

Devil's Advocate



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**Also by
Amanda DeWitt**

Aces Wild: A Heist

Wren Martin Ruins It All

The Underwood Tapes

I

If Ivyside Preparatory Academy has taught me one thing, it's to make the most out of my time. For example: If you're going to get sent to the principal's office, you might as well get something out of it. For some people that could mean a lesson that will serve them later in life. For me, it means Principal Harker has a really nice paperweight that I'd like to get my hands on.

"Ms. Faust," Principal Harker says with a sigh so heartfelt it could win an Academy Award. "How did I know it would be you in my office this afternoon?"

I tear my eyes away from the paperweight. It's a black resin pyramid with a layer of glitter that probably swirls around when you shake it. Kind of tacky, but Izzie would like it. And I'm a good friend, even if I'm not a very good student—a *well-behaved* student. I'm good at everything else. The rules are the only problem. "I can't really speak on your relationship

with precognition, Mr. Harker,” I say, “but it sounds like you were onto something this time.”

Harker’s expression is distinctly unamused as he drops into the chair behind his desk. No. Bad. I need him to look away if I’m going to swipe the paperweight and make this meeting even a little bit worth it. Otherwise I’m just in trouble for no reason. “Very funny,” he says blandly, and I get the feeling he doesn’t mean it.

Principal Harker is six foot three and has an eyepatch. In a badass way, not a pirate way. It’s been a gleeful source of speculation for the entire student body since he started at Ivyside. Some people think he was a Marine. Some think he came from one of those tough inner-city schools and a kid took it out in a fight, which sounds a little dramatic to me. What I *do* think is that he came to Ivyside thinking it would be an easier gig. Supervising a bunch of nerds duking it out over the order they’ll get into Ivy League schools? Easy. You could sleep through it.

Only now he’s figured out that *any* group of teenagers stuffed into a building is going to be a powder keg waiting to go off. The only difference is that at Ivyside Prep they’re all rich enough that they can get away with it.

Like . . . well, like me. To be honest.

I keep telling him that he should let it go and just enjoy the fancy office until it’s time to retire. It would save us both a lot of time. *But* then I wouldn’t get a shot at that paperweight. Silver linings.

“Mrs. Williamson said she caught you on the roof again,” Principal Harker says, dragging my attention back away from

the paperweight. “*Again*,” he says, with more emphasis this time, leaning forward like he can get his exasperation across by sheer proximity. “Ada, we talked about this.”

He talked; I pretended to listen. If he reviewed his memory, I think he’d find that I acknowledged that maybe I *shouldn’t* go on the roof of the Faust Building again—I didn’t agree that I *wouldn’t*.

It’s got my name on it, after all.

“Dominic,” I start.

He gives me a Look.

“Mr. Harker,” I amend. Guess he can do first names but I can’t. That’s fine. “The roof of Faust has the best view in the entire school. I needed those shots.” Getting sent to the principal’s office is a hobby. Photography is a passion. I push myself to my feet and walk across his office to the windows looking out at the school, ignoring the world-weary sigh and creak of his chair as Harker leans back in it. “Look.”

“I know what the Faust Building looks like,” he says flatly. “The problem is you being on top of it—”

“Just look! C’mon.” And get away from your desk so I can nab that pyramid. I want to see if the glitter really swirls when you shake it.

I think Harker likes me, at least as far as the thorns in his side go, because a moment later he joins me at the window, his arms folded across his carefully pressed white shirt. He looks like a consummate professional even as he entertains my bullshit. Maybe he was a Marine after all. He’s unshakable.

“Look,” I say for a third time, pointing out across the quad. The Faust Building dominates the distance, halfway encircling the far

end of campus. Somewhere by the door there's a dramatic bronze plaque with my dad's name on it and a heavy implication of how much money he spent to get it named after him, I think probably around the time my brother Felix got caught hooking up in the locker room. From here we can see the entire building. It's narrow and tall, built to curve inward on campus, like two great arms pulling the school into a hug. Or a headlock. I sweep my finger across the curved arms the best I can without smudging my finger against the glass. "The building being curved means I can get all sorts of angles. So really I'm on far less roofs than I could be."

Kind of nice of me, when you think about it. I never get enough credit for trying.

"That's very economical thinking," Harker says with reservation, "but the number of roofs students are on that we're aiming for is really zero."

Which is a very noble goal, but not one I'm listening to anymore, and not because of the fixation over the paperweight this time. My phone buzzes in my pocket—two short buzzes and one long one. I pull it out of my pocket and flip it over, flashing the screen.

Nick

Family meeting ASAP. Sending a car.

I pause. Well, that's not normal.

"Something more interesting, Ms. Faust?" Principal Harker asks, getting aggravated again. He can deal with my bullshit, but he hates phones at school. *Definitely* not a battle he's going to win.

Me

can't. principal's office);

It takes 0.5 seconds for Harker's phone to ping. Nick types fast. It's half his job as my dad's personal assistant and my family's semi-official general manager.

The corners of Harker's mouth pinch, and I can tell he doesn't like the idea of checking his texts. Either because it breaches some sense of professional formality or because he knows what it's going to say. This isn't the first time he's had a student fished out of his office by rich, powerful, and meddling outside forces. It's not even the first time it's been me.

"Excuse me," he says, and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He consults the screen for a moment.

I dig the toe of my shoe into the thin carpet of his office impatiently. Family meetings in the Faust family are something like a five-alarm fire. They don't wait for anyone. "So . . ."

Principal Harker sighs. "Just go," he says, passing a hand over his shaved head and dropping it over his eyes. He rubs them wearily. "And stay off the roof, Ms. Faust. Please."

I swipe the paperweight on my way out.

"Oh, wait." I stuff the paperweight into one pocket of my uniform blazer and pull an SD card out of the other. I flip it onto Harker's desk like a poker chip. "Those are pictures of Mr. Bass selling Adderall to the lacrosse team, by the way." I wink. "I like roofs. I don't like bullies."

Like I told him. You can see everything from that roof.

Lizzie is waiting for me next to the elevator, kicking one foot against the tile as they consult a cracked paperback older than both

of us put together. I don't think Izzie reads anything that doesn't have yellowed pages and a 19 as part of the publication date, more from the magpie-like thrill of a weird used-bookstore find than anything else. Izzie revels in the weird that other people only aspire to, because other people *aspire*. They try too hard. For Izzie, the sci-fi paperbacks from the '70s and the niche collector's items and the vintage conspiracy theories all come entirely naturally.

"Where'd you come from?" I ask, even though I should know better. Izzie also has a way of being in the right place at the right time.

"Heard on the walkie-talkie that you got caught," they say, flipping the book closed without marking their place and slapping their hip, where a walkie-talkie is clipped like a gun in a holster. Ever since they started as the fifth-period TA for the front office, they've mostly used it to abuse their power and snoop. I've never been so proud. "What was the verdict?"

"Unsure," I muse. I turn my phone around in my hand thoughtfully. "Mr. Bass has got to get fired, right? I got pics of him slipping pills to Jacob Henston and Riley Carr."

"Mr. Bass?" Izzie frowns. "Wait. *Ada*—"

"No one gets to call you fat," I say sharply before they can start complaining. I reach out to hit the elevator button. Nick's car is going to be here any minute.

They roll their eyes and shake their head, their dark curls falling messily in their eyes in a way that closely resembles a disgruntled sheepdog. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I *am* fat."

"No one gets to call you fat in a way that isn't distinctly body positive."

“Try again.”

“Complimentary?”

“You’re so embarrassing.” Izzie snorts. “Close enough. What did you get me?”

I scoff. “Sometimes it’s like you care more about my sticky fingers than my heroics.” Yeah, so do I, actually. I toss them the paperweight and they catch the resin pyramid with their fingertips.

Izzie stuffs their book under their arm, the aliens abruptly forgotten. “Whaaat.” They twist the pyramid around and give it a shake, grinning at the swirl of silver glitter. “This is rad as hell. Way better than the pen.”

Well, that’s gratitude for you. The elevator doors slide open and we step inside. Like everything else at Ivyside, the inside is nice in a bland way. Like a high-end hotel, but one with a conference center attached. They want you to know they’re expensive but still practical about it. “That pen belonged to the superintendent,” I say a little pointedly. “*And* it was engraved.”

Izzie gives me a look over the top of the pyramid. “Why would I want a pen with someone else’s name on it?”

Well. Touché.

Izzie Garcia and I were never meant to be friends. Dad made that clear enough, and so did the other kids from middle school onward. It might have been forgivable if I were best friends with the fat kid or the nonbinary kid or the kid obsessed with aliens, but somehow all three put together was too much for anyone to handle. People look at me and see the daughter of Mark Faust, (a) heir (fourth in line—it’s not that impressive) to the LuxCo Media Corporation (if you watch TV, you’ve seen a

LuxCo production). They see that, and they expect things. The bitchier girls used to think that they could make me come to my senses and realize I belonged with them. Mostly because they thought I could get them background roles on *Dead End Street* or whatever show everyone is talking about. And I probably could. Instead I stole one of their laptops and used it to destroy their algebra grades.

They *think* they know who my dad is. They don't know the half of it.

Anyway.

"Nick texted me. Family meeting," I say, trying to sound casual. "You wanna go?"

Izzie knows me too well to fall for it. More than that, they know my family too well. My family doesn't have "family meetings" as a rule—most of the time, you're lucky to have more than two of us in the same room for more than thirty minutes at a time. So when we do all come together, for whatever reason . . . well, *hellish* is the word for it.

"That's a no from me," they say flatly. "But thanks anyway." They toss the paperweight in the air and catch it again with the flippancy of someone not about to attend a Faust family meeting as the elevator deposits us in the administration building lobby. I flash Ms. Darling, the receptionist, a peace sign as we walk past the front desk without breaking stride. I know Nick has already contacted her about me leaving early. He's very good at his job, even when he's being annoying. Maybe especially when he's being annoying.

"What's it about?" Izzie asks.

“No idea.” I push through the double doors and out into the glare of the Georgia sun, the temperature-controlled air chasing me only for an instant. A black car is already waiting in the school’s curved driveway. I try not to look at it with dread. I’m getting out of school early, and I got to dodge Harker’s attempt at discipline. Even more importantly, I got to make Mr. Bass regret being an asshole to Izzie in gym the other day. I should look on the bright side.

And not the looming maw of uncertainty waiting for me. Beyond the school’s carefully manicured oaks and magnolias, Atlanta’s Midtown skyline glitters prettily, the LuxCo building like a dagger cutting into the bright blue sky. Dad is probably already waiting in the boardroom.

I look back at Izzie, squinting in the sunlight. “You sure you’d rather go to Calculus?”

Izzie doesn’t bother offering me pity. They just toss me the paperweight. I catch it, but the pyramid lands awkwardly, stabbing me in the palm. If that’s not an ill omen, I don’t know what is. “You need it more than I do,” they say.

Well. It’s the thought that counts.

†

I’m in the back of the car, halfway to the LuxCo building when my brother calls.

Well, one of them. But even before I look at the caller ID, I know it’s going to be Felix. I sigh and lean back in my seat, the car’s beige leather interior squeaking underneath me. He wouldn’t be

calling me if he already knew what this meeting thing was about, but if I'm going into unknown territory here, it helps to have an ally. Among my siblings, that's usually Felix.

I answer the call. "Hey," I say. "Why are you calling me?"

We both know why he's calling. He doesn't bother entertaining the question. "Do you know what the hell is going on?"

God, he's already stressed about it. He gets so pissy when he's stressed. "No," I say, trying to sound nonchalant. He thinks I do it on purpose to bother him more, and I do, but getting all worked up along with him would only make things worse. "Nick just said 'family meeting ASAP.'" I look at my nails, picking idly at a chip in the red polish. "Didn't he tell you?"

"No, why would he tell me?"

"I don't know, because he's your boyfriend?"

"You know he's married to the job," Felix says impatiently and I roll my eyes. You'd think it would be weird for him to say when "the job" is essentially our dad, but I'm halfway convinced he only started dating Nick to try to irritate Dad anyway. I don't think it worked, but I also don't think Felix realizes that his little stunts actually look like cries for attention. I guess that's between him and his therapist. "I don't know why you're not more worried about this."

I don't know why he thinks worrying about it is going to change whatever Dad tells us in the next twenty to thirty minutes. "It's probably just something with the board," I say. "Kevin will freak out, Evangeline will act like she doesn't want to be there, you'll do whatever it is you do, and I won't care." I tick off each of our siblings on a finger, including myself just so I can wiggle all four,

even if the effect is lost on Felix over the phone. “Maybe we’ll have to sign an NDA. Bring a pen.”

“Maybe.” Felix is quiet for a moment. Up ahead, the driver mutters under his breath as he navigates Atlanta traffic. “You don’t think it has anything to do with the Jörmungandr thing last summer, do you?”

Um. Well. I *didn’t*.

I sit up a little straighter. “No. What? No.” I look out the window, trading a sideways glance with my reflection. “Jörmungandr let go of his tail for like, two minutes. It wasn’t even a big deal.” Except for the three different tsunamis, that was pretty bad, but Dad doesn’t care about that unless it’s affecting the Asian markets. He probably didn’t even notice, except for the spike in ratings from LUXNews. “Dad hates those Norse guys.”

“Exactly,” Felix says, a little too quickly. My stomach sinks. I don’t like that he’d been prepared for that argument—it means he’s really thought about this. He’s *actually* worried. And maybe for good reason. “And don’t you think he’d be pissed if they got to end the world before he did?”

He’d be—pardon the pun—apocalyptic. Not that he couldn’t end the world again, and not that he hasn’t before, but there are cycles to these things, at least according to him. You can’t just do one right after the other. Or you can, but it’s tacky. If Jörmungandr getting feisty for a minute really did make him nervous that the Norse were sniffing around the end of days—

Well. *Shit*.

I drop my phone against my shoulder. “How much longer?” I ask the driver.

“Two minutes, miss.” He pauses. “Maybe three.”

I put the phone back to my ear. “I’m almost there.”

“Me too.” Felix sounds happy that I’m appropriately freaking out now. That makes one of us. I can’t deal with the end of the world right now. I’m a junior in high school. I have shit to do. Finals are next week and Mrs. Golding hasn’t finished writing her answer key yet.

I hang up without saying goodbye and press the edge of my phone against my chin, my thoughts racing a thousand miles ahead of me. The school guidance counselor says I should take time out of every day to express gratitude. For my nice school (I think she’s biased), for my family (meh), for my camera (fair)—whatever it takes to quiet the negative voices in my head that instigate me to complain so much. I get where she’s coming from. Really, I do. Out of all the horrible, terrible things in the world, I’m lucky to be who I am, where I am, when I am.

But sometimes having the Devil for a dad is less than convenient.

2

My dad isn't just an asshole. I mean he is, but so is every other CEO of a media conglomerate. So are a lot of people, really, but my dad isn't just *an* asshole, he's *the* asshole. The Devil, Satan, Lucifer, the Morningstar. There are a few different names that he lays claim to, though the lines can get a little blurry sometimes. Dad likes to say that belief is an art, not a science. I think the more names ascribed to him, the stronger the grip he has on his role. It's why the Norse guys loved the Thor movies and the Greeks are putting so much money into the Percy Jackson series. You're whatever you have to be in order to serve your best interests. And those guys need it a lot more than Dad does.

That's the first thing I learned at LuxCo, before I even learned to speak. Everyone has an agenda. For most people, it's money. For people like us . . .

Well, it can be a little more complicated.

Which is why Felix is so worried, and kindly passed that worry off to me. If we were normal people—as normal as the Faust family could be in any reality—we'd have been worried about a merger or a takeover or any of the business-y sounding words you hear on TV. Or about our inheritance. Not that I'm necessarily *not* worried about those things, but now that Felix has put the thought in my head, I'm a hell of a lot more worried about the end of the world.

I distractedly thank the driver and slide out of the car, tapping my thumb restlessly against the side of my phone as I cross the bright, hot pavement between the curb and the LuxCo building. It rises up fifty floors, cutting in sideways for the last ten and ending in a deadly sharp point. It's a brutal testament to modern architecture, all glass and white steel that turns blinding at sunrise *and* sunset. I think Dad told them to make it so abjectly without personality on purpose, just to piss people off. Even the air tastes bland as I pull open one of the identical sets of glass double doors into the lobby.

I wave at the front desk as I cross the endless expanse of white tile floor. I don't recognize anyone sitting behind it, but I think they must have all our pictures taped up next to their computer screens, because the little electronic gates open up for me without an ID, like they always do.

Felix is waiting for me at the bank of elevators, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, one foot tapping restlessly against the ground. I'd say Felix looks like a too-hip barista, but my brother has never worked a day in his life—which, like, me neither, but at least I don't pretend otherwise. Felix, meanwhile, tries to be the embodiment of what boomers on

Facebook think a college student is—vegan, socialist, whatever. I honestly can't tell how much he really believes in, but I *do* know that Dad still pays for his rent and his tuition, so he can't really believe in it that much. Last I heard, his actual activist friends think that he sold his shares in the company to pay for it all. It's so embarrassing.

He catches sight of me and stands up straight, holding out his arms. Perhaps in another family it would've been an invitation for a warm, familial hug. Because it's us, it's a gesture very clearly stating: *What the fuck?*

I agree entirely.

"Are Kevin and Evangeline here yet?" I ask, forging past pleasantries and straight into crisis mode.

"I'm pretty sure Kevin sleeps under his desk here, so yeah," Felix says, turning to hit the button to summon the elevator. "I wouldn't be surprised if Evangeline was too. You know she always hears things before the rest of us."

"Great." The elevator chimes softly and the polished steel doors slide open, letting us step inside. I hit the button for the top floor on my way in, trying to ignore the tension slowly tightening my shoulders. I wish Felix had kept his big mouth shut. I hadn't been worried before, and even though I'm worried now, there's *still* nothing I can do about it until Dad tells us what's really going on. All we can do is stand stiffly next to each other in the elevator and look at our stony faces in the mirrored ceiling.

An intern starts to step into the elevator after us, takes one look inside, and veers off again as if she always intended to take the stairs.

Finally, the elevator doors slide shut. “You don’t *really* think he’ll try to end the world,” I say, as if the closed doors finally give us permission to speak freely. Or more accurately, give my chaotic thoughts the strength to pry themselves out of my mouth.

“Why wouldn’t I think that, Ada?” Felix says snappishly. “What about Dad makes you think, ‘Oh, this guy would never usher in Armageddon?’”

God, he’s so obnoxious sometimes. “I don’t know,” I say, just as defensively, “but I’m not the one trying to end the world, so maybe you shouldn’t be yelling at *me*.”

“Hm.” It’s not an apology, but it would’ve been weirder if it was. Still, I can tell he’s decided to back off just from the way he stares up at his own reflection, his foot tapping again. He fusses with the artful tousle of his hair. “It’s just a feeling. With the Jörmungandr thing and everything,” he says, grudgingly civil. He pauses for a long moment. “There’s something else. Something Nick told me the other day.”

If Dad’s assistant knew about the end of days before any of us did, I’m going to lose my cool in a major way. But Felix has been known to overstate things before. I give him a sideways look. “What?”

Felix’s mouth pinches unhappily at the corners, like he’s trying to hold a lemon in his mouth. Again, with the dramatic pause. “He sold all his crypto.”

“Please never say that word to me again.”

“You don’t get it! Nick fucking loves his crypto!” Felix throws his arms up in exasperation, somehow more frustrated by me not wanting to predict the future by his boyfriend’s cryptocurrency

wallet than the fact that that's what his boyfriend spends his paycheck on. Or, possibly, gets his paycheck in. "He wouldn't have sold it unless something was going on, okay? Like, end of the world-level shit. Literally."

Right. Okay. I'm starting to get a headache now. "I guess we'll see," I hedge impatiently. "Let's just agree that whatever Kevin says . . ."

"We say the opposite," Felix fills in.

"We say the opposite," I agree. I've gotten through so many conversations by just choosing whatever opinion is opposite my eldest brother's. It's usually a safe bet.

"Not that it really matters," Felix says, undermining our agreement not even half a second later. The elevator doors glide open silently, welcoming us to the top floor. Felix steps out, turning back to raise his eyebrows at me. "It's not like Dad ever listens to any of us anyway."

True. But he didn't have to say it.

I bite back a sigh and step out of the elevator after him, wishing I'd brought my sunglasses as soon as the sunlight off the white tile hits my eyes. Dad's inner sanctum occupies the entire top floor of the LuxCo building. He has like three other offices in the building alone, an actual residence five minutes away, and a handful of others around the world, but this one is his favorite. I'm not sure why. The inward angle of the building means it's half the size of the lower floors and the floor-to-ceiling windows mostly show a view of highway traffic. I guess it's fine, but as far as executive suites go, he could have done better. Some gargoyles outside the windows at least.

The foyer features a couple of weirdly long couches and a decorative bowl filled with different colored pieces of sea glass, but everyone else is already in the conference room that overlooks the city and is separated from the lobby by a pretty useless glass wall. Nick still meets us at the door as if everyone else can't already see us coming.

"Good, you're here," he says hurriedly. Everything Nick does is hurried, except for his immaculately slicked-back hair and admittedly very nicely manicured fingernails. He rushes through giving Felix a kiss on the cheek that's a bit more like bumping their faces together. "Hi, Ada."

"No kiss for me?" I say sweetly.

"Not today," he counters breezily. "Mr. Faust should be here in five. Kevin and Evangeline are already inside. Divya too."

"Divya is here?" I'm not sure what to think of that. Divya is the CFO of the company, which means maybe this really is just the usual corporate bullshit, sign a few forms, go home. Or maybe whatever Dad's planning is so big that the company's bottom line is part of the conversation. But who would be worrying about profit margins while he's orchestrating the end of days?

Well . . . Dad would. So I guess I'm not so comforted after all.

Nick ignores me. "Do you need anything? Good." He ushers us into the conference room without waiting for an answer.

A long glass conference table dominates the even longer room. The table probably sits fifteen, but three people have managed to take up just about the whole thing between them. Divya sits at one end of the table, perfectly poised at Dad's right hand even

when he's not even here, her fingers flying across her tablet. Her black hair is streaked with gray these days, probably something to do with the stock market, but it's still swept up into the same perfect updo she's been wearing my entire life. Her eyes flicker upward when we step in and then back down again.

"Felix. Ada," Kevin says stiffly from where he's seated close to the head of the table but not quite there. Sucking up to Dad but pretending like he's not. Classic Kevin. He's always trying too hard to look like he's *not* trying too hard and always fails spectacularly. Today it's a powder-blue button-down and salmon tie, but with his suit jacket artfully draped over his chair and his sleeves rolled up. So cool. So casual. Sometimes I wonder how much time he spends calculating this stuff.

"Nice of you to join us," Evangeline cuts in from the opposite end of the table, leaning forward on her elbows, her chin resting on her hands. She, meanwhile, makes everything look effortless. When I was twelve years old and locked in the throes of puberty, I'd hated her for it. At seventeen, I've grown out of it and grown into accepting that it's better not to compare yourself to other people. Because sometimes you lose.

"Some of us have school, you know," I say lightly, dropping down into one of the chairs toward the middle of the table. Neutral ground. I grab Felix by the elbow and force him into the chair next to me as a symbol of our alliance.

"At Ivyside?" Evangeline squints like she's trying to remember what grade I'm in. "I skipped class all the time."

She also graduated valedictorian. Yes, my sister is perfect. I need to stop thinking about it.

“Does anyone know what this is about?” Felix says, leaning forward in his chair, giving away his nerves like blood in the water. “Like, this is weird, right?”

“I think we’re here to find out, Felix,” Kevin says with paper-thin patience.

“Well, for once I’d like a little warning—”

“He’s your father, he doesn’t need to warn you about anything—”

“Are you going to do this the whole time?” Evangeline butts in.

“*Felix.*” I reach over and pinch him under the table, but it only makes him throw up his hands in exasperation. “Can you be *normal?*”

“I can’t be the only one who wants to know what the hell we’re doing here!” he squawks, his hands planted flat on the table, smudging the pristine glass.

“Interesting choice of words.”

We freeze. The particles in the air hang suspended, waiting for permission to start drifting through the light again.

Our father stands inside the doorway, Nick right in front of him, armed with his tablet and a bland expression. “. . . Mr. Faust is here,” he says unnecessarily.

Nick thinks it’s funny that Dad caught us off guard, but no one is paying attention to him anymore. They don’t call Dad the Lightbringer for nothing. He glows like the moon during the daytime; he’s disarming to find there and a little wrong, but you can’t help but look. There’s a cover of *Forbes* magazine with him on it. There’s an entire subreddit called r/evilDILFs that features him semi-regularly. If I think about it too much, it makes me want to die.

His smile quirks. He spreads his hands out. "Look at this," he says. "When's the last time we had the whole family together?"

Divya takes the question literally. She cocks her head thoughtfully. "I believe it was your birthday last year."

Kevin clears his throat. "I was in London."

"Kevin was in *London*," I mutter out of the side of my mouth and Felix snorts. Good, we're still on the same side. Even if he is a shitty ally.

Dad brushes it off as if no one said anything, stepping properly into the conference room and sweeping to the head of the table. I watch his back warily, trying to gauge his mood, but it's not that easy. Nothing with Dad is ever that easy.

The thing about our dad, about the Devil himself, Lucifer Morningstar, etc., etc., is that he's not exactly what you'd expect, and I think he likes it that way. Entities built off belief always have a human form, and Dad has walked the earth in different human shapes for a long time now. For as long as there have been people who believed in the Devil—wrote about him, dreamed about him, hated and feared him—he's been here, feeding off their fear.

The thing is, you'll still never find any of his names in the history books. He doesn't play the tyrant.

He's . . . something else. Something more subtle than that. The everyman of human suffering, pushing and prodding humanity toward its worst self. Sometimes he succeeds, sometimes he doesn't, but he knows that it's a game he'll always win eventually. The world ends every couple of centuries, an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Most people don't even realize it. We're all kind of the teenagers of our time, I think—no one has it worse

than us. But some times are worse than others, and we call those *apocalypses*. Like the Dark Ages or the fall of Rome. The end of civilizations that the history books don't even have explanations for. It's natural. Like those plants that need forest fires to start growing. Kinda poetic when you put it like that.

Doesn't mean I want my house to burn down.

I exhale slowly through my nose. Felix is freaking out, because Felix is a mess. I'm calm, cool, and collected, sitting in my padded leather chair, secretly pinching the seam of my skirt between my thumb and forefinger. I mean, I could see it. Things haven't been great recently. Climate change and COVID, national discord and international disaster. But *apocalypse* bad? I don't know about *that*. Dad could at least wait until I graduate high school.

His eyes sweep the table. For a moment they land on me and I try to remember this podcast I listened to on manifesting once. Please, *please* wait until after I graduate high school. I can practically feel Felix vibrating next to me. I shift the direction of my manifestation. *Be cool*.

Dad takes a seat. "I think I might retire," he announces, and then immediately picks up his phone to consider something more interesting on the screen.

3

I—
What?

The room goes entirely silent. Like, hit-over-the-head-with-a-hammer silent. Kevin blinks like that might have actually happened to him while no one was looking, his mouth hanging open and his hands wilting against the table. Divya is unaffected, but she always looks that way. After a moment she goes back to typing on her tablet.

Dad looks around the room again, pause heavy in the air. “Well?” he says. “Anything to say?”

I’d rather pull out my own teeth than speak first. Evangeline takes the bullet for us.

“You haven’t really said anything, Dad,” she says, leaning back in her chair, the leather squeaking slightly. She says it in a very Evangeline way—a little breezy, a little sardonic—but even she

pulls it back an inch when talking to Dad. “We know you don’t really want to retire.”

“Why not?” He shrugs and folds his hands together in front of his chest.

“Because . . .” She falters. Her eyes dart around the table, a rare concession that she doesn’t, in fact, know everything. “You’re *you*.”

Yeah, *duh*. Still, I’m glad she said it. He’s the Devil, great tempter of humanity, gleefully pushing people to be their worst selves since the day he was created. He doesn’t get to *retire*. I mean, why would he even want to? You know what they say. Do the job you love and you’ll never work a day in your life. Or something.

“Because you want to start the apocalypse,” Felix blurts out, leaning forward against the edge of the table, his hands braced like he’s considering vaulting across it. “The Norse—”

“I don’t want to hear about the Norse,” Dad interrupts impatiently, the way he always gets when they come up. It’s been centuries since the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings and the whole “invading England” thing, but clearly he still takes it a little personally. “They couldn’t start Ragnarok even if they could get that overgrown worm to drop its own tail. They don’t have it in them.” He half-tilts his head toward Divya. “What would the apocalypse look like for our numbers?”

I truly and honestly don’t know what Divya thinks about all this—as far as I know, she’s an entirely normal, unsupernatural human being, but she’s always taken the Devil stuff entirely in stride, as if it’s not even worth raising an eyebrow at. Maybe it matters less to her than the dollar signs. “The numbers would

be bad," she says briskly. "An apocalypse scenario might give the news sector a bit of a boost, but it would be short-sighted. The twenty-four-hour news cycle doesn't fill itself."

"And our numbers now?"

"Quite good. Particularly with it being an election year."

Dad spreads his hands and turns back to us, a smug smile playing on his lips. *There you have it.*

Yeah, except no, we don't. The awkward silence settles over the table again, the cogs in all of our brains turning so loud you could practically hear them. As much as I tried not to, I really thought Felix was right and this was the beginning of the end of days. Sitting here, I think Kevin and Evangeline had reached that conclusion too. We thought Dad was about to announce his Super Bowl, and instead he hit us with his retirement season.

Which, again—*what?*

Dad watches us from the head of the table, his mouth pressed in a sly little smile, and then he laughs. "You should see your faces."

Oh. He's joking. The tension in the room relaxes with an audible exhale peppered with a few faint laughs of our own.

"But really," he says. "I think I might retire."

All the oxygen is sucked back out of the room.

"And end the world," he adds.

Some of the oxygen leaks back in, just enough to give us the brainpower to be confused again.

"Oh, come *on*," Felix wheezes under his breath. He sounds like he's considering throwing up. I know the feeling.

"How?" I ask, finally finding my voice. Because Dad, for all his pros and cons, is a bit of a performer, and I know he's just

waiting to be set up for his next line. But also: *how*? Like I said, the apocalypse would be his Super Bowl. You can't sip a margarita in Cancún and score a touchdown at the same time. Even if it's the point of your existence, it's still *work*.

Dad shoots me an *I'm glad you asked* sort of smile, and even if he doesn't say the words my heart still jumps a little. Dad's approval is like a drug. It just takes a little bit, but we're always coming back for more.

"We're already nearly there," Dad says, slick like a used-car salesman. He gestures with one hand and the screen built into the far wall pops to life. It would seem more magical if Nick wasn't standing in the corner with a remote in one hand and a tablet in the other.

Images and video clips flash across the screen, all of them with the LUXNews lower third across the bottom, lit up with headlines in white text on red so you can't miss them. Bombed-out buildings and bloodied faces, people in cages and mass arrests, talking heads picking people to blame as footage of kids streaming out of a school plays behind them. Things that feel far away from a boardroom in the middle of Atlanta, built so high up that we're looking down on it all. It's uncomfortable seeing it all play out in front of us. There's a reason I don't watch LUXNews, despite it paying my tuition.

"You see all this? Call it the New Apocalypse," Dad says, an air of reverence in his voice.

He flicks his hand and the screen pauses on the image of a man behind a podium draped in the American flag. He looks familiar, but he's a middle-aged white guy—they all kind of look the same.

He grins at the camera with a razor-sharp smile, all pearly white teeth that are so obviously veneers it's distracting. His dark hair is slicked back to show off the touch of gray at the temples that's supposed to make him look experienced. He clearly knows how to angle his head perfectly to show it off as he waves to a crowd out of frame. The banner at the bottom of the screen reads NELSON CAMPBELL CELEBRATES PRIMARY WIN.

"This is what the Norse will never get," Dad says, leaning back in his chair, his fingers pinched together and held up like he's making a point, but he's still looking at the screen in lazy contemplation. "We have to adapt to survive. We have to adapt to *thrive*. It's no use holding onto the old ways. And why would I want to? Back in the day, an apocalypse would have meant—oh, plagues, crusades. Do you know what it takes to topple an empire? Messy, *messy* things. All in good fun, of course. But you get tired after a while." He sighs and rubs his fingers against his chin, tilting it upward. "And in this world—well. A lot can be automated, can't it?"

We're all sitting on the edge of our seats, fully in *shut up and listen* mode. Still, my eyes can't help but dart back toward the man on the screen. Divya said something about it being an election year and that being good for our numbers. I don't think the fact that Nelson Campbell is running for president *and* sitting on the screen right now is a coincidence.

"Faith is no longer built in the church or in the temple or on the sacrificial altar. It's built on the six o'clock news." Thanks to LUXNews. Thanks to him. "And once Nelson Campbell is president, there won't be any shortage. He's built his entire platform off the fears of the American people. It's—" He laughs to himself.

“It’s so beautiful, I almost can’t believe it. It’ll be a fire that keeps burning. An apocalypse that never ends.”

I realize we’ve all gone dead silent, but in a different way. We’re all leaning in, captured by his oozing confidence, like we’re the ones sitting in church pews. Or in front of a television screen. I see what he’s saying. I don’t think he wants to talk about giant serpents again, but it’s an ouroboros. Feed people hate and fear, and they’ll only learn to be hungry for more. They’ll only believe in Dad more, but they’ll only blame each other. The fire keeps burning.

It is smart. I mean, if you’re into that sort of thing.

But what does any of this have to do with us?

“This only works if Campbell wins the election,” Dad says as if reading my mind. I don’t think he can actually do that, but right about now I’m not sure about a lot of things. “We’ll have our New Apocalypse. And all good apocalypses need an Antichrist.” He pauses. “I’d like it to be one of my children, if you can impress me enough.”

Oh.

Entities like Dad—like the Devil—exist because people believe in them. Like Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*, which is a comparison I made to him once and never, ever again. I may be the Devil’s daughter, but no one believes in *me*, or any of my siblings. I don’t have powers or influence over the world, just a camera and a charmingly devilish aura. Becoming Antichrist would make me Dad’s right-hand man, an entity in my own right, not just his daughter. I’d probably be presiding over this New Apocalypse of his, which might interfere with my senior year a bit, but it would also be something that the rest of my siblings would never have.

Divya is looking at Dad. Dad is looking at the picture of Campbell. Kevin and Evangeline are looking at each other like two coyotes standing over the same piece of roadkill, and Felix is staring wide-eyed at his knees through the glass table.

Absolutely no one is looking at me.

My heart twists painfully and my hands curl into fists where they're lodged under my thighs. No one thinks I'm a player. I'm the youngest. Why would they? For a moment my pride threatens to choke me. I could show them, except—

Except we just watched all that evidence of the world on fire, like, two minutes ago. *New vs. old* apocalypse doesn't change the fact that it's still an *apocalypse* and I haven't even been accepted into college. Dad gives a good pitch, it's kind of *his thing*, but I'm not seeing how this apocalypse is any better than the one Felix and I agreed to stop.

"Genius, Dad," Kevin says hurriedly. There's a flush high on his cheeks. I wonder if it's there for all his business meetings or if he's especially flustered to suck up to Dad today. "Absolute genius. A long time in the making, clearly."

"I—" I start.

"Think of all the free time you'd have. You've always talked about buying Facebook," Evangeline chimes in, not to be outdone. "Or Tesla." Dad still isn't over missing the chance to buy Twitter himself. He holds a grudge.

"I think they're pretty evil on their own—" I attempt.

"I think it's a great idea," Felix says, unprompted, louder than anyone at this distance should reasonably talk. "Great idea, Da—*augh*."

I smash my heel into his toes, grinding it down into the shiny white tile to make sure it *hurts*. That spineless *traitor*. I knew I couldn't rely on him to question Dad, no matter how much he puts on the little rebellious act for everyone, but he could have at least kept his mouth *shut*. How hard is that? *Literally* how hard is that?

I can fix this somehow. I just—I just need time to *think*.

“Ada?”

I blink, coming back to myself past the red haze of righteous anger that's threatening to have me strangle my brother in the middle of the conference room. I look up to find them all watching me—finally they've remembered I exist. Dad is the only one who matters, his eyes inscrutable and his mouth turned up in a little smile. He sits back in his chair, his fingers laced together with the lazy confidence of a cat.

“What do you think?” he prompts.

“I . . .” I stare at him, my mouth hanging open, suddenly very dry. When I was younger I would have loved this. I would have loved the fact that Dad was asking for my opinion, but I would have loved the idea of the apocalypse too. Which sounds bad, yeah, but things are a little weird when your dad is Satan. I'd grown up thinking of the end of days as our Christmas, if Christmas came once in a lifetime and by nature involved minimal amounts of Jesus. I'd looked *forward* to it. Now I can't help but think that there are a couple of things that I'd rather not go up in flames. Next year is my senior year. I wanted to get my photography in the Senior Showcase. Izzie and I are supposed to go see a movie next weekend. I have *plans*. All of those things on the screen are

far away from my life now, but I'm not sure they're going to stay that way. "New Apocalypse" is fun branding, but it still sounds a little . . . bad.

I should tell him that. I've got other things going on, I've got a life outside of his apocalypse. I have perfectly valid reasons not to want to watch him go through with it. I take a deep breath, open my mouth—

And fold like a house of cards.

"Sounds great, Dad," I squeak.

4

It's *not* my fault.

The rest of them all rolled over first. Great idea, Dad. Sounds like the only sensible choice, Dad. Would you like the world to go up in flames before or after your coffee, Dad? What was I supposed to say? “No, Dad, that’s a bad idea, why can’t you just get into golf like a normal father?” Yeah, because that would go over well.

I dig my thumbnail into my cuticles as I sit through the rest of the family meeting, which mostly involves Divya charting out the different possibilities with LuxCo stock and if we should shift around a few of the offshore accounts and, oh yeah, definitely tell the studio to change that upcoming plotline on *Dead End Street* where they cure the zombies—zombies are always in during a recession. Something, something, something. I can hardly hear it past the buzzing in my ears. All I can do is stare at my distorted reflection in the glass tabletop.

The meeting ends when Dad's phone chirps and Nick pipes up to remind him that he has a meeting in five in the 30th floor conference room. Yeah, about the layoff thing. No rest for the wicked.

Dad taps his knuckles against the table before he leaves his seat. "I'd really like you kids to help me out on this one," he says with more paternal warmth than I've heard since *maybe* the last time I got caught breaking into the principal's office. (Before Harker's time; he got rid of the easily short out-able electronic lock on the door.)

Now I'm just thinking about tossing the SD card of evidence onto Harker's desk. Probably the last time I'll ever feel like I've got things under control ever again. I'm glad I enjoyed it, at least.

Then Dad says those last magic words, thrown over his shoulder as he leaves. One last little reminder of the stakes here.

"I expect to be impressed."

With that, he's gone, along with Divya and Nick, the glass door closed behind him, sealing us in that suddenly airless little room. We're cowboys in the Old West, all four of us sitting perfectly still at the conference table. Our eyes slide, meeting one another's with silent understanding. We all may have different mothers, but we're all Fausts. We like to win. More specifically, we like to beat each other.

"Client call," Evangeline says suddenly, pushing back her chair so fast it nearly tips over. "Gotta go."

It's like breaking the ice. Now everyone's pushing back chairs and practically crawling over one another to get out of the room. The election isn't for another five months, but we're all scrambling like we're going to physically pick up Nelson Campbell and put him in the Oval Office. Dad couldn't have been more clear.

Campbell equals apocalypse, and apocalypse equals Antichrist. It's hard to tell what impresses Dad, but I think it's pretty clear that it involves Campbell getting elected.

"I'm actually running late," Kevin says. He's already putting his phone to his ear. "Stacey? Stacey? Tell them I'm on my way, the family meeting just went a little over. Yes, I had a meeting—"

"I can't believe I forgot to tell Nick—" Felix is scoffing so much he sounds like an overheating dog. He keeps smoothing down his shirt with one hand. "I can't believe—that's so silly of me. I'd better go catch him—"

Ten seconds flat and they're all gone, leaving only sibling-shaped dust clouds in their wake. And I'm still sitting there, in my stupid ivyside uniform, just . . .

Yeah. Just sitting.

I check my phone.

Izzie

?

Me

bad

Izzie

):

1-10?

Me

12

Izzie

uh oh!

They have such a way with words.

I take the long elevator ride back down to the lobby and lurk there, pretending to scroll Instagram while I wait to ambush Felix. He's so predictable it's almost sad sometimes. I have no doubt he actually went scuttling after Nick to try to get some sort of insider scoop out of him, just like I know that Nick will blow him off in about 0.5 flat. I really don't have to wait very long.

There he is, right on time. Felix skulks out of the elevator like a dog thrown out in the rain, too busy texting furiously to notice me leaning against the wall just past the turnstiles. I wait for him to pass me before I attack him from behind.

"*Traitor*," I hiss, pinching him viciously in the side, threatening to tear off the love handles there he's always complaining about. "*Great idea, Dad*," I mimic him snidely. "I'm going to *kill* you!"

Felix squawks and throws an elbow at me, forcing me to catch it before he can give me a black eye and now we're just wrestling in the middle of the LuxCo lobby. I attempt to knee him in the gut but he just grabs my leg so I have to hop in place and hit him on the back with the butt of my iPhone.

"Can we not—you'd better not bite me." Felix plants his palm on my forehead and pushes my head back out of biting range. "I'll have you arrested if you try to bite me!"

"Do it, you *won't*."

"Can we not *do this right here*?" Felix untangles our flailing limbs and escapes, preening like a disgruntled cat. I huff and retreat to my corner with a glare, pointedly straightening my Ivyside blazer. "People are *watching*."

Of course people are watching, we just conducted the world's most pathetic WWE match in the lobby of one of the biggest media conglomerates in the country. None of them have done anything about it either. Security hovers nearby, looking distressed, but they know a couple of Fausts when they see them. Their job is to make sure that footage of the incident doesn't end up online unless it's another Faust that posts it. Luckily Evangeline is still upstairs.

"Fine," I grind out from between my teeth, because suddenly I'm sick of having an audience. Felix must sense the bite risk is over because he throws an arm around my shoulder and steers me out of the gleaming lobby and back out into the Georgia sun.

It's May, nearly the end of the school year, which means it's not totally miserable yet, but the weather is starting to think about getting unbearable. Definitely too hot to have a hundred and thirty pounds of brother hanging off me. I duck out from under his arm and push my hair back out of my face where it came loose from its ponytail during our fight.

Felix is texting again. "Come on," he says without looking up. "I need a drink."

"Dude, it's like four p.m." And now my brother is an alcoholic. *Great.*

"Coffee." Felix rolls his eyes. "Jesus, you're so annoying."

Yeah, look who's talking. I scowl but fall into step next to him, letting him lead us to whatever trendy downtown coffee shop he has a loyalty punch-card for. He *is* annoying, and I *do* want to pinch him again, but I'm glad that I have someone to talk to about what the hell all that was, much less what happens next.

I've always been closest with Felix. I kind of have to be. He's only three years older than me, and Evangeline has never really been the "doting big sister" type. She's never shown me how to paint my nails or talked about boys, or whatever it is sisters do on TV.

Not that we were ever going to be a *normal* family. Dad made sure of that. By . . . you know, being *Dad*, but also he kind of went out of his way to make sure that the Faustus were not the stereotypical nuclear family. I think Kevin kind of knows his mom, but the rest of us don't, outside of a couple of sentences about what crazy, successful lives they're off leading and their additions to Dad's genetic code. Kevin and I are all white like Dad is, with the same bright red hair that sort of almost has a wave to it, though Kevin's has a receding hairline that makes him look like both princes William and Harry had a beautiful baby boy together. Evangeline's mom is Black and I'm pretty sure she named her that as a joke, considering her name means *gospel* and *good news*, two things that my sister has never been associated with. Evangeline inherited her tight ringlets that she wears luxuriously to her shoulders. Felix is the only one who didn't get the red hair, because his mom is a restaurateur from Seoul and her genes wouldn't allow it. Naturally it's a middling shade of brown, but I know for a fact he dyes it with henna to give it a reddish cast.

I made fun of him for it once, but only once. Even we know when there's a line not to cross, and it's not our fault that we can't be the mirrors of Dad like he secretly kind of wants us to be. Not that that stops Kevin from trying anyway.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Felix butts in on my silent ruminating, narrowing his eyes at me suspiciously. Probably

wondering if I'm going to try to pinch him again. I'm not sure what my face was doing, but it's a fair concern.

"I'm wondering what it must be like to have a brother with a spine," I say without missing a beat. "You were the one freaking out about Dad trying to end the world."

"Yeah, and he's *not*," Felix counters.

"He called it the *New Apocalypse*." I squint at him.

"It's a *name*." He rolls his eyes. "It's not like there's going to be fire and brimstone. Things will just be kinda bad. They're *already* kinda bad. And one of us will get to be Antichrist. So really it's a net win."

Yeah, for one of us. "And you really think it's going to be you?" I look him up and down with as much derision as I have in my body.

"It could be," he snaps, just as defensive as I knew he would be. "Besides, I didn't see *you* saying anything either."

"Yeah, well—"

I don't have a good excuse, actually. I'm not *proud* of it, but Dad has that way about him. I mean, he's the CEO of a company with business holdings all over the world. He's good at getting what he wants. And I'm, like, seventeen.

So *yeah*. Asshole.

"No one listens to me anyway," I scoff, because I have to say something. It's true, and they all have their own way of reminding me that I'm the youngest of four. I deserve financial compensation for what they put me through.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm crying for you." Felix veers sideways and pushes open the door to a generically hip downtown coffee shop,

the kind on the ground floor of an office building with a lot of white tile and a pink neon sign on a big wall that says “make the mocha of each day!” It’s a pun so belabored that I almost get hit with the door as I try to decipher it.

“I have to pee,” Felix announces over his shoulder. “Get me a honey rose latte with oat milk, will you? Tell them to leave the flower petals off the top. They get stuck in my teeth.”

“You’re not even going to buy my drink?” I complain after him, but he only throws up a hand flippantly to make sure I know for sure he’s disregarding me. This is what I’m talking about. *I’m* supposed to be the disrespectful one, but he doesn’t even give me the chance.

Whatever. I step up to the counter and order from the bored-looking barista armed with an iPad. “Can I get a honey rose latte with extra flower petals? Almond milk, please,” I ask sweetly. “And a dirty chai. Biggest size you have. Both iced. Yeah, that’ll be it.” Except for the row of cake pops glistening at me enticingly from just behind the counter, each of them wrapped in colorful cellophane so they look like fat lollipops. I could buy one. I could even wait for the barista to close out my order so it could be extra annoying. But they’re temptingly just a little too far back to be easy to swipe, and I like a challenge. I could really use the pick-me-up too.

It’s just that I’m the Devil’s daughter. I was kind of born to be bad.

The barista turns around to get started on our drinks and I lean forward against the counter, one foot hooked casually around the opposite ankle. Just a little bit further. It’s all about confidence.

Quick, like plucking a flower. I pinch the stick between my thumb and forefinger and—

“Ada.”

I’d know that world-weary, enduringly sanctimonious voice anywhere.

I drop back on my heels, my prize left with its brother cake pops, left to live another day unstolen. I should have taken it anyway, Hasan’s judgment has never stopped me before. I’d never get anything done if it did. But I do want my drink, and I’m not going to get it if he rats me out.

And he *will*.

I heave a sigh and turn to face my tormentor.

Hasan Attar has been a thorn in my side since kindergarten day *one*, when he found me breaking crayons and putting them back in the box. That’s the day he decided to be my self-appointed babysitter. A pint-sized crusader for justice, so long as the injustice was being committed by one Ada Faust. I guess I ought to be flattered that I’ve kept him so busy all these years that he hasn’t been able to diversify. Instead, I’m mostly just annoyed.

“Did you follow me here?” I demand. I try not to look put out, but *honestly*, he’s the last thing I need today.

Hasan gives me a put-upon look. He’s not so pint-sized anymore—sometime around puberty he got taller than me. Not by much, but enough to be noticeable when we’re standing next to one another, which makes me sure that his genetics somehow did it on purpose. It makes him look like an overgrown baby deer, with those big dark eyes and long eyelashes that perpetually say “Ada, do you really think that’s a good idea?” without having to say anything

at all. I'm pretty sure we could sleepwalk through this interaction at this point. The only weird thing is that he's not wearing his Ivyside uniform, that I'm used to seeing him in. Instead he's just in a T-shirt and jeans, entirely boring, and holding a black apron.

"I work here, Ada," Hasan says with exaggerated patience, holding up the apron to show the logo embroidered on the front. He gives me one last pointed look—*don't do it*—as if I'm going to try to steal the cake pop right in front of him. Which, yeah, maybe, but at the moment I have to turn to watch him as he puts the apron on over his head and goes around behind the counter. My eyebrows sink in increasing levels of confusion. Oh. He means it. He really does work here.

"You go to Ivyside," I say incredulously. "And you have a *job*?"

An internship, sure. A lot of Ivyside students have "internships," which is a nice way of saying they hang around wherever Mom or Dad or Grandpa will nepo-hire them one day, so they can put it on their college application. The only reason I don't have an "internship" at LuxCo is because Kevin has already joked I could be his assistant. Not worth it.

I don't think Hasan's family owns a coffee shop chain. Not unless a lot has changed recently.

"My mother pays for Ivyside," Hasan says. He takes my drink from where the other barista has staged it and plops it in front of me. "Mom doesn't let them pay for anything else. And I happen to like working."

Right. Of course. That's the other thing about Hasan. The big thing, actually, the reason he feels like he needs to haunt me like a—

"Oh, ew," Felix says. "Is this your little nephilim friend?"

Like the angel on my shoulder. Ba dum tiss.

Hasan smiles with forced amounts of cheer. "See? You meet the most interesting people," he says. "Can I get you guys anything else?"

"We're good," I say shortly. I glare at Felix, who is squinting at the bakery case now. "And he's not my friend."

But he is a nephilim. Half angel. As in his mother is an angel and his mom is human, and he's made it my problem ever since he laid eyes on me. Felix can see the otherworldly goodness that radiates off him just as much as I can. Sometimes I wonder what Hasan sees when he looks at us. I hope it's glowing red horns or something cool like that.

"We're classmates," Hasan says helpfully. Tactfully ignoring the *ew*.

"Adversaries," I specify.

"Classmates feels more accurate."

"Cool, I don't care," Felix interrupts and he reaches over to claim his drink. He shakes the ice obnoxiously and wanders off to claim a café table. I scowl at his back. This is exactly why I don't go anywhere with my family.

"Ada." Hasan's voice distracts me for the second time in the last five minutes. He stands behind the counter in his full barista regalia now, a little name tag pinned to his apron with a peeling cat sticker stuck to it. He holds out a cake pop. He smiles crookedly. "You look like you could use it."

And he's not even being sarcastic. *God*, he's insufferable.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I grab my drink off the counter and march after Felix, trying to pretend like this day can't get any worse. I'm really trying to cling to the bright side here.

Pros: The world isn't *actually* ending. Like, *really*.

Cons: Hasan gets to watch me beg my brother to help me. The humiliations truly never cease.

"Ugh, what part of 'light flower petals' don't they understand?" Felix is bitching when I get to the table. He at least chose one shoved in the far corner, against a wall covered in framed photos of quirky looking cats.

"We can still change our mind," I say, cutting right to the chase. I plant my hands on the table and drop into the chair opposite him, my drink mostly forgotten. Mostly I'm thinking about my sweaty palms as I remember the real problem at hand. "We could talk to Evangeline and Kevin, get them to see our side of things. I mean, only one of us can be Antichrist anyway."

"And we'll all hold hands and convince Dad to reconsider? Yeah, I'll schedule that for right after I walk on water." He's typing on his phone again, casually sipping at his drink despite the flower petals. Or pretending to be casual. Felix isn't that hard to read. I can tell that there's something he's not saying.

"What?" I ask warily. "What are you thinking? *Tell me.*"

"Who says it can't be me?" Felix blurts out, letting his phone drop back onto the table with a clatter. He gestures up and down his chest as if his paisley bomber jacket is going to be a defining element in the race. "Who do you think it's going to be? *You?*"

I bristle like a cat. "Why *not* me?"

"You can't even vote," he scoffs. "Besides, what's your plan?"

I don't like the way he says that. Like he already has one. Felix doesn't have a plan. Felix has never had a plan in his whole life, except to do the opposite of what Dad likes and hope it gets his

attention. And it doesn't even work. "This all happened, like, ten seconds ago." I hate how defensive I sound. But I hate the look he's giving me too. What the hell does he know? "Give me a minute."

"Uh huh," he says.

"You don't have a plan."

"Do so."

"You do not," I say, but really my heart is trying to beat out of my chest. I've barely touched my drink. I can't blame it on the espresso.

Felix shrugs with one shoulder and picks up his phone again. "I'm on Campbell's social media team. They need me so bad. Right now it's so millennial I could cry."

"You're—since *when*?" This is all happening too fast. This morning my biggest problem had been getting the right shot of Mr. Bass so it was extra incriminating. Now somehow the presidential election is my problem, even though I can't even *vote*. And I've got to get a job about it.

Worse: every single one of my stupid siblings *already has*. There's no way Felix was the only one to have that idea. Kevin and Evangeline are at least three steps ahead of him.

Which means they're four steps ahead of *me*.

My palm sweats against my cup and I pretend to believe it's just condensation. This is all happening, one way or another, and as with many things, it doesn't really matter if I want it to or not. All that's left is to make the most of it, and that means absolutely not letting one of my siblings become the Antichrist over me. Not one of them thinks I even stand a chance.

My stomach churns. Yeah, well, *they're wrong*.

“Since five minutes ago.” Felix smiles smugly against the lip of his coffee. “You’d better catch up fast. No time like the president.”

“It’s no time like the *present*,” I drawl to hide the fact that he’s right. And I’m panicking. Felix Faust is right. The world is fucking ending after all.

“Yeah, well.” He waves it off. “When Campbell is president, he can change it.”

5

“*Ugh.*” I lay flat on my back and stare at the ceiling, but there aren’t any answers in the smooth white expanse and cool-toned, app-controlled LED lightbulbs. I try tapping my heels against the floor like a toddler to see if that helps. “Ugh, ugh, *ugh.*”

Absolutely nothing. Great.

“I can’t believe the world might be ending.” I push myself up onto my elbows with a huff that blows a chunk of hair off my eyes. “And we have to make a *diorama.*”

“I’m making the diorama,” Izzie says. “Technically.”

“I’m letting you make the diorama,” I correct. “*Technically.*” I lean sideways so I can peer inside the glued-together shoebox theater Izzie has constructed. “Or else there wouldn’t be aliens.”

“Worth it,” they say and twist together another pipe cleaner alien to glue to the sky over the invasion of Normandy.

I heave another sigh and lean back against the couch so I can drag my laptop into, appropriately, my lap. We're sitting on the floor in one of the penthouse's living rooms, surrounded by craft supplies and Chinese takeout containers. These days the Faust penthouse is kind of *my* penthouse, which isn't as glamorous as it sounds when you're rattling around in it alone. Dad nominally still lives here, but I know he'll be working late tonight, and if he comes home he usually takes his private elevator to his wing anyway. The rest of the penthouse, minus my room, is a museum to my siblings before me. The nice thing is that Evangeline had a big arts and crafts phase that she summarily moved on from when she moved out, so we have plenty of supplies for the diorama.

Evangeline tends to do that. Have phases, I mean. She left a cat at the penthouse too, who is currently sitting on the couch above me, looking down at us with perfectly loafed contemplation. That's Angelica. No, I'm not sure she appreciates the irony. I'm honestly not sure if Evangeline does either.

"So, like, the world *isn't* ending, right?" Izzie asks. "Like, not *ending-ending*? Because I'm not finishing this if it's all gonna light on fire anyway."

I shrug one shoulder dispassionately, fighting the urge to slide back onto the floor. "It's complicated," I say. "Dad thinks if Campbell gets into office he won't have to do anything anymore, and things will just sort of be . . . bad forever."

"Oh." They twist more pipe cleaners contemplatively. This time fire to stick to a tank. I think the aliens shot it with a laser. "Man, that sucks."

“Yeah.” I puff out my cheeks. Oh, come *on*, Ada. Look on the bright side. “But the election isn’t even until November. And the inauguration is in January. *And then* this stuff can take a while to get going. So, like . . .” I try and fail to find a high note to go out on. “Honestly, we’ll probably be in college by the time anything really crazy happens.”

I’m actually feeling a little bit better about it all. If I can figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do to prove myself to Dad in the meantime, I might even be in a good mood. Things might be bad, but bad doesn’t have to mean *really* bad. At least not for us. I’ll be Antichrist and Izzie can be my assistant to whatever the Antichrist is supposed to do. It might not even be that different from what we’re doing right now, except we’ll be on a private jet more often. If you’re going to be bad, you might as well be the worst, I guess. That is what Dad would say.

Another egg roll might help too.

“Maybe,” Izzie says, still maybe not entirely convinced. At least their Alien Invasion Normandy is coming together. Maybe we just really need to live in the present more anyway. Enjoy the little things. “So what are you gonna do?”

“Mmm,” I mumble around a mouthful of egg roll. I’m slouched against the couch now, propped up just enough to tap at the laptop’s trackpad. I’m scrolling through Harker’s emails—he has a dog he keeps a framed photo of on his desk, guessing his password wasn’t exactly what I would call *hard*—to make sure that he’s really doing something with those pictures of Mr. Bass pushing pills. I think Principal Harker might be a man of honor, but I don’t trust anyone that much. Except for Izzie.

So I feel confident in admitting to them: “I have *no* idea. Felix got in on Campbell’s social media team. Kevin is working for him as some sort of analyst, whatever that means.” I know because he’s already sent an out of office email to his entire contacts list, which includes me for some reason. “I don’t know what Evangeline is doing yet, but you know she had it locked down before either of those two clowns.”

And before this clown. Not that it’s *my* fault.

“I’m literally seventeen,” I complain. “Who is looking for a teenager in their presidential campaign? Nelson Campbell isn’t about to ask me to take pictures for him.” I mean, they’d be good. But not “win the presidency” good. Probably.

“Maybe you can just like, post online a lot. Like on Reddit or something,” Izzie offers, but they’ve turned back to their pipe cleaner flames. They bite the tip of their tongue, holding it perfectly still while the hot glue dries to the plastic tank. “Like start conspiracy theories. Those people love that shit.”

I take another sullen bite. “Maybe,” I mumble around egg roll as I listlessly scroll. Nothing about Bass yet. If he doesn’t do anything with those pictures, I’m going to leak them to the newspaper. I think there are still newspapers around. Maybe I should—

I choke on my egg roll.

I sit up and pound on my chest until I hack up a bit of cabbage, but I’m still holding onto the laptop with my other hand like a lifeline. A beautiful, beautiful lifeline known as Principal Harker’s sent emails folder. Because there, as if it were waiting exactly for me, is:

SENT: Presidential Campaign Social Media Internship Candidate

I'm hesitant to call it *divine intervention*. But maybe something close.

"Oh my God," I choke through the egg roll still stuck in my throat.

"What? What?" Izzie looks up, panicked, hot glue coming off their fingers in drying strings. Their eyes are the size of saucers, still barely visible behind the shaggy fringe of their hair. "Is it the apocalypse after all? Should I call my mom? I don't think we even have a fire extinguisher. Oh my God."

"No, no," I wheeze, waving them off. "I found—*augh*, I'm dying—I found the solution." I grab the laptop by the top of the screen and turn it around, putting it in front of them while I fumble for the nearest liquid to wash out the last bits of shredded carrot before they can infiltrate my lungs.

Izzie rubs the globs of hot glue off their fingertips and pulls the laptop forward, a frown growing as they do it. "Presidential Campaign Social Media Internship," they read. "Okay, makes sense. But Harker recommended Hasan."

"Irrelevant." Of course he did. Who wouldn't? Unfair of him to pick his recommendation from the student body himself and not open it up to applications. Not that I would have applied before, like, today. But still, the option would've been nice, wouldn't it?

"*And*," they say pointedly, eyebrows raised, "it's for the other guy's campaign."

I stop short. "The other guy?"

"It takes two people to run for president." Izzie hands me back the computer. "Or. Well. At least two. Two that matter?"

I take the computer back and frown at the email, where Principal Harker is telling someone named Ms. Rook that he's

proud to recommend Mr. Hasan Attar for the role of social media intern for Senator Harlow's campaign, blah, blah, blah, hard worker, his journalistic aspirations, blah.

I *do* know the name Harlow, mostly because I've heard Dad complain about him more than once. Perry Harlow is one of the senators that represents the great state of Georgia, and the fore-runner to be the Democratic candidate in the presidential election. He went to Ivyside—a million years ago, clearly, because he looks like someone's weird grandpa—and wants to support the school with an inside look at the campaign trail with a social media internship, because what else are the youths good for? A *paid* internship. What a hippie.

Ugh. That's not going to work. I need him to lose.

I need him to—

My head goes up.

"I'll be a spy," I say like it's a revelation. And it is. It's genius, actually. My siblings are all about to duke it out for Campbell's attention like a bunch of crabs in the same bucket. Kevin will suck up, Evangeline will smirk and do something clever. I don't even know what Felix intends to do, but it'll probably be stupid. If I were working for Campbell's campaign, I'd be fighting them more than I'd be doing anything else.

But Harlow's campaign . . .

"I'll sabotage him from the inside," I go on, my heart rate picking up speed as the possibilities unfurl before me. Stunning. Spectacular. *Genius*. Even Dad won't see it coming. "Harlow's got to have skeletons in his closet somewhere. Everyone does. I'll find them and leak them to the press. Campbell wins. Dad is happy."

“And the world ends,” Izzie says with negligible enthusiasm.

“Not literally,” I remind them, but I’m too swept up in my own relief to think about how the difference might not be that big. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. Of course my siblings all ran to lick Campbell’s boots. They don’t think outside of the box. When you’re the underdog, you kind of have to. “All Principal Harker has to do is tell them that he’s got another excellent candidate.”

My hands are already flying across the keyboard as I try to passably recreate the way Harker writes his emails. It’s too late to rescind the nomination of Hasan, but I can add an eleventh-hour second candidate. Ada Faust, a passionate aspiring photojournalist with a background (well, genetic history) in media, social and otherwise, would be an excellent addition to the campaign. She’s even willing to forego any payment for the opportunity, in acknowledgement of her nepo baby status. Which is nice of me, way too nice to be Faust behavior, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made, and *free* is always an easier sell. Hasan deserves it more, but that’s exactly why he doesn’t need it. I don’t know what he’s doing trying to get a social-media internship to begin with. He doesn’t even have an Instagram.

When I look up from the screen, Izzie is still watching me skeptically, a little line forming between their eyebrows. I don’t like it. Izzie and I are usually on the same page—or at least, I’ll be on a page and Izzie doesn’t mind being on that page too, so long as it’s funny.

So they really can’t be looking at me right now like I might be wrong about this one. This isn’t a prank at school or finding ways

to make Amazon glitch so we can get free stuff. This is important. This is—

I mean—

This is *Dad*. It's not like I have another choice.

"You're really sure about this?" Izzie says doubtfully.

The sound of the question mark hits me with a wave of relief. Izzie isn't sure either. But I can be.

"It's really not that big a deal," I say soothingly, dispelling their concerns with one hand and hitting *send* with the other. "I know the branding sounds bad, but the world isn't really ending. It's just one bad president." One president so bad that Dad thinks he can retire. But we don't need to get into that. I close the laptop and toss it onto the throw pillow next to me before leaning forward so I can see the diorama better. It's a perfectly hellish landscape, between the blue cellophane water and the neon green pipe cleaner alien heads floating in the western sky, complete with red spiral eyes. I tap one of the toy soldiers on the head with my fingertip. "Look at these guys. I bet they thought it was the end of the world too."

Izzie hums and plops the flaming tank in the middle of the beach. "I'm not sure that makes me feel better."

6

And to think, I still have to go to school the next day. Only technically, but still. Finals are next week, which means this week has been a total breakdown in the traditional educational routine as teachers run out of their lesson plans and start just killing time before the big tests. Hence, Mr. Bass passing along Adderall to the lacrosse players so they don't get held back. And me on the roof of the Faust Building taking pictures of it. We all have a lot of free time this week. Minus the diorama.

I should still be in class anyway, even if it's just watching a movie and texting under my desk, but the thought of sitting in one place for even that long makes me want to crawl out of my skin. Now that I have a plan, or the start of one, I'm dying to *do something*. Or at least know if it's going to work so I can start working on a contingency. It's the end of May now and the election is in November. Five months. Right now, it might as well be

five minutes. I know Evangeline isn't waiting around for something to happen.

Ugh. I lay flat on my back on top of the monkey bars, trying my patented technique of staring upward and frowning again, much to the same results. A playground is a little stupid to have at a high school, but Ivyside used to have a middle school attached to it before Fern Prep opened down the road. I can explain the playground. The botanical naming convention, I don't have answers for.

I squint and check my phone again. No email from the Harlow campaign. No Harker looking for me either. So absolutely no one has noticed what I did yet, for better or for worse. I roll my heels against the bar they're propped up against. Does no one do their jobs anymore? It's a Thursday. Get to *work*.

"What are you planning?"

My heel slips and my foot plunges between the bars, banging my knee in the process. The force of it nearly pulls me through the gap like a noodle, but the bars I'm lying against catch on my spine. Lucky me.

I grunt and push myself into the sitting position so I can lean over and squint at Hasan, who stares up at me from the edge of the playground with a look of steely determination.

I frown at him. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Shouldn't you?" he counters.

God, he's so bad at this. "I'm me. You're you." I illustrate the point with a flip of my hand. I skip class all the time. He's the one who is, definitionally, the perfect little angel.

So it *is* a little interesting that he's here, standing with his arms folded across his chest, his uniform blazer bunched up awkwardly

and staring at me suspiciously. I like when he gets all fluffed up like a distressed chicken, it's funny, but usually it takes at least a little bit of effort to get him there. Not a lot, this is Hasan we're talking about, and once he tattled on me for stealing a pencil (in second grade, but still). The thing is, I haven't actually *done* anything this time.

I mean, not that he knows about. There's no way he hacked Harker's email too.

I hop down from the monkey bars and he averts his eyes politely as I fix my skirt, which is actually a skort, so it doesn't even matter. The uniform was amended before either of us ever started at Ivyside. "What was the question again?"

"What are you planning?" Hasan asks again, insistent. "I can't stop thinking about you and your brother in the café yesterday—"

"Flattering."

"—and I know you're up to something."

I huff an offended little breath. "Who said I was up to anything?"

His mouth pinches at the corners. "You're *always* up to something, Ada."

Okay, *actually* flattering. Am I blushing? "It's not nice to accuse people of things," I say blithely and I turn on my heel to start wandering across the playground, the wood chips crunching underneath my shoes. "Or skip class. Hasan, what's happened to you?"

"I—" He sputters behind me. There go the flustered chicken noises again. "That's not—"

He makes it so easy sometimes. I let him go on for a minute just to see where he goes.

"That's not what I was saying," he says. "I'm *saying* that the last time I saw you talking with your brother on purpose someone released an entire box of crickets inside the cafeteria—"

"You have such a good memory." The crickets had been funny and Felix knew a guy in his college's bio lab. I'm actually a little glad Hasan is here. It's like he knew I could use a distraction right now. "What's with you applying for a social media internship anyway?"

"I—" He stops suddenly. With his feet, I mean. But he's got to start finishing his sentences. "How do you know about that?"

Hm. Maybe I tipped my hand a little too much there. Well, like I said, I need a distraction, and for all his suspicion, there's nothing Hasan can actually do about it. We've been playing cat and mouse, angel and devil, for most of our lives now. I know his game as well as he knows mine.

Still, sometimes he does surprise me. Every so often. I'm not surprised that Harker would nominate Hasan for the internship, because who wouldn't. I *am* a little surprised Hasan would be interested.

I spin on my heel to face him, my hands clasped coyly behind my back. "I know lots of things," I say enigmatically. "You want to be a journalist. Isn't writing captions and clickbait articles kind of beneath you?"

Something flickers across his face, kind of like surprise but a little softer, and I wonder if I've said too much. Of course I know he wants to be a journalist. He's wanted to be a journalist since, like, sixth grade, when we both got put on the school paper and we ran opposing articles. Hasan on who was stealing all the boys'