

AUDIO DISTORTION

Begin Again

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(<http://steamby51.deviantart.com>)

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“We are, and always will be – no matter what paths we travel, or what complications life throws at us – *Audio Distortion...*”

~Catrin Meredith

prologue

10:30 AM – Tuesday – Torino, Italy

Emma Greene

“Buongiorno, Emma!” the girl behind the counter calls out.

“E a voi, Bianca,” I reply.

After a brief silence, I turn to look at her, and find a face covered in confusion.

“What’s with the face?”

“It is Tuesday...”

I laugh.

“I was passing by, and my heart pulled me in. You know me and music...”

I hear her laugh, as I start to wander down my favorite aisle, but a second prolonged silence, and Bianca’s unusual seriousness, makes me pull up short. I turn and walk back to the front counter, where I find her intently staring at me.

“What’s going on? You’re never this serious...”

“A very odd thing has happened this morning... and now, your random appearance...”

“Stranger than me just turning up in your shop one day, and you recognizing me immediately?” I ask with a smile.

“Perhaps it is. I will leave it to you to decide...” she replies, reaching under her counter and getting something. “A courier left this an hour ago...”

She hands me a square cardboard envelope that I recognize as a CD mailer. The moment I see that it's *addressed to me*, I understand her confusion.

"How is this possible?" I ask.

"As you told me when we first met, because no one knows you are here, I too, was quite confused. My concern that it may be important, forced me to sign for it, rather than send it back."

I glance at the address of origin, and see that it was sent from Ibiza, Spain.

"Well... I assure you I don't know anyone in Ibiza, *and* not even my closest friends know I am here."

"Well then," Bianca says, walking over, locking the door, and turning off the small neon OPEN sign, "I would suggest you open it and we investigate..."

forty-six hours later

8:30 AM – Thursday – Torino, Italy

I'm standing outside the door when Marco and Bianca arrive to open their store.

"Emma, it is quite early. Is there some problem?" Bianca asks.

"No... no problem. But... I do need a favor guys – a big favor."

"But of course, Emma, anything!"

"Remember the CD you gave me Tuesday?"

"Of course," Bianca replies, unlocking the door. "Do you wish to know who recorded the song?"

"Not yet. I did discover a hidden mp3 file on the disk – it's a recorded message – and now I know *why* I got it," I reply, following them into the store.

"Really? May I ask what it says?" Bianca asks, as she locks the door behind us. Marco goes about

turning things on, and getting the store ready for business.

I pull the CD out of my notebook, and stare at it for a moment... thinking.

“I’ll let you hear the message, in return for the favor... well two actually...”

“It sounds very... very...” Marco says from across the room, looking at his sister, “what is the word in English?”

“Di malaugurio?” Bianca asks, a bit spooked.

“Si...si...”

I raise my eyebrows, and Bianca understands my visual request for a translation.

“Ominous...”

“What do you need?” Marco asks, stopping next to us.

“I need to make four copies of the song on the CD, and I need a contact – *in Spain* – who can ship them overnight for me...”

Finally, Bianca relaxes, and laughs. Marco is quick to follow.

“Come,” Marco says, turning toward his office. “Rico has a small store in Santa Pola – a town near Alicante. We trade with him regularly, and he thinks Bianca is ‘cute’, and will do anything for her...”

He makes Bianca blush, and me laugh.

“I will send him the file, have him make copies, and send them where ever you wish them to go.”

Still laughing, I follow them into their office...

four days later

9:00 AM – Monday – Southport, England

Catrin Meredith

“Miss Meredith,” my new assistant says, sticking her head in my door, “A courier just dropped this off for you. I told him you were here, but he insisted I could sign for it.”

“Shannon... I thought we talked about the whole ‘Miss’ thing...” I say, frowning and waving her into the office. “We’re within five months of each other age wise – you really should be calling me Cadi, like everyone else does. We’re in a concert hall... not a court room.”

When she makes it to my desk, she’s as red as a fire engine, and quickly hands me what appears to be a CD mailer. As I am reading the addresses on the front, Martha appears at the door.

“Good morning MISS MEREDITH!”

Again, poor Shannon blushes.

“Now... see what you’ve started?”

“What’s that?” Martha asks, “I saw the truck driving off.”

“No idea,” I reply, “but it came from Santa Pola, Spain – where I know no one.”

“I’ll be at the front desk,” Shannon says, and quickly disappears out the door.

“Don’t worry, Cadi... she’ll loosen up. Just give her some time. After all, it isn’t everyday someone gets hired by the bass player for one of music’s biggest pop bands...”

I laugh, pull the tab to open the envelope, and find only an unlabeled CD inside...

five hours later

9:00 AM – Monday – Lake Tahoe, California

Emily Táó

Because I'm not expecting anyone, when I hear the chime on the lobby door, I get up from my desk and head out front. I arrive in our small lobby at the same time my husband does, to find an overnight courier standing there with a clipboard.

"Ms Emily Táó?"

"Not any more... but I was once," I reply, making Leonard laugh.

When the guy looks confused, I explain.

"I got married, that's all. Whacha got anyhow?"

He holds up a white cardboard CD mailer.

"Just this... but I need a signature."

"No problem. You want it as addressed?"

"Well..."

I laugh, take his electronic signature pad, and scribble Emily Táó, for the first time in years. He smiles, hands me the cardboard mailer, and disappears out the door.

"Santa Pola, Spain?" I mumble, pulling the tab, and tearing it open.

"You know someone in Spain?" Leonard asks, watching intently.

"Nope... not that I know of..." I reply, as I pull a single, unlabeled CD, out of the mailer.

"Well... fortunately for you, I just happen to have a CD player handy," he says, laughing and holding open the door to the studio...

thirty minutes later

10:30 AM – Monday – Fort Collins, Colorado

Stanley Campbell

When we hear “Mr. Campbell,” over the classroom intercom, all my students go quiet.

“Yes, Theresa?” I reply.

“I just signed for an overnight package from a courier service, address to you here at the school. I’m sending it down with a student.”

“Thanks, Theresa!”

I turn back to face my class.

“Okay... so... clefs... someone tell me which ones we commonly use.”

“Bass clef!” one student calls out.

“Treble clef,” comes from another.

“And time signatures?” I ask.

“4/4 is most common,” a girl in the front row replies.

“Very good – you guys were paying attention.”

A student appears at the door, knocks, and I tell her to come in. She crosses the room, hands me a white CD mailer, I thank her and she goes back to the office.

As I stand reading the return address, I realize everyone is sitting quietly, watching me.

“Do you guys know anyone in Santa Pola, Spain?”

Most of them laugh, and a few mumble, ‘huh’?

“Yeah... me neither.”

I pull the small tab to open the mailer and find a blank CD inside.

“So... what say we find out what’s on it guys?” I say, walking over and popping it into a portable player I keep in the classroom.

With 16 pairs of eyes watching, I push play...

thirty minutes later

10:00 AM – Monday – Los Angeles, California

Willie Morgan

I'm carefully mixing a track for a new artist, when the door to the booth opens, and one of the many secretaries in the building sticks her head in.

"Sorry to interrupt, Willie..." she whispers.

"No need to whisper, Carrie, the mics are off. What's up?"

"This just came for you. Richard said I should bring it down."

She holds out a cardboard CD mailer, which I take from her.

"I didn't know you had friends in Spain," she says, smiling.

"I don't... that I know of," I reply, spinning it around so I can read the origin address.

"Well... see ya later. Gotta get back to work."

She lets the door go, crosses the studio and disappears out the door. Now curious, I pull the tab on the mailer, tear it open, and find a blank CD with no explanation inside.

With a shrug, I slip it into the nearest CD drive, and click 'play'...

one

Stanley

I'm lost in the lyrics, handwritten on the page in my hands, when my dad walks up.

"Hey guy – why so serious?"

"Lyrics..." I reply, holding up the page.

"Oh..." He pauses for a moment, and then sits down next to me, on the steps. "You okay?"

"I guess..."

When I sit silently staring at the page in my hand, my dad continues.

"I stopped by to tell you that I have a crew that can handle the modifications to your house, in four days. You interested?"

"Well..."

"Still not sure you want to do it?"

I frown, confirming what he's suspected for months – my mind is still stuck on Emma... and the possibility she'll come back.

"Four years, Stanley – it's been just more than four years since the two of you 'broke up'. I know what I said the day I 'lectured' the four of you, right after she left, but this has gone past all that. When are you going to quit screwing around, and do what needs to be done?"

"We've been over this, Dad... repeatedly. I can't *make* her do anything. No one except Emma, can make Emma do anything."

"Good point, son. But you can damn sure make *Stanley* do something..."

“I don’t even know where she is...” I start to say, and then jump when my dad snatches the envelope I’m holding, out of my hand.

“You could start here,” he replies, pointing at the postmark on the envelope...

I-10123

Torino Italy

I take the envelope back, and sit staring at it.

“How long are you going to continue to torture yourself, Stan?”

“We decided, Dad... we decided that what we had wasn’t meant to be permanent.”

“Yeah... right. Two twenty-one year olds, trying to find their way, in a high-pressure world, of bright lights and fame,” he says, looking at me, and shaking his head.

“May I?” he asks, reaching for the single sheet of paper I’m holding, which I let go of.

I watch quietly, as he reads the five stanzas of lyrics she’s written, and as he hands it back to me, he says, “If you don’t go find her, you can bet I’m going to. ‘Daughter-in-law or *daughter*’ as I recall, which means...”

He’s interrupted by my current ‘girlfriend’ as she comes out the door behind us.

“Hey, Stan – I’m off to work.”

“Okay,” I reply, standing up and kissing her. “Do you want to meet us for dinner, or should I come and get you?”

“I can get there.”

The moment she glances at what’s in my hand, a brief look of depression sweeps over her face, telling me she knows what it is. After a second, she smiles, and looks at my dad.

“It’s really nice of you to do the ‘birthday dinner’ thing for me, Mr. Campbell.”

“It’s my pleasure, Courtney. Logan also has a gift for you – which she and Georgie came up with. Hopefully, whatever it is, it doesn’t embarrass you.”

“I’m sure it will be perfect.”

She gives me another quick kiss, and disappears down the driveway, to her car, which is parked on the street.

“She knows,” I mumble, sitting back down next to my dad.

“Of course, she does. She’s just waiting for you to admit it. You know she doesn’t deserve this...”

Sure, he’s right, but it isn’t something I want to talk about.

“I have to get to school, Dad. Let’s hold off on the project for now, okay?”

“Sure kid. I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”

“Okay... see you then,” I reply, as I head for my truck.

Just as I have for the last few months, all the way to the high school, I think about just one thing...

More accurately, *about just one person...*