

W I N N E R
Takes All

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Five Ways to Fall Out of Love

The Year We Fell Apart

W I N N E R

Takes All

A NOVEL

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This one goes out to my group chat.

CHAPTER ONE

ELEANOR

Most musicians I know have a preshow ritual. They drink tea with honey, or they huddle up with their band and say a prayer. Or, in the case of one particularly eccentric indie artist I signed a while back, they scramble an egg on a hot plate backstage and hand-feed it to their bichon frise, Ringo.

For nights like this, I have a ritual of my own. One that involves getting my hair blown out, a single glass of white wine at the hotel bar, and the Louboutin stilettos I splurged on after I negotiated my first major contract at the label. The shoes make me want to saw off my own toes, but they also make my legs look incredible and are therefore perfect for meetings that have me feeling like I'm the one about to step onstage.

I have to sign this band.

Not just because I genuinely love their music and know I can help take them to the next level, but because I am desperate for a win. And Dempsey is a sure bet. They already

have a solid fan base, have proven they can bring money in. Word has spread that they're unhappy with their current label. If I can close them, it will make up for every underperforming EP and personal failure of the past year.

I drain the last sip of my wine and put a tip down on the bar, then make my way outside to where my Uber driver is waiting. As he pulls away from my hotel and onto the Strip, I pop my earbuds in. Ninety percent of the time I'm listening to new music, demos my reps send me or unmastered tracks from an artist already on my roster. But right now I find my favorite playlist, full of familiar songs that demand I think only about what I was doing, what I was feeling, the first time I heard them. Songs that drive out every other thought in my head within a few beats. Which is what I need—a distraction. No irritating little voice reminding me I already had a chance to sign this band five years ago and failed.

Barely three songs later, we're pulling up to the posh steak house where I'm having dinner with Dempsey.

"Thank you," I say as I reach for the door.

"Have a good night, ma'am."

Ma'am. I pause and glance down at my outfit—a black leather pencil skirt and cream silk blouse. Is it giving ma'am energy? That is . . . less than ideal. It's too late to go back and change my clothes at this point, so I choose to believe he addresses every woman over the age of twenty that way.

"You too." One last deep breath, and I'm out of the car, heading toward the ornate double doors. I rub a finger over my front teeth in case of any rogue lipstick and smooth a hand over my hair.

Inside, my heels click against the marble tiles as I approach the hostess stand to give my name. The entrance is

lavishly decorated with metallic wallpaper and gold leaf trim. Ostentatious, like the rest of Las Vegas. Before I have a chance to take it all in, I'm being led to a large curved booth along the edge of the dining room.

The two Dempsey siblings and their two bandmates are all seated on the crimson velvet upholstered booth, while their manager sits on one of the matching armchairs tucked in across the table.

"Hey, everyone," I say when I reach them, and Freddie Dempsey stands up first to give me the handshake/bro-hug combo that never gets any less awkward, no matter how many guys greet me that way. I work my way down the line, exchanging handshakes and air-kisses with Freddie's sister Sheridan and the band's manager, Fiona. Curtis Kennedy and Ralph Winters—drummer and bassist, respectively—are trapped in the middle of the booth, so I settle for over-the-table handshakes before finally taking a seat in the armchair next to Fiona's.

A server comes by to take my drink order—another glass of white wine, which I plan to nurse until this dinner is over.

"How does everyone feel about getting some pulpo for the table?" Ralph asks.

"Sounds great," I tell him. "I love pulpo."

I have no idea what pulpo is. But I flew to Las Vegas prepared to give these guys whatever they wanted. Which is why I chose this place, even though this dinner wasn't entirely sanctioned by my boss. Wining and dining artists is part of my job, but going over budget is a big part of why I'm on the chopping block. Josie will be pissed when I turn in my expense report, but as long as I have a signed contract to accompany it, I'll be fine.

The waitress tells us the food will be right out, and Ralph grins broadly before tipping his head back to take in the massive crystal chandelier dripping like rain from the ceiling above the bar. He's practically vibrating with excitement, and it reminds me of the way a toddler would dance in their high chair at dinnertime. This is why I've always been fond of Ralph—no matter how successful his band gets, he's still basically a goldendoodle, endlessly pleased just to be along for the ride.

And then there's Freddie, who is manspreading so much I have to keep my legs tightly crossed and my feet tucked under my chair to avoid unintentionally playing footsie with him. The family resemblance between him and Sher is strong—same jet-black hair and fine features. Same style when it comes to playing the guitar, even. Between the two of them, Sher is more talented. She has a better range and a purer voice, whereas Freddie already has a bit of vocal fry. She's a star. But Freddie has the bigger ego. So I turn to give him my full attention. "How do you feel, now that the tour is wrapping up?"

"Tired, mostly. I'm so ready to sleep in my own bed again."

"I believe it."

"Antsy to get moving on the next thing too."

Across the table from him, Sheridan sighs loudly. "Some of us would like a break."

Freddie rolls his eyes. "We all want a break, Sher. But we have ten tracks ready to lay down. We should keep up our momentum, is all I'm saying."

I'm momentarily distracted by the arrival of my wine and the appetizer—it turns out *pulpo* is a fancy word for octopus. Fantastic—then, my brain catches up: "Wait, ten new songs?"

“I wouldn’t say they’re ready to lay down, exactly.” This comes from Curtis, who tilts his head as though he’s saying it mostly to Sheridan.

“Uh, yeah. I wouldn’t either.” Sheridan adjusts the front of her lurex jumpsuit—it looks vintage, probably from the ’70s. Her style is so fierce. “They also don’t all belong on the same album.”

Perhaps sensing the rising tension between the siblings, Fiona jumps in: “Which is exactly why we’re looking to land somewhere that offers more creative control.”

I smile, grateful for the opening. “Absolutely. That’s something I can offer. More artistic freedom, and a more relaxed time frame for putting out work. If you finish an EP ahead of schedule, great. But at Blue Sky, we don’t have the expectation that our artists churn out an album every year.”

While this sinks in, I take a bite of pulpo and try to ignore the texture of the literal tentacle in my mouth, the way the suction cups attempt to latch on to my tongue in the process. I chase it with a generous sip of my wine and begin to wonder if I’ll be able to make this glass last all the way through dinner after all.

“That’s good to hear,” Sheridan says. “We don’t want to lose momentum, like Freddie said. But two albums in three years has been . . . strenuous.”

From what Fiona hinted at during our last call, it was more than strenuous. I get the sense there’s been a lot of discord among the band members ever since they launched their sophomore album. Touring hasn’t helped, because it never does. Artists always come off tour underfed and sleep-deprived.

The server returns to take our entrée orders, and I wait for her to leave before continuing my pitch:

“I think it’s smart that you don’t want to keep fans waiting too long, but you need to be strategic, and make sure the entire team is happy with where the album is at before we launch.”

Freddie shares a look with the others, before leaning forward to rest his tattooed forearms against the table. “We just want to be sure you mean what you say. That there won’t be drama down the line if one person at the label doesn’t like a song, or a cover concept, or whatever else.”

“That’s understandable.” I match Freddie’s posture, perching my wrists on top of the table. “My priority is to help you put out the best album possible, and I promise to do everything in my power to give you guys back some control—of pace and decision-making.”

“Well, in that case . . .” Sheridan smirks at the others before continuing: “Now seems like a good time to mention we plan to announce who we’re signing with at the wrap party.”

I blink. Turn to Fiona and blink again. Back when I tried to sign Dempsey the first time, Fiona was still green. Dempsey was the only band she managed at the time, and in meetings she never concealed her emotions. But now we’re all older and more seasoned and her face has become impossible to read.

I know Fiona is in my corner—we kept in touch over the years, and she remembers how hard I fought for Dempsey before. She did me a solid, tipping me off months ago that Dempsey would be looking to move on once their current deal was up. But this is the third meeting I’ve had with the band since Fiona reached out, and it’s the first time they’ve indicated a decision date. Which, evidently, is tomorrow night.

“Wow. Well, that’s exciting.” My pulse kicks up a notch,

and I work to keep my voice level and calm. “Not that I wasn’t already excited to come to your show.”

Tomorrow marks the final show of their monthslong tour. I anticipated it being a blowout, celebrating not only the end of their tour but the official end of their contract with Sin City Sound. But I can’t say I expected them to finalize their next move so soon.

I glance around the table at each of them in turn. Curtis is predictably drumming his fingers against the wood, nodding along to the beat inside his head. I am only half-convinced he’s following our conversation. Ralph is still eating pulpo with a blissed-out expression, but flashes me a smile once he swallows his bite. Freddie seems quietly content as well, slouched back against the luxe velvet booth again, the picture of someone who’s well aware the world is his oyster.

I’m not naive enough to think I’m the only rep Dempsey has met with. I’m sure they’ve had plenty of interest, from every major label out there. But for the first time, I let myself believe I have this in the bag.

Our food arrives, and I dial back on the hard sell, and between bites I ask about the songs they’ve written and visions for their next album, what they’d like to do differently next time in terms of promotion.

By the time our plates are cleared, I’m buzzing with endorphins and the exact right amount of wine. I feel like I could sprint all the way back to my hotel, devil shoes be damned.

While I wait for the server to return with my company card, I allow my gaze to wander. This place is bougie enough to attract a certain crowd—namely, celebrities and people who

are willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money for the chance to be in close proximity to celebrities. I've lived in LA for long enough now that I consider myself somewhat immune to the thrill of a celebrity sighting, never mind that it's patently uncool to be caught staring at anyone famous, so when I cast a look around the room it's more perfunctory than anything. Until my eyes land on one familiar face in particular.

Adam Shaw is sitting across the room at the bar. I look away before he spots me, instinctively slouching a bit in my seat before realizing how unattractive that posture will make me look. I straighten again and sign the bill with a flourish as soon as it's placed in front of me. But even as I make small talk with the group as they finish their drinks, I can't stop myself from surreptitiously glancing at Adam every few seconds until, inevitably, I look up to find him already watching me. I tense, half expecting him to immediately come over, but the only reaction he gives me is a slight nod. As minutes pass and he stays seated, I'm able to incrementally relax.

It's not easy to ignore his presence, though, especially because I can't shake the suspicion it's no coincidence, him being here.

I pull my phone out and shoot off a text to my assistant, Nora:

Any idea why a rep from Exeter would be at this restaurant?

Despite the late hour, she replies almost immediately:

???

I drop my phone back into my bag and down the dregs of my wine. I can feel the faint vibrations of my assistant texting a couple more times, but don't bother to read her messages, because now Adam actually is making his way over.

As if it's not bad enough for a rep from another label to be interrupting this meeting, of course it has to be someone from Exeter who was there to witness it when my life blew up four years ago. And of course it has to be *Adam*, who has already stolen one recording artist from me this past year.

"Eleanor. Long time no see."

My shoulders tighten, and I consciously force them to relax. To make myself look laid-back and unfazed. "Of all the steak houses in all the towns," I bite out. I shake the hand he offers, squeezing as hard as I dare. "What brings you to Vegas?"

Adam offers an easy shrug. "Meeting someone for dinner."
"Small world."

His hazel eyes flicker around the table, then return to hold my gaze, expectant. This fucking guy.

Six months ago he signed my favorite artist out from under me. The musicians I work with are probably meant to be like my nonexistent children—I'm supposed to love them all equally in spite of their shortcomings or attitudes or how prolific they are. But Maya was a gold mine. She was driven, and professional, and she had a sound unlike anyone else out there. She was my favorite, and I was just as upset as she was that her last album didn't hit the way we wanted. But I had a plan. A strategy to make sure her next one would succeed. Only she didn't give me the chance—she took Adam's bait and wouldn't even come to the table to renegotiate. Now he's standing here looking to do it again, and he's actually going to make me introduce him.

I clench my jaw, then suck in a breath and smile big as I lean back in my seat. “Guys, this is Adam Shaw. He’s an A&R rep at Exeter Records. Adam, this is—”

“You guys need no introduction,” he cuts in to say, already offering his hand first to Freddie, then the others. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Thanks, man,” Ralph says.

“You said you’re with Exeter?” Fiona asks.

“That’s right. Eleanor and I worked there together before she left for Blue Sky. But I’m actually a manager now.”

And doesn’t he look the part? An expensive, perfectly tailored wool suit has replaced the ill-fitting poly-blend polos he used to wear to work. Back then, Adam looked like he was playacting at being a grown-up. His hair was always shaggy, so the ends curled over the shells of his ears, but now he’s got a big-boy haircut, styled with pomade and everything. His jawline is sharper, his shoulders broader, and it’s hard to ignore the fact that this definitely qualifies as a glow-up.

I run my tongue over my teeth. “Manager, huh? Congratulations.”

“Thanks. So far, so good—I’ve got some exciting stuff in the pipeline.”

Now he’s just poking the bear.

Fiona’s eyes narrow. “Adam Shaw . . .”

Wait for it . . .

“Aren’t you Atlas Shaw’s son?”

And there it is.

“I am.” Over the years, Adam has perfected his reaction to this question. A casual smile, like the fact that his father was a goddamn legend is neither here nor there. He even

manages to look a touch embarrassed, like he can't believe Fiona figured out the connection. Which is hilarious, because the fact that he had a famous father was one of the first things I learned about Adam when we met.

"I was sorry to hear about your old man," Freddie offers. "He was a hell of a guitarist."

Adam nods, a bit stiffly. "Thank you." He clears his throat and gestures over his shoulder. "I'm actually here with an old friend. You guys know Chris Edwards?"

For fuck's sake. Is he serious? Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Chris Edwards. Of course that's who he's having dinner with.

Sheridan and Ralph scramble to get a better look, both of them elbowing Curtis out of the way as they try to turn in the booth.

Even Freddie lets out an awed laugh, which is somewhat alarming. Unlike Ralph, who is and always has been an over-excitable puppy, or Curtis, who is so impassive all the time I low-key suspect he might be a robot, Freddie has curated a too-cool-for-school persona since getting a taste of fame.

"He'd love to meet you all if you have a moment."

Oh, he's good. Positioning it as a favor they're doing him, even though Dempsey has cited Chris as an influence in more than one interview. I'm more certain than ever that Adam planned all of this. I'm generally great on my feet, but right now I've got nothing.

Especially when Ralph turns to me with his mop of blond curls and big doe eyes, like he's waiting for my permission. What am I, his mother? Dinner is over. I've made my pitch. I'm in no position to tell them they can't go over and meet their idol. The best I can do is attempt to intervene by tagging along.

“I’d love to meet him, too, if that’s cool.”

“Of course.” Adam steps back to give everyone room to slide out of the booth.

With a promise to be in touch tomorrow, Fiona takes the opportunity to make her exit. Though she’s only a couple of years older than me and the band, she’s a new mom and I can imagine the peace and quiet of a hotel room is more appealing to her than partying with a bunch of other industry folks. We wave her off, and the rest of us trail Adam across the restaurant like some perverse game of follow the leader. At the bar, he introduces each of us to Chris. Conversation flows easily between all the musicians, leaving Adam and me decidedly on the outside. Adam orders an old-fashioned and lifts the glass toward me in a silent *cheers* before he takes a sip.

“How did you know I’d be here?” I ask, quiet enough I won’t be overheard by the others.

He swirls the ice around his glass. The sound makes me want to smack the drink out of his hand. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Really,” I say flatly. “You expect me to believe it’s a total coincidence?”

He smiles blandly at me, exuding don’t-give-a-fuck energy. “Honestly, I’m not very concerned about what you believe.”

His sudden inability to meet my eye feels like a tell. An amateur one, at that. If he’s going to crash my meeting, he should at least have the balls to own it.

Freddie steps back to catch my attention. “Hey. So, I think we’re going to head over to a club with Chris.”

It’s quite clear this is my cue to leave, for us to do another handshake / bro hug and promise to speak tomorrow after the

show, while Adam accompanies them to the club because Chris is his friend or guest or possibly some guy he now owes a favor. But instead I turn to Adam. I grab him above the elbow and smile like we're best buds and say, "The place you were just telling me about? That sounds great. Let's go."

Adam's gaze flickers down to my hand on his arm, then up to meet mine. He puts on a fake smile of his own. "Ready when you are."

Under no circumstances am I going to allow the band to be alone with Adam tonight. Josie made it clear: I have until the end of the month to turn my revenue stream around, or I'm finished at Blue Sky.

Dempsey is my lifeline. I've put all my eggs in this basket, and I will do whatever it takes to prevent Adam from swooping in and signing them out from under me.

Which is how I wind up squeezed into the back of a limo next to him, pretending I can match men who are twice my size drink for drink.

I'm not going down without a fight.

CHAPTER TWO

ADAM

Before I'm even fully awake, I know I've fucked up. It's a bone-deep feeling, accompanied by a blinding headache and the desire to pull the pillow over my face and will my body back to sleep. But that ship sails when the mattress dips and my eyes shoot open to find Eleanor beside me in bed.

She's propped up on her elbows, clutching the crisp white sheet to her chest with one hand, staring at me like she's seen a ghost.

I blink once, twice, trying to clear my cloudy vision. My eyelids are like sandpaper. It takes me a second to realize I slept in my contacts. "Eleanor?" My voice comes out low and gritty. "Why are you in my bed?"

"This is *my* bed," she hisses. And . . . huh. Upon closer inspection, this does not appear to be my hotel room. The color palette is blue and gold, whereas mine was beige and green. The desk and nightstands are made of clear Lucite instead of wood, the overall aesthetic is much more modern,

and the layout is completely different. I don't even think this room is in the same hotel as mine. I sit up, ignoring the pulse of nausea that follows, and try to get my bearings. Only I don't get much of a chance, because next thing I know, Eleanor kicks me out of bed. Literally. Her foot connects with my shoulder, and I hit the ground with a thud.

The sheet still tangled around one of my legs is tugged away, and I hear her scramble off the other side of the bed.

“. . . Sorry,” she says a moment later.

I groan. Then press the heels of my hands against my brow bones, hard. It feels like there's shrapnel in my brain.

“Are you naked?”

My hands flop back down to my sides. I frown and lift my head enough to peek down my body and confirm that I am, in fact, wearing boxer briefs. As well as one sock. “No.” Alarm bells start to go off in my head. “Are *you* naked?”

“No,” she answers quickly, her tone almost offended.

The alarm bells won't shut up, though. They've turned into more of a blaring siren. I roll onto my side, and with great effort manage to push up onto my hands and knees. I hear Eleanor moving, too, and we look at each other over the bed at the same time.

Christ, my eyeballs are fucking *burning*. I blink hard a few more times, bringing Eleanor into focus. Her hair is a mess and her mascara is smudged all over her eyes, but she's still wearing her blouse from yesterday. That seems like a good sign.

“You don't think we . . . I mean, we didn't have sex. Right?”

I half expect her to laugh. To tell me there is no world in which she would ever sleep with me. Instead, Eleanor's gaze

drops down to the rumpled bed between us. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Wouldn’t you be able to tell?”

She cuts me a look. I can’t figure out if she’s annoyed or confused. “Excuse me?”

I’m still on my knees. I rock my weight from one to the other. “Women are supposed to be able to tell, I thought.”

“Who told you that?”

I shrug. “A friend.”

It was a girl I went to college with, who lived down the hall from me freshman year. It came up after we’d gone to a party together, only to get blackout drunk and separated before the night was over. Thankfully, it turned out her roommate had taken her home after she puked in the middle of a game of beer pong, but when I checked on her the morning after, I remember her saying she would have been able to feel if something had happened to her anyway. At eighteen that seemed perfectly believable. But I also used to believe running bottom-shelf vodka through a water filter would make it taste better. So.

Eleanor slowly shakes her head. “Okay, well, no. As amazing as my vagina is, it is not all-knowing.”

I lock my gaze onto her face, resist the urge to let it travel south. She flatly holds my stare for a few beats, then pushes to her feet with a sigh. She’s in her underwear, lacy and black. Her top isn’t quite long enough to completely cover her ass when she turns around. I swallow and try not to creep on her as she moves around the room, checking the trash bin under the Lucite desk, then disappearing into the bathroom. I’m about to ask what she’s doing when she comes back out and shakes her head again.

“Nothing happened. No used condom or wrapper, and I probably *would* know if we’d been stupid enough to fuck without one. We’re good.”

Thank the lord for that. Because if we were too wasted to remember how we wound up sleeping in the same bed, we were *definitely* too drunk to fully consent to anything else.

Though I’m fairly confident that after the amount I drank last night, my dick wouldn’t have worked even if we’d tried.

“Good. That’s good.”

“Agreed,” she says. And then the room is quiet, aside from the faint whir of the air-conditioning and muted traffic noises from however many floors down below, and though neither of us is naked, I am suddenly very aware that we’re not fully dressed either.

“I should find my pants.” I use the bed for leverage and push up to my feet. Then I have to take a moment to breathe through my mouth before I’m capable of casting a look around. The pants and my shirt turn up near the foot of the bed. My other sock proves more difficult to locate, and I’m frankly too hungover to bother with it. I sit on the end of the bed and dress.

If Eleanor and I *had* slept together last night, this would be the part where I’d suggest getting breakfast. But as we’ve established, that did not happen. Of course it didn’t. She may not have outright laughed in my face at the idea, but evidence suggests I am not Eleanor Thompson’s type. Which is fine, because Eleanor isn’t my type either. I mean, sure, back when we were interns together I thought she was cute. I remember we liked a lot of the same artists—how she’d take her headphones off to talk to someone and I’d hear Alabama Shakes or Lorde blasting out of them. Once upon a time I might’ve

even considered asking her out for a drink. But that was like seven years ago.

My eyes shift to the nightstand and I snag an empty bottle of booze from it. I inspect the label and hold it up for Eleanor to see. “This is Lagavulin 25.”

She rubs the space between her brows. “That’s scotch, right?”

“That’s a twelve-hundred-dollar bottle of scotch,” I say, a bit awed. I splurged on a glass of it once before, but never owned an entire bottle.

“Fuck me,” Eleanor mumbles. “Who paid for that?”

I pull the cork and sniff it out of instinct, not taking into consideration my raging hangover and the fact that any alcohol—even the good shit—smells abhorrent to me right now. I fight off a gag and put the cap back on.

“No clue,” I tell her. “Guess last night got away from us.”

“Apparently.” I look over my shoulder to find her buttoning the fly on a pair of denim cutoffs. Her neck’s bent, her hair a curtain of tangled brown waves that hides her face from view.

I focus on doing up the buttons on my shirt. I’m about to ask if she remembers what happened after Dempsey and Chris turned in, because I for one do not, but the question dies on my tongue when I catch sight of the ring on my finger.

“The fuck?” I frown at my left hand for a long moment, confused. And possibly still a little bit drunk. Because even as my pulse starts to roar in my ears, I don’t immediately connect the dots.

Then I’m on my feet so fast I have to bend back over, close my eyes, and plant my hands on my knees to avoid throwing up. Absurdly, despite being a twenty-eight-year-old

grown-ass man, the first coherent thought I have is: *My mom is going to kill me.*

“You okay over there?”

I shake my head. Take a breath and—*slowly*—straighten. “Let me see your hand.”

Eleanor makes a face and holds out her right hand, palm up.

“Other hand.”

She huffs, then lifts her left hand, spotting the matching platinum band at the same time I do.

“Gah!” Eleanor covers her mouth with both hands, then wrenches her left one away, stretching her arm out like the ring is carrying an infectious disease. “What is that?”

“I think,” I begin slowly as I wade through my hangover-muddled memories, “that we might have gotten married last night.”

“No,” she says flatly. She shakes her head and crosses the room to grab her phone off the nightstand. She breathes fast as she unlocks it and taps with her thumbs for a few seconds, then freezes. “*Noooo!*”

I wince. “So, yes?”

Her whole body deflates, arms falling and head hanging back in defeat. She sighs and holds the phone out so I can see the screen. Which has a picture of us, very obviously wasted, in front of a brightly lit chapel. I’m holding Eleanor bridal-style, her arms looped around my neck with one of her legs kicked out, a pose that feels pretty damning in this context.

My stomach sinks, heavy with guilt. It’s not like I forced her into this. I don’t think I could *make* Eleanor do anything. But historically Eleanor has always seemed indifferent toward me. Then I signed Maya, and am here to sign another

act she wants on her roster, so I'm thinking *indifference* might be too generous a term for how she feels about me now. Compared to the short-lived attraction I had toward her in the early days of us interning together, and the fact that I have no fucking filter when I'm lit, I have to wonder if this whole mess might've been my idea.

"How did we even get that drunk?" she whines. "I was careful, and I drank a glass of water with my wine at dinner—"

"Well, it was probably the edibles that did you in."

". . . What?"

"The pizza," I say slowly.

"You're telling me I ate pizza with weed in it?" she asks, just this side of shrill.

"Yes? Chris took us to a cannabis lounge." Which was very clearly branded as such. The menu even stated how much THC was in every serving. "How did you miss the giant neon sign shaped like a pot leaf above the door?"

Eleanor glares down at the photo on her phone for another beat. Then, abruptly, that glare shifts to me. "This is all your fault."

Even though I had the same thought, I find myself getting defensive. "How do you figure?"

"Because you're *here*," she yells. "I have loved Dempsey's music for years, I know what they need to take it to the next level, and I was way more focused on them and my pitch and watching *you* to make sure you didn't pull any bullshit, so no, I did not notice the signage above the restaurant door—sue me. If you hadn't come to Vegas to fuck with me, I wouldn't have been in the position to make that mistake."

Oh man, I am way too hungover to handle being yelled at right now. Especially when she's dead wrong. I did not

come here to fuck with Eleanor. I came because my mentor asked me to. Billy has known me pretty much my entire life—he was my father’s old manager, and he gave me my first break when I was a sixteen-year-old, smart-mouthed kid. I owe him a lot. So it was a no-brainer to chase the lead when he tipped me off that Dempsey was looking to make a huge switch—new label, new publicist, maybe even a new manager.

Billy told me to focus on signing them, not to worry about putting in a word for him as a manager. But I know it could be great for Billy if it does happen. He’s had a rough go of it lately, especially after the incident last summer. The DUI was bad, but made worse because he had a celebrity in the car with him, so of course *TMZ* picked it up. Since then he’s gone through treatment and is sober, as far as I know, but he lost a handful of clients in the aftermath. Something like this would really help turn things around for him. And if I bring Dempsey on, that alone could be enough of a leg up for Billy because they know he and I work well together.

But none of this is any of Eleanor’s business.

“I came here because Dempsey was going to be here,” I say simply.

“And you knew damn well they were meeting with *me*. You somehow heard where we were having dinner—and don’t think I won’t figure out where you got that information—and you decided it was a perfect opportunity to swoop in and work your bullshit machinations to poach them like you poached Maya.”

See, this right here is why Eleanor and I have never become friendly. She thinks she’s in a league of her own. Even back when we were both bottom-feeders at the label, she

acted so entitled. Like she shouldn't have to pay her dues, or actually *earn* her way up the ladder.

Eleanor may see my being here as a personal attack, but the truth is it had nothing to do with her. Yeah, I knew the band would be having dinner with a rep from another label, but I didn't know that rep was her, and it's like I told her—nothing is official until it's official. Just because Eleanor got an in with Dempsey first doesn't mean I shouldn't be allowed to throw my hat in the ring.

I shake my head with a dry laugh. "First of all, they're not your band. You haven't signed them. And you're not *going* to sign them, because I can offer better terms."

"You don't even know my terms," she says tightly.

"Second of all," I go on, watching her nostrils flare when I don't acknowledge her point, "I didn't poach Maya. I simply won."

"By playing dirty."

Oho, that is fucking rich. Everything that went down between her and Griffin Hastings when he was an executive at the label, and she's accusing *me* of playing dirty? I round the bed, closing in on her. "Are you really going to stand there and pretend you've always played by the rules?"

She holds my gaze, even as her jaw tightens. Her expression is hard to read, becoming more closed off with each passing second.

An itch crawls up my back, just out of reach. I roll my shoulders and look away first. Hastings has nothing to do with this. I'm not going to throw their relationship in her face so I can gain the upper hand in a stupid argument.

I scrub a hand over my hair and sigh. "Look. I don't exactly remember how it all went down last night. But I don't