

YOU ARE VIEWING A PREVIEW

Silent Song

Ren Benton

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“IS LEX THERE YET?”

Gin should have heeded her instinct to let the call go to voicemail. *Your Business Affairs Executive surely has important news about your business affairs*, her treacherous reason argued.

Instead of news, Maisie jabbed a stick through the phone’s speaker to stir up the butterfly infestation nesting in Gin’s stomach.

She raised a mug to her lips and flattened their wings with a gulp of Earl Grey. “I sent Ethan to the dungeon for leaving nose prints on the window like a puppy waiting for its boy to come home from school. You can join him.”

“I’m a thousand miles out of your reach, tyrant.”

“I can reach my phone. It would be a shame if your mother somehow got the notion her precious bijou sounds like she’s coming down with a cold. Unsweetened cerasee tea and enough VapoRub to cryogenically freeze you are one quick text away.”

“Wow. That Rocky Mountain air has made you a monster.”

On the other side of floor-to-ceiling glass, towering spruces sheltered a few pockets of dingy snow that clung to life in defiance of the calendar. The shin-high sliding window closest to Ethan’s desk was open a crack to admit gusts of the aforementioned mountain air to swirl with the heat generated by the computers temporarily running the creative and promotional arms of their film production company. In the opposite corner, where the warmth made its last stand, Gin huddled in her chair, flannel sleeves pulled down to her knuckles and feet tucked beneath her thighs for more protection from the encroaching cold than her thick woolen socks provided.

Maisie continued. “Moving on before you do something really vicious, like email my ex to say I miss him. What’s the status on the new screenplay?”

Gin lowered her laptop’s screen as if the empty document displayed there would spontaneously choose to tell tales now that it had Maisie for an audience. She put her elbows on it to ensure continued silence. “It’s not ready to share.”

“I’m not asking for the shooting script in my inbox by five, but it’s never too early to start thinking about locations and labor.”

GemGam Ltd. had produced sixteen movies, counting the one Gin had retreated to this borrowed lodge in Colorado to edit. By the premiere of their first film, the script for the second had been written and the myriad creaky wheels of production set in motion. After fourteen repeat performances on the same timeline, Maisie had every right to expect a fifteenth.

Too bad that damn blank document had no respect for tradition. “I don’t have a good sense of the setting yet.”

What a relief. She hadn’t completely forgotten how to make up a story.

“That’s a first. You always tell film students action and setting are inseparable.”

Just tell her there’s no script, no story, no idea and get it over with.

The words jammed in Gin’s throat. The movie opened in July. That gave her two months to write something. It didn’t have to be finished—she could revise at any point, including on set if necessary. Her team could perform miracles with nothing more than an idea.

She could come up with an *idea* in two months. Prematurely threatening everyone’s job security in an attempt to unburden her conscience would be... monstrous.

“It will all come together in the end.” She plucked a postcard advertising home security systems from the mail pile and fanned herself to cool her flush of shame. “Have I ever let you down?”

Maisie’s laugh cracked like a whip. “Of course not. I wish you would once in a while so the bar isn’t set so high.”

Gin leaned back in her chair, half expecting the frustration vibrating through the line to manifest in physical form and hand her a resignation letter. “If we need another assistant, I can find money in the budget.”

“I write the budget. You couldn’t find money for a staple in it.”

Gin could always take a pay cut, but she’d have to tiptoe behind the bookkeeping dragon’s back to put money in the account. In the meantime, she could shift more of the load to herself. “What do you hate doing most? I’ll take over.”

“Way to miss the point. Let me do my job. You make sure the music man signs all the necessary boilerplate and get it back to me ASAP.”

The butterflies took flight again, thousands of wings scattering Gin’s worries about the health of her partnership with Maisie to clear the way for a bigger threat to her peace of mind. “This isn’t the first time

I've had someone score a movie, you know."

"It's the first time you've had Lex Perry score a movie. I don't want you getting too distracted by six feet three inches of sex appeal to lock down chain of title."

Gin had been too busy worrying about bad blood and professional clash of wills to give any thought to the physical side effects of proximity to Lex. Just what she needed—one more way to screw the deal. "He hasn't agreed to take the job yet. Ethan and I will probably end up doing the music ourselves."

"That wouldn't be a first, either."

There were benefits to keeping as much work as possible in house. Foremost, always, the budget adored cheap labor. Nearly as important, the almighty chain of title never became kinked at the hands of a nonbeliever who didn't depend on it for distribution and therefore survival.

But *River Bound* was special. Every movie they had produced previously required a downward adjustment of Gin's vision to accommodate the limitations of money and time, but for once, the stars aligned to bring together a combination of talents, trades, and locations beyond an independent filmmaker's wildest dreams.

The only flaw she could pinpoint was the absence

of music. The wrong music would be worse than none, tarnishing every other gleaming performance. The movie needed a composer as good as the sum of all its other parts, capable of understanding its heart and pouring all his passion and genius into the music.

The movie needed Lex.

Maisie pulled her back to their conversation. "He told some magazine or other he was doing it."

That was news to Gin. "When was this?"

"Must have been right before he hit the road because they mentioned something about having his bags packed early for a tour that's not announced yet. Let me find it in my alerts." Maisie's keyboard pattered. "*Got it. Apparently, spending the past year in the studio wasn't creative enough for Gone & Forgotten's frontman. When asked what's next, instead of plugging the anticipated tour for the band's ninth album, Lex surprised us with the news he'll be scoring a movie for 'an old friend.' While Lex has been 'friends' with his share of Hollywood's beauties, we know of only one 'friend' with the authority to throw work his way. Asked directly if Perry-Greene will soar again, his only response was an enigmatic smile.*"

Gin's desire to believe played tug-of-war with common sense, using her guts for a rope. Hope put up

a good fight before being dragged through the mud. “I can give you half a dozen reasons in that paragraph alone not to take whatever gossip rag that came from as a credible news source.”

“The enigmatic smile is a big red flag. I knew Lex for a year before I saw him do anything but brood, and I wasn’t irritating him with obnoxious personal questions at the time.”

That one was obvious. Referring to Gin as a *friend* was another giveaway. If she held that rank, she wouldn’t have put off contacting him for a month after admitting to herself only he could do the job right. Her throat wouldn’t have constricted while she tapped out the email: *Do you want to score a movie?* Clicking send wouldn’t have been a race against the cowardice urging her to hold down the backspace key and purge her drafts folder to make sure the past stayed safely where it belonged.

Before she could slam her laptop closed and stuff it under the bed for a day or three to avoid the *No, and never contact my client again* response from his manager or publicist or whatever third party was tasked with telling people to fuck off on his behalf these days, his reply popped into her inbox.

Call me.

A command from Lex had a way of overcoming

even paralyzing reluctance. One hand hovered over her phone, but a voice test produced only a rough wisp of sound.

She'd undergone extensive occupational therapy. She knew all the exercises to relax and mobilize her scarred laryngeal fold. In fifteen minutes, she could have carried out a telephone conversation like a big, brave girl.

Instead, she'd typed, *Croaky*.

Since that night eight weeks ago, they'd gone back and forth about what she needed, when, and where, always via email.

Lex preferred the speed and spontaneity of verbal communication over all that tedious typing, but he never again pressed for phone contact. Unless one of them overcame the mutual aversion to speaking, they'd be emailing each other from opposite sides of the same house.

If Lex took the job.

Three decades of friendship enabled Maisie to read her mind. "Veracity of the article notwithstanding, he'll make music for you."

Gin didn't share her optimism. In eight weeks, he hadn't committed to anything more than taking a look at the movie. "You don't think there's the slightest chance he gave me two months to get my hopes up and

drove all the way here so he can see the look on my face when he tells me to go to hell?”

“You’re kidding, right? Lex doesn’t have a long enough fuse for a plot like that. If he’s mad, he explodes, vaporizes the enemy, and writes a song about it.”

Lex and anger had a long, comfortable relationship. They even collaborated creatively, no critic missing the opportunity to declare each of his albums *a masterpiece of melodic rage* or some unimaginative, one-dimensional variation thereof that entirely missed the point of his music.

Other emotions served him less well. Betrayal, for instance, took advantage of his hospitality by setting up permanent residence and roosting on a grudge until the traitor was punished satisfactorily. As far as Gin had been able to tell from a spectator’s seat, nothing short of a coliseum full of ravenous lions could appease him once a friend became a foe.

Now that it was her turn in the arena, she feared even gladiatorial mauling would be insufficient penance to earn his forgiveness.

Feet pounded down the hallway. Ethan burst into the office, breath short from his sprint. “He’s coming up the driveway. How do I look?”

Since she last saw him, he’d donned a tailored vest

over his white T-shirt. The crispness of his jeans suggested the recent touch of an iron. The remainder of his absence had been dedicated to schooling his hair to red carpet-worthy volume and shine. “You look like you’re ready to get your class picture taken.”

He mimed combing his hair a safe distance from disturbing his pompadour. “It’s against my code of conduct to be less well groomed than the nearest straight man. When Lex is involved, the struggle is real.”

Maisie’s sneer traveled through the line. “The man has been trapped in a car for four days. How pristine do you imagine he’s going to be?”

Gin compensated for the visual limitations of the communication medium by providing a voice-over. “Ethan stares in your general direction, perfectly manscaped brows at comically disparate elevations to convey the extent of his disbelief.”

He stroked the aforementioned brows to acknowledge the compliment. “Has she forgotten the man’s hair is supernatural?”

Gin had to take Ethan’s side in this particular dispute. Lex would be cranky after prolonged confinement of his long limbs and impatient energy, but an ominous glare only enhanced his state of being perpetually, effortlessly camera ready.

Even near death, he'd looked like a fallen angel, dark and wounded within the cage of a hospital bed, otherworldly splendor untouchable by mere mortals.

In contrast, every sleepless night for the past two months showed in the hollows under Gin's eyes. If the movie failed to hook his creative interest, seducing him into taking the job obviously wasn't an option, so Plan B was pity. *Do it for the people who are going to lose money and jobs if this movie bombs because there might not be a next time for me to make it up to them.*

Maisie heaved the sigh of the left out. "Tell the handsome man I said hi and sit on his face for me."

Their *friendship* definitely stopped short of that level. "He said he wasn't coming alone, and I have way too much on my plate to take a beating from his girlfriend to give you a vicarious thrill."

"But think of the publicity." Ethan splayed his fingers and swept them through the air as if materializing the headline. "*Gin Greene and Lex Perry had a secret rendezvous in the mountains, and Gin emerged covered in bruises.* Everyone would want an interview. We set up a live presser, and when you're plastered on every network from CNN to E!, you shout, '*River Bound* is coming to a theater near you,' drop the mic, and run away."

"Or—hear me out—we could *not* descend into the

bowels of self-promotion.”

Maisie blew a raspberry. “You know where dignity gets you in this business.”

Nowhere near as much publicity as a juicy scandal, but Gin had enough trouble sleeping without getting into a catfight in the name of a promo op. “Any time you want to get further in this business than my dignity allows, I’ll write you a glowing reference stained by my tears.”

“Where am I going to find another producer who does half my job for me? You’ve been gone a week, and it’s almost starting to feel like work around here.”

Maisie might be right to worry about Gin being too distracted to ensure chain of title, given how easily she could be distracted from warning signs in a friendship that began on set when they were five.

Ethan smoothed a hand over the buttons of his vest, oblivious to Gin’s silent plea for intervention. “I’m heading out. Are you joining the welcoming committee?”

The butterflies zoomed up to clog her throat. “Give me two minutes to finish up with Mais.”

He dashed to greet his long-lost boy without commenting on the croak her voice had become. The front door banged to signal his exit.

Maisie’s code of conduct prohibited letting a

friend's bullshit go unmentioned. "On a scale of one to ten, how stressed are you?"

Gin's postproduction stress level hovered around 9.7 at the best of times, so hitting the top of the scale on special occasions made no discernible difference. She addressed the movie-related portion of the surplus. "I hate the alternatives if he says no."

"There was a time that man would do anything for you. Remind him."

There was a time Lex nearly killed himself attempting to escape the demands she heaped on him. She would never do that to him again. "My two minutes are up."

Maisie interpreted her strangled whisper well enough. "Take a deep breath and blow out the worry candles."

Gin pursed her lips and blew into the speaker. The childhood ritual eased Maisie's mind, if not hers.

"Remember, every movie you've ever made has been done without the musical stylings of Lex Perry. With or without him, this one will be great, too."

No other movie had begged for attention only he could give.

Gin issued a sound vague enough to pass for agreement and pressed the button to end the call.

She didn't have fifteen minutes to perform a full

throat workout. She stretched her mouth wide and inhaled, feigning a yawn. Scarred structures tugged in a tight line from the hollow of her throat up to her ear. She exhaled with a soft, extended *ah*. Five reps didn't return her voice to normal, but the sound that emerged less resembled air leaking through a pinhole in a balloon.

The front door banged again to announce an entry.

She unpretzeled her legs and stood. The urge to ease the door closed and lock it was strong, but hiding in the office wouldn't persuade Lex working on her movie was a worthwhile use of his talent. The movie itself would convince him or not, but she'd have to perform the introductions first.

She stepped from the office into a cavernous living room. The shared wall between the rooms housed a fireplace, TV, and wet bar, none currently in use. The far end of the room opened into the dining room, beyond which a kitchen pumped the rich aroma of long-simmered stew through the open space. Along the northern and southern walls of the house, windows stretched from the plank floor to the beamed ceiling, maximizing panoramic views of woodlands and lake that Ethan declared spectacular.

To Gin, the glass box formed a terrarium with too few places to hide from unseen eyes peering in. Even

miles from the nearest neighbor with acres of dense forest shielding the house from the road, the exposure made her skin creep.

No eyes other than hers scanned the living room from within, and no voices drifted from the kitchen ahead or bedrooms behind to indicate the men had made it inside.

Ethan must have exerted just a little too much force trying to get Lex through the door. Gin mentally directed the cinematic reenactment. Overcome by the premonition he was about to be shackled in the dungeon and forced to make music against his will, Lex wrenched from his captor's grasp and bolted for the trees. Now, Ethan was chasing their runaway composer through the woods because he didn't want to be responsible for ruining the movie with inferior music any more than Gin did.

She should probably help drag the music man back to ensure he didn't escape again.

She equipped herself for a footrace by slipping her feet into canvas sneakers cast off at the security panel the last time she came into the house. As she bent to adjust the back of one shoe over her heel, a flash of movement in the dining room set off alarm bells in her brain.

“Omigosh, it's really you!”

Gin hopped back a step as the intruder rushed her. The door blocked further retreat.

The assailant's embrace crushed Gin's arms against her chest. The woman was a couple of inches shorter and of average build, but her grip couldn't be broken from that position. With her hands trapped, the panic button on the house alarm might as well have been miles away.

She skipped away just as Gin decided to risk her forehead on a headbutt. Hands fluttered in the air like pink, nervous birds. "Please don't tell Lex I grabbed you. He warned me not to, but I was so excited, I forgot I promised not to do the fangirl thing."

Gin's heart continued to gallop while her mind sluggishly processed the news the intruder was a fan, not an assassin—not that the two were mutually exclusive.

She was on the young side of adulthood, petite, hourglass shaped, and hadn't stopped talking the whole time. "I grew up watching you on *Trouble & Toil*. I begged my parents every day to let me dye my hair purple like yours, but the most they'd let me do was wear a wig for Halloween."

Gin's purple hair had been as fake as the spells her character cast throughout the ten-year run of the series. In rare solidarity with other parents, Simone Greene

never would have allowed her daughter's hair to be dyed purple, thereby diminishing her marketability as an above-average white American girl. Gin could hardly appear on the cover of *Seventeen* without long, flowing, natural-colored hair, even if it took a stylist four hours a month to apply those “natural” highlights and lowlights to the drab blonde genetics provided.

The other woman's wide-eyed stare fell to the mark slashing across the right side of Gin's throat. “The scar isn't anywhere near as bad in real life as it looks in pictures.”

The defect bothered Gin only when the tissue damage interfered with her voice. The best plastic surgeon in Hollywood, consulted at Simone's insistence, said she had a greater chance of dying under anesthesia than achieving a noticeable cosmetic improvement with surgery. She never covered the scar with makeup or pretended a fondness for turtlenecks. Fashion magazines digitally erased the disfigurement. Tabloids enhanced it. What they really hid or reveled in was their own discomfort with unapologetic ugliness in a world obsessed with beauty and the “perks” of celebrity.

With any luck, the ball of excitement bouncing before her would never have to understand how ugly the world could be. Gin could easily picture a

miniature version dressed up for Halloween like a character idolized by little girls around the world, even if she looked like she hadn't been born when the final season aired nineteen years ago.

The younger woman slapped her left hand over her mouth to cut off the flow of words. A set of bands on her ring finger sparkled in the sunlight pouring through the windows. A fresh torrent of words pushed the hand away. "I am so sorry. I just feel like I know you after doing nothing the whole trip except interrogate Lex about you, and I forgot you have no idea who I am. I'm Piper, by the way, and I swear I'm not a nut. I will totally understand if you throw me out, but please please *please* point me to a bathroom first."

For the first time since the deluge began, Gin knew how to respond. "I won't throw you out." Her voice emerged low but clear, intelligible despite the increasing perception of constriction.

Lex mentioned he was bringing company, so she'd been prepared for another woman. Just not... this one.

She pointed to the hallway beyond the office. "First door on your left, or you can claim any room other than Ethan's and use the en suite. Make yourself at home."

The finger wings took flight again. "I can't believe how *nice* you are."

Lex must have painted an unflattering picture if not wanting someone's kidneys to explode was unexpectedly nice of her, but why would he be kind? She was the evil ex, after all.

Piper dipped her knees in the universal dance of urinary distress. "My pregnancy app says this baby's only the size of a kidney bean, and he's already squishing my bladder capacity to nothing."

She sprinted toward relief.

Baby echoed in Gin's ears, reverberated in her skull, and threatened to explode from her mouth, amplified a thousandfold.

She kept her lips sealed and pressed a hand to her abdomen. Lex was full of surprises. Babies, rings, and bubbles full of sunshine. Either a lot had changed in five years, or she'd known him even less well than she thought.

Well. If she'd had any idea what he needed, their relationship wouldn't have been such a cataclysmic failure. If his new album was any indication, he was thriving now. Obviously, the best thing for him was everything she wasn't.

Good for him. Good for them.

And if his good cheer made him amenable to working on the movie, good for her, too.

She stepped out of the arc of the door when it

swung open to admit Ethan and an enormous suitcase covered in flowers of glaring hues.

He laughed at the sight of her. "You look dazed. Isn't Piper great? Did she make it to the bathroom, or do I need to find a mop?"

She ignored his first question and the peevish impulse to call him a traitor. "I think she avoided leaving a puddle on the floor. Are there more bags?"

He lugged his load toward the bedroom wing. "Lex brought half a dozen guitars. Maybe he'll trust *you* to carry one."

Her lips trembled with the effort of forming a smile. He wouldn't subject his retinue of wooden ladies to such a long journey unless he meant to seriously consider taking the job.

Happy Lex was good for the movie, but as his *old friend*, she should be glad for him even if he gave her nothing. He was long overdue for some peace.

Her churning feelings receded to the well from whence they'd crawled. They were irrelevant, like ghosts whispering to the living. She would be professional. Lex would put the final perfect touch of sound on her movie and then ride off into the sunset with his wife and child. Gin would return to her blank page.

And they all lived happily ever after. Roll credits.

She stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind her. Stone slabs formed stairs that curved around the front of the house, descending to the driveway that bowed toward a detached garage. The steps grabbed at the soles of her shoes, slowing her feet as she rounded the corner.

A Suburban loomed in the drive, rear hatch open to expose the precious cargo within. The guest of honor stood with his back to her, inspecting the integrity of his baggage.

Alexander Fitzgerald Perry. The blues rendition of his life story would begin *His mama couldn't give him a silver spoon, so she gave him a name fit for a railroad tycoon*. He had the regal bearing to match, though Gin never could pinpoint the origin, other than from his height, he had no choice but to look down his nose at just about everyone.

His long body looked even leaner than she remembered it. Broad shoulders strained at the seams of a soft knit shirt. His torso tapered to a narrow ass encased in aged denim.

Following introduction to the mother of his child, she should confine her admiration to the artistic realm and stop wondering if his back still made a good life raft when the floor was lava, if he still got a pinch under his shoulder blade during long guitar sessions

and groaned long and low while probing fingers smoothed it out, if the canvas of his skin bore any new ink.

If he tasted the same when another woman took him in her arms and put her mouth on him.

Professional, remember?

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the rear view of Lex Perry was a thing of geometric beauty, his back an inverted sublime triangle. If the half dozen drummers who'd had the privilege of staring at it in the line of duty shared her appreciation of the view, they'd have tried harder to hang onto the job.

A slammed door rocked the Suburban, and the current holder of that enviable position came around the back of the vehicle and called her name in greeting.

Lex turned, revealing a sharper jaw, more chiseled cheekbones, every goddamn hair predictably in place. He pinned her where she stood with eyes that were deceptively dark at a distance. Those, too, were more intense than memory served.

She crossed her arms across her middle and hugged herself as if that would hold her in place. Eight weeks of scripting every word and gesture she would perform at this moment hadn't accounted for the tidal wave of helpless yearning that threatened to push her

toward him. Her lines vanished from memory as if they'd been written in sand.

This movie had tormented her with equal parts promise and agony from the start. Now there could be no doubt it meant to break her heart before it finished with her.

END OF PREVIEW