accepting that she had missed something, Marcy nodded before heading off to fulfill Ava’s bidding.

“Marcy, huh?” I asked nonchalantly.

Ava nodded. “I know the name of every LSA employee.”

I couldn’t help but shake my head. “Of course you do.” I paused for effect and then sarcastically said, “But you didn’t know we were going to Oregon.”

She shrugged. “I know you don’t or won’t believe me, but I didn’t know we were getting on the plane.” I scoffed and she added, “I told finance to give you free rein to travel. I know you’re not going to intentionally gouge LSA’s bank accounts.”

Marcy returned with Ava’s coffee and the two women exchanged the pleasantries of coffee consumption.

“Almond milk and agave, correct?”

“Yes, please.” Marcy set the accoutrements on the table in front of Ava. “Thank you.”

I laughed into the very black sludge in my cup.

“What now?” Ava queried, minor annoyance in her tone.

“Pretentious order for a girl who came up the hard way.”

It was her turn to roll her eyes at me. “Can you try not to be a dick for like three minutes?”

I crossed my legs, turning my body so it faced her more, before I winked and said, “I’ll think about it.”

She exhaled a noisy breath, then she stirred her spoon in circles, trying to melt the agave in her coffee. The spoon made a little clanging sound every time she hit the side of the

porcelain mug. The sound reminded me of sitting next to her on the lengthwise seat of a stretch limo, back when we were teens, before there was any bad blood between us. I remembered the fluttering anxiety of feeling the heat of her thigh next to mine. I remembered my desperate need for her to think I was cool.

We were on our way to an awards show and the ice in my mother's glass clinked every time we drove over even the slightest bump in the road. Both of my parents were on their phones. Still lobbying for more airtime and looking for last-minute PR opportunities. Annoyed by their never-ending jobs, I'd slouched, letting my head roll on the back of the seat. I had dropped my voice to a low tone, trying to create a private space between her and I and lamented, "Most parents wish their kids would put down their phones."

She was silent for a minute and then with cynicism said, "In my world, most kids wish their parents would stay sober long enough to remember that dinner is a thing."

At the time, I was thrown off by her response. She didn't bring up her world often and she'd never wielded her upbringing like a weapon before, so surprised and selfishly teenaged, I asked, "Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?"

She sighed. "No, but..." She pulled at the hem of her skirt, adjusting it so it stayed flat against her thighs. "You're dumb about your life. You have no idea how good you have it."

I blew her off, thinking she didn't know what it was like to be me, but obviously, older and wiser at this point, it was clear that teenage me had no idea what it was like to be her. The memory felt bittersweet. I liked the thought of a time before Ava was complicated for me, but I sort of wondered if that

time ever existed. She seemed to always get my parents in a way I did not. Driven by my own inner thoughts, I found myself asking, “Do you miss my parents?”

My question was random to her and she flinched when I asked it, like having to consider them caused her physical pain. She turned to stare back out the window when she said, “Yes. All the time.”

Her answer struck me as deeply as if my chest had been hit by a handful of shattered glass, little icy pricks of pain. Resentful, I said, “There were times when I felt like they were your parents.”

She shook her head and I wasn’t sure whether she was being defensive or protective when she said, “No. They were always your parents. They worried about you. They cared about you. They wanted the best for you. I wasn’t their child. I was a well-loved employee, a tool.”

I laughed sardonically. She stared at me blankly, and I centered myself. “You don’t really think that, do you? That you were just their employee? They left you in control of their legacy for Christ’s sake.”

She responded by quirking her head at me and furrowing her brow. I felt like I was being studied. I could tell she wasn’t convinced. But she shifted away from my point by asking, “Do you miss them?”

I didn’t. At least not in any normal way. When I thought of them, I felt angry maybe. My relationship with them was so strained for so many years. We never agreed. We always fought. I wanted to miss them because it felt fucked up that I didn’t miss them. So, when anyone asked, I pretended to miss them. But for some inexplicable reason, I didn’t tell Ava that lie. I answered honestly. “If it weren’t for this game we’re

playing when it comes to inheriting the company, I think I might forget they were gone sometimes. Or feel relieved.”

I thought she'd be appalled, but she wasn't.

“They hadn't been part of your daily life in a long time,” she said.

I shrugged. “I'm still angry at them.”

Her voice was hollow when she added, “Because of me.”

I shrugged again. “Maybe.”

Again, she got quiet and looked out the window, and then after a beat, she asked, “What's in Oregon?”

She and I were going to some tiny town that I'd literally never heard of and whose name I couldn't seem to remember because it wasn't the name of a town. Towns had names like Silverton or Aspen or Jamestown. This town had the name of a man. Jessup? John? Joseph? Something like that. It didn't matter. I didn't have to remember the name. We were going there regardless because that tiny town was where Marcus located Sam Tucker.

Seventy-year-old Sam Tucker was part two of my plan. Tucker was quite possibly the greatest country bluegrass musician of all time and a killer songwriter to boot. He was on the LSA roster. My father found him in a bar and signed him before I was born. For ten years they made great music together, and then the wind shifted and people started to listen to synthesized pop. LSA followed the fandom. But not Tucker. He wouldn't make the kind of record that my parents wanted him to, and they had him by the balls, all tied up in contracts. So he walked, and he hadn't released a record since. Honestly, he hadn't been seen since. I was gonna change that. Getting Sam Tucker to make a record was a magic trick, a rabbit out of

a hat that would result in one of my coveted chart-topping singles.

I'd had Marcus hunting to find the bastard even before the board meeting. And it wasn't easy, but you know, YouTube. Harder to disappear than it used to be. Now, all I had to do was convince him that at my version of LSA, he could release any record he wanted, if he did it quickly. Well, that, and I had to pray that he didn't like the simple life in Jessup or Jimmy or whatever more than being famous.

But I didn't tell Ava any of that. Feeling a guttural need to watch her squirm, I answered her question by merely saying, "A lot."

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AVA

As if he'd never been famous, a still-stately, gray-bearded Sam Tucker sat upon a kitty-corner plywood stage in a rickety Windsor chair, playing his heart out. So far he'd played a solid forty-five-minute set to a crowd of washed-up-looking bar regulars while Bruno and I kept to a shadowy table in the back corner. We were in a one-street town in Oregon in a rundown bar with a lot of brass fixtures, uneven tables, and green vinyl cushions.

"I can't believe you found Sam Tucker," I said for the fourth time, unable to contain the shock and awe on repeat in my brain. I leaned forward, needing to be closer to the music, and put my elbows on the table and my chin in my palms. "And he's still so good."

Leaning in the opposite direction, Bruno balanced his chair on the two hind legs and his smirk was clear in his tone when he said, "I know."

I twisted my body to look at him. "Tell me you have a plan. Because I am pretty sure that if you so much as say your name, he's gonna run."

The furrowing of his brows gave away his nervousness, but he said, "Plans are for suckers."

I rolled my eyes. “Jesus, you’re a child.”

He dropped forward, replacing all four legs of his chair on the ground and stood. “I don’t need a plan. Like recognizes like. He’s gonna be able to tell the music matters to me. He’s gonna smell it on my skin.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. “Smell it on your skin, huh?”

“Yep.” He nodded, fixing his gaze on Tucker who was putting his guitar in its case.

He took a step in Tucker’s direction and reluctantly, I stood to follow, mumbling under my breath, “The only thing I smell is your laundry detergent and maybe a hint of your shampoo, but go ahead, you do you.”

He heard me and turned slightly to flash me a coy expression as he said, “Smells good, right?” It did. Bruno smelled like the fucking woods on a foggy morning, all crisp and clean and just manly. There were times when I had to actively breathe through my mouth in order to concentrate in his presence. But I was certainly not telling him that, so I said, “You don’t stink.”

In a tiny show of unexpected humbleness, he said, “At least I’ll have that going for me. Keep your fingers crossed.” Then, as if revving himself up for a fight, he pushed out a hard puff of air and bounced in place for a second before setting off on a beeline in Tucker’s direction.

I followed him, lagging just a few steps behind. He approached Tucker casually, calmly, and offered a warm compliment. “Incredible, man. Best I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Thank you, kindly, son.” Tucker’s voice was rich and layered with all kinds of raspy goodness and he smiled at

Bruno. It was a warm, open grin that revealed slightly yellowed teeth.

“Most of those were originals, weren’t they?” Bruno asked, knowing full well they were.

Tucker nodded. “Sure were.”

“It’s been a long time since I heard a song of that caliber, let alone ten.” There was a lilt in Bruno’s voice—a certain kind of teasing, tempting.

Tucker dipped his chin and chuckled to himself. When he looked up, his face was still pleased but the wrinkles around his eyes grew deeper with an impish glow. “That so?” he asked, giving away almost nothing

Bruno mirrored Tucker’s playful look. “I’d go as far as to say that there was only one man capable of ballads like those.”

Tucker leaned over and snapped the buckle on his guitar case and then gripped the handle, pulling it off the chair and letting it swing by his side. Lifting his chin, he pursed his lips and shook his head before saying, “I’m a little old for ruses, but you got style, Difrancio.”

I giggled, absolutely loving that Bruno hadn’t fooled this man for a second. Grinning, Tucker winked at me. But when he spoke again, there was sadness in his voice. “I am sorry they died like that, kid. In the end we didn’t get along, but they didn’t deserve that.”

The color drained from Bruno’s lips, but he stood tall and shrugged. “In the end, we didn’t get along either.”

“So I read,” Tucker drawled, then he turned to me and stuck out his hand. “Ms. Childs, I presume.”

I couldn't help but smile. I nodded, taking his one hand in both of mine. "It's an honor."

He laughed. "Been a long time since a pretty girl was honored to shake my hand."

From behind the bar, the bartender, a striking woman with curly auburn hair, who had very obviously been eavesdropping, called out, "How much will you pay me to not tell Ma you're flirting with chicks at the bar, Pop?"

Tucker's smile broadened and like a bard on stage, he swung his hand in her direction and snarked, "This sharp-mouthed sweetheart is my daughter Delilah. Delilah, I'd like you to meet Bruno Difrancos and Ava Childs."

"Fucking Difrancos," Delilah popped cheekily while she reached up and rang a bell above her head that was hanging from the ceiling. Responding to the bell's chime, all the three men nursing their afternoon beers lifted them up in toast fashion and droned, "Fucking Difrancos."

My mouth fell open. Everyone was quiet for a beat, and then Bruno started laughing, and lifting an imaginary beer, he chanted, "Fucking Difrancos."

Turned out, Bruno's ability to laugh was all it took. Sam Tucker knew a lot about us. Apparently, his daughter kept tabs on anything related to LSA Records her whole life and she'd been arguing our case for us ever since Bruno's parents died.

"I told him he should contact you," Delilah said while filling a pint glass with beer. We'd taken a seat at her bar and were all getting to know each other a little better. "I mean, even if you're a total douche canoe, nobody holds someone to a contract like his at this point."

Bruno took the beer from her, and with full-on cocky vigor, he said, “Don’t hold your breath. No one of any intelligence would release Sam Tucker from his contract without a fight, but that said, I am not my father. I know my limitations.” He turned to Sam. “You’re the talent. You call the shots.”

Tucker just sort of stared at Bruno for a second, and then he rubbed his chin in thought before saying, “I’m not really looking for the rock ‘n’ roll life at this point. I got a girl...”

Delilah rolled her eyes. “Mom’s in her sixties, Pop. I’m pretty you should be calling her a woman.”

Scrunching his face up in jest, Tucker repeated, “I got a girl. She’s my girl no matter how old she is. It’s a goddamn term of endearment, Lilah, not some infantilizing bullcrap or whatever it is you get on about. She’s still my girl.”

“Whatever you say.” She threw her hands up defensively. “But from now on I’m gonna tell Ma to call you her baby daddy.” Their dynamic was gold. It was like an old vaudevillian comedy show, the sweet old codger and his smart, pretty daughter. We could market that.

Almost giddy, Tucker shifted his shoulders so he’d basically turned his back on her when he spoke, his eyes sparkling, and I was pretty sure that getting his daughter’s goat was one of his favorite pastimes. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, I’m not really looking to live a big life at this point, but there is one thing that might tempt me to record one last record.”

“Consider it done,” Bruno said.

Tucker chuckled. “You don’t even know what it is.”

“I trust you,” Bruno said, his tone casual and unflinching. He was dead set on proving to Tucker that the new and improved LSA Records was a safe place to make music.

Tucker threw a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to Delilah, “I want to record with my girl.”

“Pop,” Delilah breathed, clearly touched.

Tucker turned to her. “Didn’t mind when I called you my girl that time, did ya?”

She laughed. Then, with glassy eyes, she said, “You don’t have to do this.”

Seemingly unimpressed by Delilah’s selflessness, Bruno asked, “She any good?”

Tucker shrugged. “Got a Grammy or two in her.”

“Only two?” Bruno joked.

“Give or take. But it’s not so simple. She needs better terms than I had.”

Bruno sighed. “I imagine she does.” He turned to me and we locked eyes. My heart flipped when I realized that in this moment of his negotiations, Bruno needed me. He was frozen, unable to move forward without my say so, and totally unsure about what he was free to offer the Tuckers. “What do you say, Aves? Can we offer Delilah a better deal than the garbage can Sam is trapped in?”

We could and we would. I smiled softly, but I was all business when I said, “We won’t tie your daughter to LSA the way Bruno’s parents lassoed you. Her contract will be for this record and only this record. But I’m gonna hope that during the process, Bruno and I can earn your respect back and that we can all work together for a long time.”

I delivered the words with sincerity and they brought the old man in front of me to the brink. Tucker's face twitched, holding back his emotions, but he stuck out his hand to shake on it. Behind him, Delilah rang the bell again, and absolutely elated, she cheered, "Fucking Difrancio and the badass bitch he brought with him!"

I couldn't help but laugh as Bruno responded to the call by throwing up his arm, echoing her sentiment. "Fucking Difrancio and his badass bitch!"

Bruno goofy-grinned at me. His elation was palpable. I don't know if it was out of instinct or excitement, but he threw his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his armpit with a squeeze. My breath caught in my throat and my heart throbbed, reverberating like a bass drum in my ears. Being close to him was a thing I wanted. There was no denying it.

To my surprise, he didn't let me go until I climbed into the back seat of the car we took back to the airport.

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BRUNO

“I cannot fucking believe we did that. Can you believe we did that? Sam Tucker is going to make an album for us! Sam motherfucking Tucker.” I was squealing like a frantic Beatles fan as I dipped my head to enter the airplane. I had my arms out and kept turning back to look at Ava. She grinned at me and bit her lip before giggling out her nose. She was happy too. It was a big win and I couldn’t have done it without her. She went out on a limb for me and I knew it.

Still bubbling with giggles, she put her pointer finger in front of her lips, “Shhh. We don’t want this secret leaked on Twitter, buttface.”

“Come on.” I rolled my whole neck, not just my eyes, at her. “Just for one minute be in the moment and stop trying to control the future PR campaign. Also, buttface? Really?”

She bit her lip again and then, giving me the sweetest set of googly doe eyes, she gleefully said, “Fine, it’s a-mazing. It was an incredible idea. You should feel really proud of yourself.”

I fucking wanted to kiss her. “I’m proud of us.”

She looked down bashfully and I didn’t second-guess the effect my compliment had. It hadn’t even been a full day and I

was already losing my ability to see her clearly, but I was also losing my ability to give a fuck because having her around made me happy.

She flopped down in her seat on the plane and said, “I don’t know about you, but getting old musical legends to agree to make a record with us really takes its toll. I’m exhausted.”

Dropping into my own seat, I announced, “Sorry, but exhaustion is not an option. We still got places to be, babe.”

“Oh my God. What?” she whined. “Are we not going home now? I was totally planning my nap.”

I smirked. “Venice Beach, here we come.”

Feigning grumpy, she donned a monotone voice when she asked, “Do tell, what delights are in store for me after sitting in LA’s rush hour traffic?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re traveling by helicopter. No way am I sitting on the 405 when I could be sipping a cocktail, watching the sunset, and evaluating the potential of the unknown Marcus has been raving about.”

“Oh God.” She sighed. “You’re serious. We’re not heading back to New York tonight?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Goddammit, Bruno.” She was genuinely annoyed. “How many times do I have to ask you to communicate with me? I don’t have a toothbrush or a change of clothes.”

I was on such a high that nothing was going to bring me down, not even a pissy Ava. “That’s an easy fix. I can call the hotel now and have those things waiting for you in your room.”

“Okay, fine. But what about the meetings I had today that I rescheduled for tomorrow?”

“You’ll reschedule them again. You’re the COO of one of the top record companies in the world. You call the shots.”

She shook her head, but then I saw her cool slip away and she couldn’t control herself when she snarled, “No, Bruno. I’m the Hispanic girl from Queens who cajoled her way to the top and now that I’m the boss, everyone is waiting for me to screw up and looking for ways to jump ship.”

Watching her freak out, it occurred to me that Ava was a little terrified. Maybe, just maybe, she really wasn’t out to get me at all. Maybe she didn’t want to run the company on her own. Maybe she knew we were both good for business and that she needed me as much as I needed her.

Still, cocky till the end, I said, “I’m the boss, Ava.”

In response to my comment, she cackled sarcastically.

I stayed light. “That’s how it works. The CEO gets to be the boss of the COO.” Despite my words and our titles, we both obviously knew that for the time being, she was in charge, but my comment was loaded with sexual innuendo so it took the wind out of her sails and helped her anger dissipate.

She flopped back into her chair and said, “Fuck you, Bruno.”

“Anytime, babe,” I quipped. It was just a retort, but I realized I’d just offered her open invitations to ride. I snuck a tiny glance in her direction to observe her response.

She swallowed and a blush started to creep up her neck, but she was saved by Marcy, the inopportune flight attendant.

“Can I get either one of you something before takeoff?”

Ava squeaked, “I’ll take a scotch, please. Two rocks.”

I followed her lead. “Ditto, Marce.” I winked.

Shaking her head, Ava breathed, “Incorrigible.”

Ignoring her, I asked, “You want to see a video of Marcus’s Venice Beach busker?”

Reluctantly, she consented, “I guess.”

I took my phone out of my pocket and patted the seat next to me, encouraging her to move so we could watch the video together. I knew I was being flirtatious, and I didn’t think she’d actually stand up and move to the seat next to me, but she did. Just like in that limo when we were kids, I could feel the heat of her thigh next to mine. I fought the urge to shift closer so we’d actually be touching.

Pulling my earbuds from my jacket pocket, I offered her one and said, “I mean, they kinda have my ear cooties, but like...” It was a totally goofy thing to say. I was trying to be silly and friendly, really. But having her close to me had my fucking manhood on full alert so despite the words coming out of my mouth, the timbre of my vocal vibrations was more give-in-and-let-me-fuck-you-till-you-scream-my-name.

Ava’s eyes got wide and she swallowed uncomfortably, but then she reached out and took the earbud. Her voice was equally deep and whispery when she said, “I’m not afraid of your cooties. But if I borrow this, it’s gonna be covered in my cooties. You okay with that, champ?”

Holy fuck. I most definitely wanted all up in that situation. I mean, not like actual ear wax, but I could think of some serious Ava cooties that I wanted to be covered in. Shitballs.



I TOOK HER TO DINNER. To a dive across the street from where Marcus told me the busker showed up most evenings. So far it was sort of a bust. The girl we were hoping to see hadn't shown, but Venice Beach is a show at night. Big bro-dudes pumping iron, seventies' style roller skaters, homeless hippie kids, lots to see. So we waited, eating greasy mozzarella sticks and nachos and chugging beers in the setting California sun. We also talked. First, about nothing much, things like the last time we were in Cali and other nonsense, but then I found myself asking Ava why she applied to work for my parents.

“In the beginning,” she said, “it had nothing to do with them or LSA. It was just an escape, ya know. I needed to find a way out of...” She paused, her eyes drifting up to the right as she considered her words. “My situation. I had this teacher who thought I was smart, and she helped people apply for scholarships and stuff. She showed me the flyer for the internship at LSA.” She took a bite of a mozzarella stick she was holding, and the white cheese oozed but didn't sever immediately so it stretched until it snapped, hanging from her lip and sticking to her chin.

“You have...” I pointed to the cheese.

She swiped at it with her thumb, pushing the strand into her mouth and drawing my attention to her lips. Fuck.

I looked away. “So, that's the story. LSA was your escape?”

“In the beginning, yes, and then it changed.”

“How?”

She shrugged and then deflected. “Why are you asking me about this?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m curious why you dedicated your entire life to my parents’ company. I mean, you never went to college and clearly you could have. They would have sent you. I bet they even offered. But you seem perfectly content to just be part of LSA. Don’t you have dreams of your own?”

She scoffed at me. “Jesus, Bruno. You are such a condescending dick all the time. I am a twenty-two-year-old COO of a billion-dollar company. I think my dreams are fine.”

I hadn’t meant it the way she took it, so I tried to backtrack. “No, fuck. I mean, is that what you were going for the whole time? Like when you got your GED, were you thinking, someday I’m going to run this joint?”

She softened and shook her head no. “I was still thinking, I wanted out of my life and into the one your parents were offering. Your world was like an addiction for me. It was so safe, so unthreatening. I was appreciated. I wanted to be with you and your family all the time. But I was sure that you’d all wake up one day and remember I didn’t belong.”

“Really?” I questioned her, mostly because I always felt she fit so easily, like she came into my world and made more sense at my parents’ dining table than I did.

“That changed though,” she said, looking at her lap and fidgeting with the corner of her napkin.

“Of course, because they adored you,” I said flippantly, picking up a behemoth of a nacho and popping it into my mouth.

Glancing up, she stared at me and held my gaze hard when she said, “They didn’t make me feel accepted, Bruno. You

did.”

I stopped chewing, the remnants of the nacho wet and heavy on my tongue. *What?*

“Are you surprised?” she asked, smiling quizzically.

I uncomfortably swallowed bits of chip that weren’t quite small enough to go down but also soggy enough to make it through. I picked up the water glass in front of me that had mostly been neglected so it was weeping condensation and took a huge swig.

“You are, you’re surprised,” she said, almost stunned. She sighed and then smiled sadly. “No one ever put me first except you. There were huge consequences to your choice in the subway that day. And you knew that, but you took the hit because you were sure that for you it would matter less than it would for me.”

I shifted in my seat and tried to be unimpressed by what she was saying. “I was fourteen, Ava. I’m not sure I really knew what I was doing.”

“No, you did. You knew you were saving me. It was a big deal. That moment shaped both our lives. You can’t pretend it didn’t.” She was emotional, her voice fluttering, but she fought past it, putting her hands on the table and sitting taller. “I know I owe you everything. I always will, and even though it hurt you, and it strained whatever good was between us, from that moment on, I felt safe with you. Safe for you.” She fumbled suddenly, growing uncomfortable. “I don’t know. It’s fucked up, I guess.” She laughed. “Maybe I’m just fucked up.”

“Join the club,” I said softly. And they were nothing words, a joke really, but I heard her. Every word she said

pierced my skin, opening old sickly scars and letting sordid stagnant infection ooze.

She laughed again but it was a throwaway sound, a I'm-a-damn-fool kind of a laugh. Then she sniffled and picked up her napkin to wipe her nose. I didn't want her to feel like what she said didn't matter. It mattered. Ava mattered. Fuck, she was the one I called when I was lost. It was always her.

"I'd do it again," I said a little too forcefully. Her eyes flooded and I watched her chin twitch as she clenched her teeth to keep from crying.

"Really?" She was barely audible.

I nodded curtly.

We just looked at each other. Another staring contest, only there was no winning this time. This was all bare souls and pain. This was thank you and I hate you and I need you. This was the fucked-up turmoil of being a goddamn unlovable mess and somehow in some weird way knowing there was one person who was there, one person who would always show up. This was probably what love looked like when no one taught you how to love.

Ava looked away first. She turned her face so I was left staring at her profile. The hard line of her nose, the plush curves of her pink lips. The ocean breeze picked up and fluttered through her hair as she pointed and said, "Look. Isn't that her, Marcus's busker?"

AVA

I tried not to think about the conversation Bruno and I just had and instead focused on the girl across the street. She seemed young. Maybe not even eighteen yet. But her sound drifted across the street, and even with the evening hubbub, I could tell she was good. Incredible, really—she had an Alanis Morissette/Liz Phair vibe—digestibly political, good lyrics, strong vocals, and solid guitar. I couldn't quite understand how she was just playing a few feet from the sand on Venice Beach and remained unsigned. I found myself looking left and right, wondering how it was possible that we were gonna get this girl. How were we the first to notice her? We were in LA. There is a lot of music production in LA. It was weird.

We paid our bill and stood, making our way out of the restaurant and to the curb. Waiting for the traffic to slow, we stood silently, both still heavy with my confessions. When the light favored us, Bruno palmed my lower back urging me forward. The heat from his hand curled and swirled through my body, like the rush of water flooding around you when you jump into the deep end of the pool. He'd been touching me on and off all afternoon and I liked it. I liked it too much.

Seemingly protective, he kept his hand behind me as we crossed the street, but by the time we reached the busker, we'd

returned to the normal interaction of colleagues—separated by a comfortable amount of space. I felt the absence of his hand like a burn. It was distracting. Incredibly distracting. Luckily, the girl was mid-song when we approached so I had a few minutes to compose myself before we spoke to her.

There wasn't a crowd, so it was obvious that we were watching her. She was a tiny thing, couldn't have been more than five foot two. She acknowledged our presence but didn't drop a note or even vaguely consider pausing her performance. The music that came out of her felt haunting. She sang about a girl alone, wandering, looking for a streetlamp in the darkness of the night so she could feel safe. It was moody and layered, especially for someone her age. And the more I looked at her, the more I realized why she was still busking on the beach. This girl was homeless, for sure. And probably underage. Maybe even a runaway. Signing her wasn't just about a contract and a signature. There was going to be a lot of legwork.

I leaned in and whispered in Bruno's ear, "Homeless."

He nodded, agreeing.

I added, "Underage. Maybe a runaway."

He nodded again.

I moved back from his ear, watching her again, and didn't whisper when I said, "It's not going to be easy."

He shook his head. "Nope, but she's got it."

I agreed. The girl had the thing that draws people in. She was his third hit, for sure.

She finished her song and Bruno gave her a little wave as he said, "Could we maybe interrupt your set for a few minutes?"

The girl looked left and then right at the lack of audience before her and then joked, “Crowd doesn’t seem to mind.”

The corners of Bruno’s mouth tipped up. He liked a spitfire. “I’m Bruno Difrancio and…” He waved his hand at me. “This is Ava Childs.” The girl blanched instantly. Bruno laughed. “So, I’m guessing you know who we are.”

She nodded, but just barely; it was a slow, painful nod like being in our presence was turning her to stone.

Bruno looked at me and asked, “Were our names always so recognizable or is that just like a consequence of my parents’ death?”

His question was probably rhetorical, but I answered it anyway. “Pretty sure everyone always knew who you were. I vaguely remember a tabloid or twenty publishing constant nonsense about your bad boy behavior. I, on the other hand, am definitely newer on the recognizable scene and it’s irritating.”

Bruno lifted his brows at me. “Hard to be a sneaky fuck when everyone knows your name?”

“Something like that,” I tossed back.

At our sparring, the girl laughed nervously, a weird dorky guffaw, and her hand jumped to her mouth like she was attempting to catch the sound and shove it back where it came from.

“Don’t be nervous,” Bruno said with his signature smirk. “You’re going to get everything you want.”

She looked at me, then at him. “You’re the devil, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe I’m a little bit of heaven and a little bit of hell.”

I scoffed, “A lot of hell. I promise.” Then kindly, I asked her, “What’s your name?”

“Eddy,” she said. “Eddy Meyer. My mom was a huge Pearl Jam fan.”

“Was?” Bruno asked.

Eddy bounced her knee as she nodded. “Yeah, she died when I was a kid.”

“You’re still a kid,” I said.

“Arguable,” Eddy said. “I bet people think you’re still a kid too, but from what I know

about your life, I’m guessing you stopped being a kid around the same time I did.”

Always ridiculous, Bruno quipped, “I’m still a kid.”

I rolled my eyes. Eddy did too, and then she said, “No offense, man, but maybe it’s time to grow up.. .”

“Oh great,” Bruno said, looking at me. “I found you a mini me. Just what I never wanted.”

I ignored him like he deserved and turned to Eddy. Bluntly, I asked, “You homeless?”

She nodded yes.

“You in the system?”

She nodded again.

“You ran.” It wasn’t a question. An underage runaway was trouble. She’d need to be emancipated. “How old are you? Honestly.”

“Seventeen. Eighteen in three months.”

Bruno looked at me. “We can’t wait.”

“I know,” I said. Turning to her, I asked, “You hungry?”

She nodded.

“Okay, pack up. You’re coming with us. I’m gonna feed you and get you a warm place to sleep tonight and make some calls.”

Eddy looked at me like I was nuts. “Um... I don’t mean to sound paranoid or whatever, but skipping my set to get into a car with two strangers, albeit famous ones whom I know a lot about but also don’t know at all, it just feels uncomfortable. Could you maybe clarify why you want to feed me? Or at least give me some reassurance that you’re not just into weird scary shit?”

“Admittedly,” Bruno joked again. “I seem like I’d be into weird shit.”

“Totally.” Eddy smirked.

I laughed.

Bruno told the truth. “So my plan is to help you to release a hit single in like the next two months. I need you to release that single. And after that, you work with the best people I know on an album at your own pace.”

“Do I get a contract?”

I nodded. “And a lawyer to protect you. I’ll pay, you choose.”

“You really want to sign me? Some homeless kid?”

“I thought you weren’t a kid,” Bruno teased. Eddy ignored him and just waited for him to answer her questions. “Jesus,

you're intense, kid. Yes, we want to sign you.”

She looked to me for confirmation. “Like, for real?”

I nodded. “Yes. One hundred percent. First things first, however, I need to figure out if we can take you across state lines. But yes, you are being signed by LSA Records, even if I have to adopt you myself.”

Eddy just gawked at us. Until Bruno finally broke through.

“So,” Bruno asked. “You coming with us or what?”

Eddy shrugged. “Fuck it. Can't be worse than what I've got going on right now.”

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BRUNO

Eddy stopped suddenly as we crossed the threshold into the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria. She just kind of lingered by the door, looking terrified, holding her guitar case by the handle with both hands so it dangled in front of her knees. There was more than one person staring at her. She looked lost and clearly needed a bath. For sure, she had the musical chops, but I had some worries that adjusting to her newly found good fortune might be a struggle.

I was halfway across the lobby when I realized Eddy wasn't walking next to Ava and me. Ava was already on the phone with the head of LSA's legal department, working out how to manage Eddy's situation so she was oblivious. She did, however, stop when I did, and then she kind of drifted in place, deep in discussion.

I stared at Eddy and flagged my hand, beckoning her in my direction. "Come on, kid. It's okay."

Uncomfortably, she moved toward me, her shoulders dropping as if her guitar had suddenly grown way too heavy to move. When we approached, the dude behind the check-in counter eyed Eddy suspiciously as he asked, "Is there something I can help you with, Mr. DiFranco?"

I hated the way he looked at her, like she disgusted him. Admittedly, she looked dirty, but she didn't stink, and who was he to question her right to belong. "I need a room for my friend, Eddy," I said sternly, trying to remain calm.

The clerk looked at her again, and his nose scrunched up involuntarily, like her poverty literally revolted him. "She will need to provide a credit card as a guarantee, sir."

I shook my head at him. "I'm paying for the room"—I scanned his chest for his name tag—"Brad. So, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop acting like a fucking dick and start treating this woman like a VIP. Got it?"

Looking a shade paler, Brad swallowed. "Shall I put the room in your name, Mr. DiFranco?"

"Sure, Brad. Also, Ms. Meyer here is free to charge anything she wants to the room. Understood?"

Brad nodded.

"And she will need some clothes. Can you have someone bring us a collection to choose from tomorrow morning?"

"I will pass the request to our concierge immediately, Mr. DiFranco."

"Good." I leaned over the counter so I was closer to him when I whispered, "I like you like this, Brad, all compliant. You're sexiest when you know your place on the food chain."

Brad coughed uncomfortably, taking a step back. Then he dipped his chin, consenting to my cruelty with one word. "Sir."

I leaned back and paused, and then I winked as I asked, "Do you have a key for Eddy, Brad?"

Flustered, he jumped into action. “Yes. Yes, sorry, sir.” When the key was ready, he attempted to hand it to me, but I took a step to the side, forcing him to hand it to Eddy.

Like a schoolmarm, I chimed, “What do you say, Brad?”

“Your key, ma’am.”

Eddy managed a “Thank you.”

And Brad added, “If there is anything you need, Ms. Meyer, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Smiling, I cooed, “Well done, Brad. There might be hope for you yet.”

Eddy and I had turned from the counter and were heading back to where Ava was pacing, when Eddy said, “You didn’t have to belittle him.”

I scoffed, “In three months, he will be telling anyone who will listen that he checked you in. Don’t worry about the Brads of the world, Eddy. They think they’re special and they’re not.”

“But you are?” Eddy asked.

Ten feet away from me, Ava caught my eye and smiled, giving me a thumbs-up. She was telling me she had worked that Ava magic and we were good to take Eddy with us back to New York.

Still looking at Ava’s face, I replied to Eddy, “No, but Ava is. And you are. I’m just a Brad who was born with a shit ton of money and the skill to know talent when I see it.”

Ava stared back at me. It was our second staring contest of the day. She was so fucking beautiful, even in the clothes she boarded the plane in at least fifteen hours ago. I’d been looking at her in those threads all day and as the time passed,

they seemed to reveal more and more of her. The way her jeans gathered just below the curve of her ass. The way her T-shirt stretched across her breasts. How had I spent years denying myself the pleasure of looking at her? I spent years avoiding that truth. I ached for Ava. I wanted my lips on her lips just as badly as I did when I was fourteen. I kept staring, watching her face shift and soften. Her cheeks started to blush.

“Eddy,” I said, never taking my eyes off Ava.

“Yep,” she replied.

I pointed toward the elevator. “Go to bed.”

I heard Eddy make a little knowing sound, but she didn’t question my instructions. She turned, heading for the elevator, and I called out, “Sleep well.”

“You do whatever well too,” she joked.

I took a step toward Ava, and then another and another until I crowded her space.

She swallowed and then squeaked, “What are you doing, Bruno?”

“Keeping a promise I made to myself a really long time ago.”

AVA

He wasn't angry or possessed. He wasn't coming at me with cruelty or spite. He didn't need me to solve a problem or manage a situation. But it was clear from the look of determination on Bruno's face—he wanted me.

“What promise?” I asked, my voice small and intimate, only for him.

He brought his hand up and cradled my chin, pulling me just a little closer to him.

“The one time I kissed you, Ava, I swore to myself that I was going to kiss you again.”

He was so close that I could feel his breath on my lips and the warmth of it ran through my body like a freight train, burning hot desire down my spine straight to my core. There was nothing I wanted more in the world than to feel Bruno's lips on mine, but looking around the lobby, filled with spying eyes, I somehow managed to say, “Don't.”

At first his hand didn't move, but his face fell. And he started to shake his head and took a step back. “Wha... I...” He was so shocked he couldn't form words.

I stepped forward, chasing him, needing to stay close as I whispered, “Not here.”

His backward momentum slowed and an evil little smile took over his face as he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the elevator. He bounced in place as we waited and when the doors opened, he practically dragged me inside before he spun around and blocked the entry to the hotel's other patrons.

“Trust me,” he said to a young family clad in Disneyland paraphernalia. “Take the next one.”

When the doors closed, he pressed the button for our floor, the penthouse, and then he turned and stalked in my direction, capturing me against the wall. His hair was pulled back in a messy bun and his face had grown scruffy because the last time he shaved must have been in New York. The handrail behind me pushed into my lower back. My eyes fluttered closed as he cornered me, his scent coating the air I drew into my lungs.

“Now?” he asked, so close that the word lapped at my lips.

I started to nod, but he didn't wait for my consent. He threaded his hands into my hair, tilting my head toward his mouth and he took. This kiss was nothing like the sweet connection of our teenage years. This was savage, monstrous. It was filled with years of wanting and hatred. It was brutal and violent, forceful and commandeering. This was a man demanding what he wanted and felt he deserved. His whole body crashed into mine, pinning me to the wall, the handrail forcing me to angle my hips toward his as he growled, “Can I fuck you, Ava? Will you let me after all these years?”

He didn't pause long enough to let me answer. His tongue was back in my mouth, destroying every conscious thought. I clung to him. Clawed my hands into his back. Not only would I let him fuck me, but it felt possible that I'd break if he didn't.

The doors dinged open and he grabbed the back of my knees, lifting me up and carrying me out of the elevator, his mouth never leaving mine.

We didn't make it to a bed. We didn't even make it to a couch. The elevator opened directly into the suite and Bruno slammed me against the wall in the tiny foyer. Bruno was like an animal, all guttural sounds and groping hands. His fingers pushed up under my shirt, making contact with my skin and sending shudders of electricity in every direction.

He dropped his mouth to my breasts, nipping and snapping and the T-shirt fabric until I could feel the sharpness of his teeth against my nipples. And then his hands dropped to my waist, grabbing gruffly at the buttons on my jeans and working their way into my pants as he said, "I need to feel you, Ava. I need my fingers in your cunt."

Savagely, he penetrated me with his hand while drawing circles around my clit with his thumb. His touch was rough. It was too much and not enough at the same time. His stroke contained all the rage he'd thrown at me over the years because the nature of his desire was just as aggressive. I liked it. I wanted it. I was hungry for everything raw and uncomfortable he had to offer. His bruising pace felt real. He and I were setting fire to years of darkness, fucking away all the animosity between us.

With each shove of his fingers, I cried out the hard, harsh sounds of my release building.

He egged me on. "That's it, Ava."

"Take what you need, baby."

"Come all over my fingers."

"Soak them."

It was like I had a need to actually devour him, to pull him inside of me and keep him there. I lifted my leg, wrapping it around his waist so that he could push deeper, and when he did, everything inside me started to tighten and spool.

“Yes, do it, Ava. Do it now. Come for me. Come so hard you see stars.”

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BRUNO

I was a ballbuster. I knew it. My friends knew it. Fuck, I'd been in the gossip rags enough that most people on the street knew it. I was cool and sharp. Bullish. The kind of person who'd seen enough to know that money could absolutely buy anything, but it couldn't protect you from getting stung. While I was always trying to find the laughs and the party, sometimes it felt like I poisoned everything around me, like grief hunted me. That unruly bitch lurked in the corners of my mind, twisting and sabotaging all the happy moments.

But not this moment.

Ava didn't make me pretend. She didn't flinch at the anger that was just below the surface of my joy. She swallowed it whole. She took every callous kernel that rose up and transformed it into pleasure. And I was hard on her. As soon as my lips made contact with hers, I felt wild. Something about Ava set the most bloodthirsty version of me aflame.

Maybe it was because my desire for her was wrapped in the disrespect I saw whenever my parents looked at me—or maybe it was because she was the keeper of my secrets, my sorrows. It didn't really matter. I literally wanted to push her to the brink. I wanted her stripped bare. I wanted her so unhinged

that she forgot to pretend to be civilized. I wanted her carnal and lustful and absolutely mystified.

Because touching her wrecked me.

So, I pushed. I took and grabbed what I needed. I clawed and probed her pussy until she fucking buckled, roaring my name. Then, with her cum all over my fingers, I picked up her shaking body and carried her to my bed, setting her down on the crisp white sheets. I let my eyes roam all over the woman who had haunted my dreams since I was a kid.

“Bruno,” she whimpered. “Please, fuck me.”

“I will, when I’m good and ready,” I said, dragging a fingertip from her wrist, up past the crease of her arm, over her shoulder, and across her collarbone. In response, she bowed, her chest rising. As my eyes roamed the landscape of her curves, the words “so beautiful” dripped from my lips and they were beyond true.

She lifted her hips, shimmying out of her jeans and pushing them and her socks and shoes off. The garments slipped to the floor at the end of the bed, leaving her naked thighs to peruse. Aching with need, she squirmed. Pressing her legs together, she shifted, rolling from hip to hip, dragging one bare red-toenailed foot up the edge of her ankle, bending her knee, turning so that the roundness of her ass was inches from my palm.

“Please, Bruno?” she begged.

I’d never seen her in her panties before. I’d never seen the color of her nipples or the fullness of her breasts. I’d never seen her wanton, hungry, and wet. I wanted it all and I wanted to savor it.

“Take off your shirt,” I commanded, my voice low.

She shifted, gripping the hem and pulling it over her head, only breaking eye contact with me when the fabric was in the way. Then, without my asking, she removed her bra and her breasts broke free, revealing her nipples, little latte-colored peaks of pebbled need. I took a step toward her, reached for her mouth, and pushed two fingers past her lips, looking to wet them with her tongue. She sucked them inside, pumping her hips up at the same time.

“Fuck.” My cock jumped, straining uncomfortably behind my zipper.

Releasing my fingers with a pop, she begged again, “Please.”

I slowly drew an invisible line of wetness down her chin, past the divot in her neck to one nipple, and circled the tip of my finger gently around her areola. She whimpered and flinched for me. Standing off to the side of the bed, I pulled my T-shirt over my head. Slowly, I ran my hand from her ankle, over her calf, to the inside of her knee, and then up the slope of her thigh, until I was fingering the elastic just inches from her core. The fabric was soft, but I knew that the skin beneath was softer.

“Show me,” I said, hoarse. She lifted her hips a second time, and I grabbed her panties on either side, pulling and shifting down until I was standing between her feet at the end of the bed and dropping them into the little pile of her things.

“Show me,” I said again. She bit her lip and then slid her legs up so that the pads of her feet were flat on the bed, and then she dropped her knees open.

“Yes. Wider.” I groaned, reaching down to free my throbbing cock from the fabric of my jeans. When she was spread wide, shiny and open, her pretty pink lips called to me

like the flower calls the bee. Crawling between her knees, I slid my palms under her ass and lifted her pussy to my mouth. Her legs shook in my hands.

“Just a tiny taste,” I said, looking up past her abs and her panting breaths to her parted mouth.

There was mischief in her eyes when she breathed, “Unfair.”

I snickered. “How so?”

“I want you,” she whined. “I want to touch you, to feel you, to lick you.”

My cock throbbed, picturing her on her knees, those pretty fat lips of hers, wet and O-shaped, drawing me into her throat. “Mmmm,” I groaned, dipping my head and breathing in the musky scent of her sex.

“You will,” I assured her. “Once I’ve had my fill.” Then I took my rightful place, face between her thighs, and sucked her swelling bud. Ava bucked off the bed, crying out. I teased and taunted, licking her up and down, thrusting my fingers inside her, nibbling at her clit. I lost myself in the rhythm of playing with her, my cock growing unbearably hard as I made love to her with my tongue. Again, she came for me, mewling and purring with her thighs wrapped around my face.

While she was still shaking, swollen and pulsing, I pushed my cock inside.

Her eyes snapped open. And she hissed, “Yes, fuck. Yes.” As if she was still in the throws of her orgasm, her pussy gripped my cock, pulling me inside her, deep and hard. The pressure was immediate and so intense that my vision blurred around the edges. In my life, I’d been with a lot of women. I

was not a saint. I had my fair share of naughty nights and literally, no one compared.

I was never going to get enough of Ava.

Never.

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AVA

As far as work went, after the night Bruno and I found Eddy, we entered the eye of a hurricane. Everything that seemed tumultuous and chaotic became calm. The storm continued to wage all around us but as a team, we floated above the fray. To be clear, as far as the outside world could see, that's what Bruno and I were, a very professional, organized team.

We began each day with a morning meeting. Bruno would come to my office first thing in the morning to discuss his daily objectives. It was always the same. I would hear him say good morning to Lorelai, and then my door would open and before it was fully closed, he'd say, "Just want to run the day by you before I get started."

We began the ritual of our morning meetings after we returned from California. This very visible structure to the day gave the office the impression that the dynamic between us had grown copacetic. The scuttlebutt was that Bruno was no longer hiding on the fourth floor because he had accepted the role given to me by his parents and was working hard to prove his worth to LSA. The gossip about our rivalry quieted and both the board members and LSA's client list seemed to buy into the idea that maybe the ship was righted and Bruno and I could run LSA together. There was also newfound energy

buzzing in the atmosphere. As word got around about the three singles in four months, many of LSA's employees had become invested in seeing Bruno succeed.

And while I loved that our "morning meetings" were giving off the impression that we were very professional, planning and plotting together, I didn't actually spend a lot of time thinking about what Bruno was saying to me at eight a.m., because while he might mention something like, "Sam and Delilah are in studio four all day today with Josh" or "Meredith is taking Eddy to Rogue Music to get a new guitar" or "Marcus wants to meet with you to discuss marketing strategies," he also had me bent over the soundboard in the little studio, clenched and coming, so the things I remembered him saying were a lot more tawdry, like "Fuck, Ava, I want to die inside this pussy" and "Be a good girl and get on your knees."

Every morning. Every single morning for two months.

It was incredible. I couldn't be within ten feet of him without feeling slick between my legs. All I thought about was being with him, touching him, teasing him, irritating him. The girl I knew myself to be, the one who worked night and day and was focused on being the best, she was missing in action. Bruno would come into my office to discuss something serious and I would get lost thinking about what it felt like when he pressed his fingers into the flesh at my hip or how I could come just from taking his cock in my mouth.

Still, somehow everything was getting done. Bruno was right. His people were talented. Very talented. We were past the two-month mark and so far, so good. Sam and Delilah were in the studio recording, mostly with Eric. They basically had an entire album in the can, maybe two. Twenty years of

singing and writing with no one listening didn't stop Sam from being prolific. Bruno spent hours listening to songs Sam had written, hunting for his comeback song and they'd settled on something called, "Ribs and Roller Skates," which sounded ridiculous to me. But Bruno kept calling it a ditty and saying, "You'll see, this is the one they'll be humming in the shower and singing in their cars."

Eddy also came packaged with songs ready and raring to go, but her situation was more complicated. She needed coaching and legally, we had temporary custody of her while she was seeking emancipation. We had done everything we could to make sure she had good, unbiased legal representation. But there was no denying that the circumstances were sticky and rife with the potential for perceived impropriety.

At the moment, we were letting her record without a contract. Of course, that was an industry no-no; it left us unprotected. But if we were going to get her single out in the time frame we'd given the board, then there was no choice. So, she was trusting us and we were trusting her. I tried to push it to the back of my mind that she was a kid, and kids make messes and mistakes in ways adults usually don't. Some mornings, after Bruno left my office, I had to take deep breaths and remind myself that there was no use worrying about it, but it never worked. And I wound up calling Harry Richards, head of our legal team, at least once a day to ask if there was any forward momentum on her emancipation. He always answered the call with the same lament, *Nothing to report*.

Bruno kept assuring me that Eddy would be eighteen just before his four-month time limit so worst case, we would release her song on her eighteenth birthday. His optimism was

to be commended, but that would only give us a week to make her song popular, which seemed impossible. Still, Bruno assured me. “Marcus says a week is more than enough time.”

Despite my stress and anxiety, I found that mostly, I was happy, a smiling, glowing doofus, drifting through meetings, smiling at strangers, laughing on phone calls, and counting the minutes until I found myself back in Bruno’s airspace. I was in love. It was that simple. And love makes people stupid. It makes you blind. It makes you forget that even though everything seems clear and calm in the eye of the storm—the storm is still coming, pushing and punching hard and fast at your back, making sure you don’t even have time to consider what’s about to hit you.

So when the storm hit, I wasn’t prepared.

It was a manic day. At first, perfect and then terrible. Two weeks earlier, a recording of one of James’s songs was leaked. As far as I was concerned the leak was Marcus. It was clearly an inside job, footage from the fourth-floor studio taped on a cell phone. Could it have been a janitor or a food delivery dude? Sure. Did I think it was? Absolutely not. The footage went viral quickly, picked up by gossip rags, desperate to know what was happening inside the world of LSA Records. With the viral leak came tons of legit press and by the time James’s actual single was released, people were lined up to buy it.

So on the day the storm hit, a Tuesday, Bruno came barreling up to my office around eleven a.m. I heard him outside the door throwing his greeting. “Lorelai.”

In my mind’s eye, I could see the little tip of his head he gave her. His voice was high and filled with glee. And just the spark of knowing that he was happy about something made me

bite my lip. He came barreling in without pausing, quickly shutting and locking the door behind him. Then, facing me, he grinned, “One down, two to go.”

Casually standing there in black jeans and a black T-shirt, his sleeves pulled tight across his biceps, strands of his chocolate hair slipped free from the elastic he’d haphazardly tied them back with. He smiled at me and the glee took over his whole face. The ugly dark chip he’d carried on his shoulder for as long as I’d known him was nowhere to be seen. He just radiated joy.

“Did you hear me?” he asked, tucking a strand behind his ear. “We have our first chart-topper, Aves.”

I was excited. But more than that, I was painfully aware that I fucking loved him. I loved him so much that it was bursting out of my skin, and without meaning to, that’s what I said, “I love you.”

Instinctually, he grumbled a little laugh, and then he said, “Wait, what?”

I got up from behind my desk and crossed the room so I was standing in front of him. I kept my hands by my sides, trying not to give in to how incredibly vulnerable and exposed I felt. And I said it again. “I love you.”

His face contorted, flashing annoyance and pain or maybe anger, and then Bruno kissed me. He grabbed me and pulled me into his arms, kissing me hard and fast, desperately. With a shove, he backed me up against my desk and started hiking up my skirt. Nothing about his behavior was soft or gentle but he wasn’t cruel. He was frenetic, pulling and pressing. While still groping at me, he unbuckled his belt and his pants, freeing his dick. Forcefully, he pushed and tore, until my bare ass was on my desk, my legs were split, and his thick, hard cock head was

waiting at my core, perched and ready to bury deep inside me. Only then did he speak.

“Say it again.” He grinned.

I couldn't catch my breath. My chest shook. I was trapped somewhere between fear and ecstasy.

He growled at me, “Say. It. Again.”

My lip trembled. He leaned forward, pinching it between his teeth and bit down, causing a tiny shiver of pain. Gently, he sucked where he had just bitten and then reaching down, he gripped his cock and probed the tip at the opening of my pussy, playing in the slickness there. He tried to be gentler when he said, “Please, Ava, tell me again.”

I couldn't understand what he was doing, but I gave him what he needed. “I love you.” The words were softer this time, almost a whisper, laden with my utter compliance.

As soon as I said them, he pushed his cock inside me, driving all the way in until I rocked against his pubic bone. My body opened for him, unable to refuse the pleasure our connection brought. He pulled back, slamming into me a second, third, and fourth time as he smiled and said, “Fuck you, beautiful Ava. Fuck you for always winning. Fuck you for being braver and stronger and more capable. Fuck you for being everything I want, always. Fuck you for saying you love me when I should be saying it to you.”

He loved me. We weren't just fucking. We weren't just lusty. We were in love.

He shifted his hands, grabbing my hips, his fingers pressing into the fleshy cheeks of my ass as he pulled me flush against him.

“This is where you belong. Do you understand?” he asked.

I started to give in, to nod, bowing my hips against him, chasing the pleasure he brought, but it wasn't right. I clenched around his cock, tightening every muscle in my body, and fought back. I wanted him to know everything between us was mutual. "No."

"No?" he questioned, stilling our bodies.

"This is where you belong," I whimpered, still desperate for his motion but unwilling to leave it unbalanced. It was time for Bruno to stop saving me. I wanted us to save each other.

He dropped my hips and brought his hands to cradle my face. "I know, baby," he said reverently.

I couldn't help myself, and I said it again. "I love you."

Everything about him softened, and looking in my eyes, he cooed, "Fuck, Ava, I love you too. Always."

Everything shifted then, the rough and ugly rhythm we shared often dissipated, and we made love for the first time, rocking gently against each other in a way that felt utterly unfamiliar. We kissed and coddled, our mouths like drifting clouds. Everything about the way we touched felt slow and languid but alive with sensation. Normally when I came I turned inward. I closed my eyes, got lost in the cosmos of my own sensation, but this was different. This time I looked at Bruno. I held his gaze and felt his pleasure rising with my own. I let myself feel the vulnerability of being open to him, letting him see me utterly out of control and on the brink. We stared into each other's eyes and we came, and the rush was like coming for the first time.

It was only when it was over that I realized what we'd done. For sure the whole office heard us. We hadn't even tried to conceal the sounds of our lovemaking. Bruno was still

collapsed on my chest in a state of postcoital bliss when the panic started bubbling in my belly like acid. And then both our phones started ringing and I knew. We weren't going to keep the peace we'd found. The eye had passed and the storm had returned stronger than ever.

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BRUNO

I leaned back in my chair at the board table. I couldn't stop smirking. Smirk. Smirk. Smirk. Smirk. Ava was sitting across the table from me looking peaked. She'd been freaking out since we got the call that LSA's board of directors wanted an immediate emergency meeting. But I wasn't worried. And honestly, I thought maybe she was just straight-up embarrassed because there was no way we were hiding how we felt about each other after what had just happened in her office. People knew now. For sure. As far as I was concerned, she was always too worried about the appearance of propriety. One by one the board members appeared either via Zoom or around the table and I continued to smirk. Smirk. Smirk. Smirk. Smirk. It was a good day. My team had worked their magic and Ava was mine. I couldn't think of anything that could dampen my high.

I was pretty sure not even fucking Charlie Albrecht with his pretentious ascot and the pompous way he clenched teeth when he spoke could get to me, until he took the seat next to Ava and said, "I called this meeting today because I believe the board needs to discuss improprieties of Bruno Difranto, our current CEO and Ava Childs, our current COO."

Across the table from me, Ava's eyelids closed slowly and she took a deep breath. I knew she was immediately lost to the belief that we were doing something wrong, that somehow the fact that we'd given in to the feelings we'd always had made us incapable of doing our jobs. But unlike her, I wasn't quick to resign myself to Albrecht's perspective.

"Oh fun," I quipped. "Do we also get to talk about what a toolbag you are, Charles, or is this just a shit on Bruno and Ava party?"

Ava's nostrils flared and she subtly shook her head at me. The silent message was *stop it*. Sorry, love. No can do.

As usual, Albrecht ignored me, moving instead to present evidence by opening his computer. Suddenly, projected on the screen at the end of the board table was an image of Ava and me kissing in the elevator in the Waldorf Astoria. "Those of you who are not here in person will find that this information has been emailed to you—and as you can see, it appears that Ms. Childs and Mr. DiFranco are having an affair."

The image was telling. No use in denying it. Cocky, I asked, "So?"

Albrecht turned to me, condescending as always, and with utter malice dripping from his words, he said, "Well, considering the board has expected Ms. Childs to serve as warden to your irresponsible tendencies, a sexual affair of this nature makes her incapable of supervising your waywardness."

"Does it, Charles?" I snarked. "I don't know if you heard, but this morning, James Baker's name is on the Billboard charts. I am on target to meet the goal the board set for me."

"Recklessly," Charles stated matter-of-factly.

“What the fuck does that mean? Recklessly?” I snapped.

Turning back to his evidence, Charles brought up an image of Sam Tucker and Delilah and said, “As many of you know, Mr. Difrancio has unearthed Sam Tucker.”

I looked around the room and caught a smattering of smiles. As I expected, the board was pleased with the resurgence of Sam, so I wasn’t sure where Albrecht was going with this nonsense.

“Despite his rebellious attitude, Mr. Tucker has an ironclad contract with LSA, and I will concede that finding him and enticing him to record again was a decent idea. However, the lynchpin in Mr. Tucker’s return was that he wanted to make a record with his daughter, a talent on her own.”

Fuck. I bit the inside of my cheek. I saw where Albrecht was headed—obviously he was going after the choice to offer Delilah a limited contract. “Ms. Child’s consented to having Delilah Tucker sign a contract, which only ties her to LSA for the record that she is currently recording with her father. Clearly, this contract favors elevating the board’s perception of Mr. Difrancio more than the long-term success of LSA Records.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Oh Jesus. Fuck you, Charlie. Ava consented to that deal because it was the best way to build faith with the Tuckers, considering the way they were treated by my parents. Once Delilah sees how Ava and I run LSA, she’ll sign with us. I’m sure of it.”

“Once a gambler...” Charlie shrugged, playing innocent to the board members.

“That doesn’t even make sense. I’m not a gambler.”

Charlie looked back at his computer, but under his breath, he mumbled, “No, of course not. Just a drug runner.”

“You’re a twat,” I snapped.

His eyes snapped back to me, and as clear as day, I could see the poison lurking in them when he said, “Do tell us, Mr. Difrancio, about the underage runaway who is currently recording without a contract?”

Ava put her hand over her eyes. Sure, it looked bad. But so what. So, fucking what? I hated that these motherfuckers were making her feel like we weren’t doing everything right. I hated that they were making her feel like our love was a problem. So what if I fucked, Ava? So what if she came all over my dick whenever I wanted her to? Why did that matter? I would have made the same decisions about the Tuckers and Eddy and Ava would have too. She was with me long before we started fucking, and she would be with me no matter what happened at LSA Records because she was mine. She was always mine. And the choices we made were the best ones. LSA was our company. It was in our blood. And this shitbag didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.

I stood, and pointing at Ava, I said, “You—” She removed her hand to see who I was talking to and was startled to find me pointing at her. “Fucking stop it. You and I both know that the decisions you made were sound. You do your job better than anyone else. Don’t absorb this douchebag’s bullshit.” I couldn’t tell if I was getting through because she just stared at me blankly.

On fire, I turned and snarled at Charlie, “Say whatever you like, Albrecht. Accuse us of anything you want. I don’t give a flying fuck. I know I’m what’s best for LSA Records. And I’m

proving it. So if you don't like my choices, sell your fucking shares and get out. I'll be happy to buy them."

Albrecht gave me his devil grin. "That's not exactly how this works, Bruno. We are the board of directors of LSA. If you don't meet our expectations as CEO, we can fire you."

I slammed my hand against the table. "The fuck you will."

Albrecht jumped back as if I was going to dive across the table and slap his stupid grin off his face. But I wasn't. Instead, I looked to Ava. She was close to tears. Goddammit. I had to cool down. Backing out of the room, I said, "If you're stupid enough to do that—I promise, LSA will be out of business before you even put out one record worth my spit."

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AVA

Once Bruno was gone, Charlie put his hand to his chest and gasped, “My God, he absolutely cannot control himself. He really is a monster, isn’t he?”

I watched him look around the room, seeking confirmation. He wanted to know that his theatrics were having the desired effect and they were. Many of the board members were twisting in their seats, wondering about their investments. For the first time in my life, my actions were literally the issue. I suggested Delilah’s limited contract and I made sure Eddy could travel with us from LA. I didn’t know what to do to fix it. All I felt was shame. I let my own desire trump protecting Bruno. And I wasn’t sure how to roll that back.

Smiling, Charlie said, “I don’t know how everyone here feels, but I think we should vote now. Why wait till Difrancio gets us caught up in some scandal or a lawsuit before we dethrone him?”

Projected on the wall and booming through the speakers, an irritated Andrew Warner snapped, “Oh, shut up, Charles. You can’t take a man’s company from him just because you don’t like him or the risks he takes. He has to actually screw

up first.” My racing heart started to slow. Andrew was on my side. He had been from the start. He wanted Bruno to succeed.

Affronted, Charlie snarled, “He has screwed up. Didn’t you see the evidence I presented?”

Andrew retorted, “He also produced a chart-topping single today and while some of you may find it distasteful, people fuck in rock and roll, Charlie.” There were some snickers from the peanut gallery before Andrew continued. “Personally, I’d like to hear from Ms. Childs. I want to know her thoughts on the situation and see if she has a proposal that will allow us board members to feel comfortable with what’s happening at LSA.”

Charlie harrumphed, dropping into the seat next to me and rolling his eyes as he said, “Yes, Ms. Childs, do tell us why you’re banging the coworker you’re meant to be supervising?”

I stood, taking my time and smoothing down my skirt with my hands. “There’s no excuse,” I said. “Sleeping together wasn’t the best choice on my part or Bruno’s.”

“Clearly,” Charlie snarked.

“But I stand by Bruno’s decisions for LSA,” I argued. “What he said was true. The Tuckers needed a show of good faith. And honestly, Eddy is so talented that she’s worth the risk involved.”

“Are you honestly implying that your personal relationship with Mr. Difranco had no influence on you supporting his risky behaviors?” Charlie asked incredulously.

It didn’t. I trusted Bruno’s choices even when I thought he’d despise me for the rest of our lives. I’d always known he was capable of running LSA Records. Always. I genuinely believed that the Difrancos put me in charge of him just so he

could learn to trust himself. Bruno could run LSA without me. I was sure of it.

Suddenly, I could see the plan. The route out of the situation we were in. All I had to do was forgo everything I'd ever worked for. It was actually kind of beautiful; he and I had finally come full circle. If I sacrificed myself for Bruno, he would succeed, just like I had all those years ago, when he sacrificed himself for me. It should have felt hard, but it didn't. I took a deep breath, and then smiling, I said, "Bruno is unconventional, but he's the best. LSA matters to me. It's all I've known in my life and I'm willing to bet it all on Bruno because he is what's best for this company."

Andrew questioned me. "What do you mean?"

"If Bruno doesn't do as he promised—come up with two more singles in the next month—then I'll sell my twenty-six percent stake in the company to the board, leaving Bruno with a twenty-five percent stake. He'll still be one of the largest shareholders but not by much, giving you the power to either oust him or control him, although I doubt he'll stick around to be controlled." Andrew snickered at my honest perception of Bruno's character. "However, if Bruno succeeds, I will give him my full twenty-six percent and the majority stake in LSA Records."

Charlie started to cackle. "Oh, this is rich. You are smart enough to realize that this scenario of yours is lose-lose for you, right?"

Wearing the kind of smirk that Bruno favored most of the time, I turned to him and said, "I do and delightfully, that means I'll never have to lay eyes on you or swallow back the vomit you elicit anytime you come near me."

Charlie paled.

Grinning, Andrew moved past my scathing comment, noting, “I’m not going to lie; this is an odd offer, Ava.” He didn’t usually refer to me by my first name and I knew it was because he felt concerned for me. “I am not exactly sure what the board gains by losing you as a member.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I explained myself. “I’m going to step down. I’ll take the hit for all of our impropriety and Bruno will still get it done. He doesn’t need my supervision. He never did. His vision for this company is going to make you all richer.”

Clarifying my point, Andrew said, “So you’re saying that time and success without your supervision should prove to the members of this board that Mr. Difrancio is the man to captain this ship.”

I nodded.

Andrew scratched his chin and then shook his head. “No, that’s not exactly how it’s going to go down. Despite your proclivity for your bad boy boss”—he smiled at his own joke—“many of us have faith in your ability to run the day-to-day operations at LSA Records.” Heads around the table bobbed, confirming his point. “So I propose this. We’ll take your bet, Ms. Childs, in writing—you can wager your share of LSA Records to prove your faith in Mr. Difrancio, but you will not step down as COO. Instead, you will end your affair and relieve yourself from working on the projects that fall under Mr. Difrancio’s purview so as to avoid further impropriety. As you’ve pointed out, this will prove that Bruno can manage his chart-topping miracle on his own.”

My stomach flipped. The thought of walking away from Bruno made me want to shrivel up and die, but I wouldn’t let him lose his parents’ company because of me.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. “Vote if you have to or just go ahead and draw up the papers. I’ll sign them, as long as you consent to one more term.”

“Okay...” Andrew said hesitantly.

“Our deal must be confidential. No one outside of this room can know, especially not Bruno.”



ONCE I’D SIGNED the paperwork, I went home. I poured myself a glass of wine. I sipped it until it was empty, and then I poured myself another and another. When I was good and plastered, I sent Bruno a text.

I CAN’T WORK with you or date you anymore. Good luck. I know you can do it!

THERE WAS nothing about the words that felt right. Breaking up with him was nothing I wanted, and I hated exclamation points, but drunk me couldn’t think of any way to imply how deeply I believed in him and how much I wanted to encourage his success, so I sent a stupid detached exclamation point. I didn’t wait for him to reply. I turned off my phone and went to bed.

Despite my anxiety, the wine lulled me to sleep, so I wasn’t sure how much time passed between my text and Bruno banging at the door to my apartment. It felt like minutes, but it was more likely hours.

From the comfort of my pillow, I heard him yelling, “Open the goddamn door, Ava.”

Moving from drowsy to alert in a matter of seconds, I scurried through my living room. He was still banging when I unlatched the chain lock and threw open the door.

“Shhhhhh,” I whisper-yelled with my pointer finger pressed to my lips. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’re going to wake my neighbors.”

“Who cares?” he stormed, stomping inside without waiting to be invited. It was the first time he’d been in my home. It was the same apartment the Difrancos’ bought for me to live in when I was a teenager, a twelve-hundred-square-foot one-bedroom on the Lower East Side. At the time, I knew it was nothing like their lavish life, but for me it was a palace and it was close enough to work. All these years later, it remained my favorite place in the world. Momentarily thrown off his game, Bruno said, “This is where you live?”

I nodded. And he marched around, looking in the bedroom and the bathroom.

“Why?” he asked. “What is your salary?”

“I make good money.” I sighed. “I just don’t need more than this.”

Seemingly flabbergasted by my home, he poked around a bit more, touching my things and sniffing about, like my life had become an utter curiosity, and then suddenly he seemed to remember that he’d arrived with a purpose.

“Did you break up with me in a text?” He hurled the question at me as an accusation.

“Were we dating?” I asked, trying to be cheeky.

He didn't laugh. "I'm gonna try that again. Ready?"

I nodded, feeling everything inside me start to crumble.

"Did you tell me you love me today and then a handful of hours later, break up with me in a text?" He sounded eerily calm, and he kept opening and closing his fist like his knuckles were aching.

"No," I said, even though I did.

"But you can't date me or work with me anymore."

"Right." I choked on the word.

Frustrated, he snarled, "How is that not breaking up with me, Ava?"

"For now," I said. "I can't do any of those things now." I'd fallen asleep in the clothes I wore to work. Cool air whistled from a window that needed to be resealed, hitting my legs, awakening my skin and reminding me how his touch made me quiver. I wanted to run across the room and press my lips to his.

"Why not?" he asked with his brows furrowed.

"Because I can't." I could see his anger ricocheting up notch by notch.

"Just can't. That's what you're going with." I wanted him. I loved him. But he had to realize that us being together could cost him everything.

"It's not appropriate now," I pleaded.

He threw his arms in the air. "Who fucking cares? We are the top of the heap, Ava. Our reputations don't matter."

That wasn't really true. His reputation might be able to take the hit, but mine would never recover. I didn't care about

that but as a force of habit, I said, “Mine does.”

His face fell. And as if I’d punched him, he muttered, “Right, how did I forget?”

I wasn’t exactly sure why those words hit him so hard. I took a step toward him and he took a step back. Putting his hands up, he said, “I give up. I have enough to worry about right now. I don’t need to fight for something you don’t give a shit about.”

Before I knew what was happening, he pushed past me, walked out, slammed the door, and he was gone.

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BRUNO

I became a machine. I filled every minute with work. Nothing was beneath me. I accompanied my artists to interviews. I called radio stations myself or popped in on DJs to talk up my clients. I helped roadies do sound checks at pop-up venues in the city. I went live on TikTok with Sam and Delilah. I took Eddy to court the day she became emancipated and made sure she signed a contract moments later. I spent the last month of my trial as LSA's CEO consumed by the job.

I had another five days in my four-month timeline, but it was Monday night so my last chance to make the Billboard charts was the following morning. I had two hits. In addition to James's first single, Sam and Delilah hit the music world with a bang, as expected. Eddy had been the sticking point. Because of the issues with her age, we weren't able to promote or release her single until a week ago. She was definitely going viral, but I wasn't sure her success would slide in under my deadline. The bigger problem was, I wasn't sure I cared about any of it. No amount of work could help me escape what it felt like to lose Ava.

And I couldn't bring myself to do anything about it, so I just worked, and then on my way out late each night, I walked past her closed office door, wondering if she was hiding

inside. She had made herself scarce. She managed all the details of the office that I had no interest in, but there was no sign of her in my space. Since I'd stormed out of her apartment, I only seen her from a distance. If I was coming, she was leaving. She wouldn't even take meetings with my friends. She built a giant wall between our two worlds and went on like we'd never worked together, like I hadn't served her my heart on a platter, complete with knife and fork.

Tonight felt different. Haggard from the breakback pace I'd prescribed myself, I left the office at around nine p.m. I could have called a car, but I decided to walk. I milled through the throngs of New Yorkers rushing their way to things like dinner reservations or second jobs and wondered if I was meant to run my parents' company.

I remember being a teenager home from boarding school and fighting with my father. I came home for three days because he and I were supposed to go to some stupid hockey game. He bought the tickets and asked me if I wanted to go with him. I didn't give a shit about hockey, but he rarely made time for me, so I said yes. I was just happy to do something with him. An hour before we were supposed to go, he got a call—something came up at work. I didn't mind, did I? Oh, I minded. I went nuts. I made all kinds of accusations, called him a fucking shitty father, and told him LSA Records was always more important to him than I was. He tried to argue that wasn't true, and then he said, "One day when you run this company, you'll realize the immense pressure and dedication required."

"I will never run your fucking company," I'd screamed.

There were many years in my life when I thought I was going to open my own label. I wanted to show them that I

could do what they did and do it better. I never had any intention of working for them. I would have hated working for them. And then they died.

And they didn't even leave me their company. Even in death they didn't trust me to be mature enough to do what they did, and I was. I always had been. Ava didn't treat me like they did. They made her my warden, but she gave me free rein from day one. But I didn't see it that way. My parents' will made me incensed, still I was trying to prove to them and the world that I was what LSA always needed. But maybe I wasn't. Maybe I needed something that was mine. Something I could foster and nurture on my own. Some place where there wouldn't always be shitheads like Charlie Albrecht reminding me that the world saw me as incapable, just like my parents had.

That wouldn't be so easy though. I had let all my people, my found family, sign contracts with LSA. Walking away meant leaving them there. I knew Ava would look after them—but in the end, she would always choose the company and her reputation over their personal needs—she was just built that way.

Forlorn, I pushed through the door to the apartment building I lived in—the building my parents had lived in—and rode the elevator to the top floor. The doors opened into my parents' foyer. Everything about the house still felt like it belonged to them, and for the first time since they died, I wondered why I hadn't made it my own.

I could hear my gang moving about the kitchen, making food. They were eating dinner late and it occurred to me that they had waited. In the back pocket of my jeans, my phone rang. I dropped my wallet and keys in the bowl on the foyer

table and pulled the phone out to look at the screen. It said Andrew Warner. For a second, I considered not answering. I just wanted to take off my coat and go into the other room and let my friends feed and comfort me.

But that wasn't the job, and no matter if I wasn't sure whether running LSA Records was for me or not, at the moment, I was committed. Swiping the bar on the screen, I brought the phone to my ear as I shimmied out of my coat.

"Andrew," I said as hello.

"Big night, kid," he replied. "Think you have it in the bag?"

"We'll see in the morning." I was calm. I wanted to win, but if I didn't, I'd survive. Thinking he was just calling out of kindness, I said, "Listen, I'm just walking in the door and I smell dinner on the table. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Nope." His tone was serious. "Sorry, this has to be tonight."

"Shit." I sighed. "What now?"

He was somehow strong and soft when he said, "I don't care about tomorrow, Bruno. LSA is your company. I will fight for that, no matter what happens."

And just like that, I wanted LSA. I wanted it because it was my parents' and even though they didn't see how good I was or the limitlessness of my potential, I loved them.

I lost it. Tears were running down my face and my voice was shaking when I whimpered, "Fuck. Goddammit. I can't believe they're gone."

Andrew, who had lost his wife and child many years ago, said, "I hate it too. They were my friends." I slid down to the

floor, pressing my back against the wall behind me, and kept crying like a baby. The clamoring in the kitchen went silent. And I heard the movement of the people who stood by me rushing to see what was wrong. But in my ear, Andrew said, “Listen, Bruno, there’s something you need to know.” I held my hand up, keeping my people at bay as Andrew said, “Ava has signed away her shares of LSA.”

My brow furrowed. I didn’t really understand what he was telling me. Ava lived and died for LSA; there was no way she gave up her stake in the company. “To who?” I asked through the fog of my disbelief.

Meredith sat down next to me on the floor and the others followed suit, circling around me, waiting patiently for me to get off the phone.

With a sarcastic laugh, Andrew said, “I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

“What?” I continued to be confused.

“She bet her shares on your success. If you don’t get your chart-topper, her twenty-six percent divides evenly among the board, and if you do, all twenty-six shares go to you, making you the primary shareholder.”

“What? Why?” I felt baffled. How was that possible? LSA was all that mattered to Ava. “Wait, when?”

“Last month, after you walked out of the board meeting,” he said matter-of-factly. “She argued that you were the best thing for LSA Records and she was willing to bet her stake on it. She even offered to step down completely, but everyone knows she’s great at her job so we just made her draw a line in the sand between your work and hers and obviously you two had to stop fucking...”

Fire burned in my chest. She gave it all up for me. She gambled her dreams on me. She sacrificed everything for me. Andrew was still talking. "...I think after tomorrow she might try to resign. You need to talk to her about it."

I snapped, "What the fuck is wrong with you people?"

On the other end, Andrew was startled. "I'm sorry?"

"This is her life you fucked with. Not my company. I love her, Andrew. She loves me. And you fuckers in your suits, you made her choose between saving me and loving me."

On the other end, Andrew was silent.

Meredith slipped her hand down and threaded her fingers through mine as she whispered, "We can fix it."

James, Josh, and Eric we're bobbing their heads like idiots.

"We got this bish," Kelly winked.

And Marcus, he was already tapping at his phone.

Clearing his throat, Andrew asked, "You loved each other?"

I laughed at him. "She gave up her stake in the company for me. Doesn't that sound like love to you?"

"Well, fuck, kid," Andrew said. "If you can't fix it, I will."

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AVA

One hour. I paced back and forth in front of my desk. One hour till they released the Billboard charts for the week. I literally didn't know what to do with myself. I'd been so irresponsible. I'd risked his entire future on my belief that he could make it happen and there were so many factors. I knew he was capable. I knew he could run LSA, but this single was a crapshoot.

And if he lost LSA, Bruno was never going to talk to me again. Never. If Eddy's single didn't make the charts, I'd basically given the company to the likes of Albrecht. I was such an idiot. I missed Bruno so much. I was dying without him. I wanted to call him and confess every day, but I couldn't. He had to do it all without me. We needed the appearance of proprietary. So I suffered, I couldn't get a good night's sleep. I didn't care about anything at work. The whole world felt gray. I'd started biting my nails again and I hadn't done that since I was ten.

I had one chance. If Eddy's single made the charts, maybe he'd forgive me. Otherwise, I need to leave. I couldn't spend my life having him hate me like he had for all those years.

So I paced. Knowing that in fifty-eight minutes, I would either have the opportunity to repair my relationship with

Bruno or I'd move to Oregon and bartend in that bar where I'd met Sam and Delilah. I tried to force myself to take deep calming breaths.

Outside my office door, I heard, "Lorelai." It was Bruno.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity fuck.

As she'd been instructed to do for the last month if he came to my door, Lorelai said, "Mr. Difrancio, sir. You can't go in there. She's in a meeting."

"No, she's not." He laughed.

And then Lorelai was calling after him, "Sir, sir..." But she wasn't going to stop him.

The door opened. And there he was, handsome as ever. I wanted to fucking run to him. I wanted to drop to my knees and beg. But there was still fifty-six minutes, so I just stood there staring and hyperventilating.

I could see his friends in the hall behind him, but he shut the door.

He pointed at me and said, "You love me."

I didn't speak. I just nodded yes. Fifty-five minutes.

"You love me more than propriety."

I closed my eyes letting the timbre of his voice caress my eardrums. I needed him. I didn't know what I was going to do if I lost him. I swallowed. God, I just needed to feel his skin, his lips on mine.

"I do," I said softly. "You're all that matters."

He walked toward me as he said, "So, I hear."

Inside my chest, my heart raced. I couldn't hold it in anymore. "I did something terrible."

“You didn’t,” he said, so eerily calm.

“I did.” The tears spilled. I couldn’t stop them. But I stayed tall, staring at his face, trying to memorize it just in case.

He reached me and took my chin in his hand, tilting my head up like he was going to kiss me any second, but first, he said, “You bet on me. Nothing terrible about that. I’m the winning horse.” My mind had a second to realize that he knew everything before we were kissing. But once his lips were on mine there was only sweet oblivion.

He loved me. He forgave me. He wanted me.

When we finally broke apart, he said, “You know, this morning I became the majority shareholder of LSA Records.”

I didn’t understand. “Did they release the charts early?”

He shook his head, “Turns out there were a few board members who felt so strongly that I should run LSA Records that they were willing to sign over some shares to me. They trust that I’ll return them in time, maybe even later today.”

I laughed, still crying. “You worked the system.”

He shrugged. “I learned from the best.” Turning so we were side by side, he draped his arm over my shoulder and said, “Wanna go hang with my peeps while we wait to see who gets your shares of LSA?”

I nodded and we walked toward the door together, but before I opened it, I said, “I’m going to have to resign. I can’t work here if we’re lovers. There will always be talk.”

“Not if we get married,” he said like it was nothing, pulling open the door.

I didn't walk through it. I just stood there dumbfounded. "Are you serious? I asked.

"Dead serious," he said, and then teased, "How else are you going to get your stake in the company back?"

Thinking he was joking, I gave him a little slap on the arm as I walked through the door.

But then I saw them. All of his friends, all of our clients, all our artists. Anyone who had anything to do with LSA was standing outside my office.

I turned back to Bruno and he was down on one knee. He smiled up at me as he said, "I want to fight with you for the rest of our lives. I want to push when you push. I want to pull when you pull. I want the music to be about us. Will you be my partner in all things, Ava Childs? Will you share my life, my bed, and my company with me until we leave this godforsaken place together?"

Chills coursed through my body and the tears flowed again as I said, "Yes. Totally yes."

Behind me a cow bell chimed and Delilah Tucker joyously called out, "Fucking Difrancio and his badass bitch!" And a cacophony of familiar voices echoed her words.

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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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