

One

AUDREY

December 18

I'm rich!

This is what I want to tell the hotel clerk greeting me at the Park Hyatt Vienna check-in. *I'm rich and that's why I booked the Diplomat Suite in one of Vienna's priciest hotels—and at peak-Christmas-season price point too. Oh, and paying for my daughter Isadora's last-minute wedding in Austria at Christmas like it's nothing? Yeah, that's me. RICH.*

But I don't want to be that gauche American. I tastefully refrain from joyfully breakdancing on the grand hotel's marble floor, my breakdancing joy coming from being so newly rich and not because I'm that limber or because Izzy is getting married. That's going to be a disaster, although I'm sure the party will be great. Even if my children's devil father and his pure-demon mother will be there.

I decide to keep my arrival simple and dignified. The clerk doesn't need to hear my life story. "Checking in," I say. "Audrey Krishnan-Meyer." I hand him my passport and platinum credit card.

I don't add: *I'm really just rich in credit card points. Years of saving them earned me this suite for two glorious nights. Two children, years of tuition, meals, clothing, camps, a very expensive divorce attorney, and here I am. About to be a mother-in-law and classing it up in one of your best*

suites. Thanks, Izzy and Max. You were worth every point. If only the points also covered the Airbnb we're all staying at once everyone else arrives, I would have spent so much more frivolously. Oh, and don't worry about my points splurge. I booked these two extra nights ahead of your arrival to explore the city on my own, and I will be sure to invigorate the local economy and restock my credit card points with the outrageous spending I plan on doing during that time.

“Welcome to Vienna,” the clerk says. “Is it your first time here?”

“No. I did a study-abroad program here when I was in college.”

“So you know Vienna well, then?”

“I know Vienna *cakes* well.” I would never forget a cobblestone alley where a delicious cake could be found. And I'm sure, if pressed, I could still find all the hashish joints where my daughters' father, Beau, used to light up back in our youth.

The clerk chuckles. He swipes my credit card for incidentals, to commence the obscene amount of euros I will be spending this week on my daughter's wedding.

But if the clerk was curious, I would let him in on a secret: *Herr Clerk, I really am, almost, actually rich. And not because Dad recently passed away and left me his modest estate. I'll be rich because the accounting firm Dad and I built together over the last twenty years is being acquired by a behemoth firm. Once the deal closes, I could retire if I want to. At forty-five years old! Can you believe it? I mean, I went to work managing Dad's office because it was the only decent job I could get as a twenty-two-year-old new mother. I never anticipated I would mastermind growing a small business. I wanted to be a pastry chef. Turns out I'm better at eating pastries, and more than satisfied to outsource the making of them to others. Hello, Vienna! So excited to be back in your pastry-laden city!*

My attention is redirected from spilling my big-money news, however. I'm jet-lagged from the overnight flight from New York and coming off the sweet Xanax that got me through it. I'm jaw-droppingly awed by the lavish Christmas decorations displayed in this stately old bank building turned hotel. I'm very, very moved by the Mozart-playing symphony performing in the Christmas market in the square just outside the hotel. But I can't concentrate on all this sensory glory because the doors to the ballroom nearby have opened. I hear the event going on in there, and my blood goes cold.

I'm sure I hear *that* voice. Deep but verging on shrill when he's stressed.

No. It couldn't be.

"Is that—" I say, then stop myself, because I notice the sign outside the ballroom, which says, in letters so big I don't need glasses to read them, **THE INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ASSOCIATION PROUDLY PRESENTS AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR IAN HAWKINS**. "Ian Hawkins," I mutter. "I can't believe he's here."

"Do you know him?" the clerk asks me. "My children love his books."

"I know him," I say. Ian Hawkins was once my very best friend. "He's my ex-husband's ex-husband."

Like all disastrous relationships, ours has an origin story.

Ian and I, instant besties since freshman orientation at New York University, had come to Austria to do junior year abroad at the University of Vienna. Soon after our arrival, we met Beau Williamson in the lobby of the International Student Residence Hall. He was placing a flyer above the mailboxes, advertising a band performance that night at a local bar.

Beau was grunge attractive. He wore eyeliner and had spiked hair, black at the roots, platinum blond at the tips, very Billie Joe Armstrong by way of Billy Idol. But what really caught our attention was the name of his band: Ava the Unstoppable.

“Who’s Ava?” Ian asked Beau.

Beau said, “She’s a rat that’s been scurrying around our rehearsal space and refuses to be caught. Can’t catch her because you can’t stop her.”

“She sounds cool,” I said, trying to sound cool.

I *was* cool then. At least, I told myself I was. I went to NYU so I could live in Manhattan, where I frequented art house movie theaters, interned at a posh gallery in SoHo, and wrote deep thoughts in my journal while sipping cappuccinos at historic Caffè Reggìo in the Village. I hung out with Ian, who legitimately was cool—an inventive artist who dabbled in painting, sculpture, graffiti, and the cutest boys.

“Then come see us tonight,” Beau said. He winked at both me and Ian.

I should have known then. Trouble.

Beau, we learned, was from Alabama, went to Emory University in Atlanta, and was also a study-abroad student. He’d spent the summer before the school term in Vienna wandering the Alps and Eastern Europe. He’d formed a casual band with some fellow wanderers. That night was to be their first performance as Ava the Unstoppable. (It also turned out to be their last. Beau slept with the drummer’s girlfriend a week after their debut performance—and RIP, Ava the Unstoppable, the band.)

In the fluorescent lighting of the generic residence hall where Beau was advertising his performance, he was indeed hot. But that night, in the dark cavern of a smoke-filled, seedy dive bar, the spotlight turned onto his face, Beau transformed into megawatt hot. His face was made up

like Ziggy Stardust, and he wore a white sequined bodysuit, open down the chest, that perfectly accentuated his lean body and showed off his muscular torso. Ava the Unstoppable was a cover band, and not a particularly good one. But it didn't matter with Beau Williamson, front and sybaritic center, singing Elton John's "Rocket Man." As he performed, he flirted with his band members. With the bar staff. With the audience.

People didn't use the term *sexually fluid* then, but Ian and I, deep in our glam rock phase of young adulthood, were very much inspired by the movie *Velvet Goldmine*, and we could not get enough of glam rock Beau, singing and thrusting and throwing the audience into a frenzy.

Ian and I had no idea then that we would both marry and divorce this charismatic performer with the golden looks.

You win, Curiosity.

I step inside the ballroom and stand discreetly at the back. The venue is packed with conference attendees wearing loose tunics and lanyards with name tags. The rows of seats are lined on the floor with canvas tote bags filled with books. The giant screen behind the podium where Ian stands displays images of Ian's most famous books, his beloved characters, his many awards: Caldecott Medal. Newbery Honor. Smarties Prize. Blah, blah, blah. The audience members gaze at him rapturously.

Something's off. Ian looks tired, exhausted, fed up, perhaps a bit stoned.

I'm all those things too—especially the fed-up part. *Of course* Izzy wanted him at the wedding. She and her sister, Max, adore him. I hate that. I also hate that I agreed to finance this very expensive Christmas wedding in Vienna instead of having it back home because I was sure Ian wouldn't show. He famously hates to travel at Christmas, as much as he hates his boyfriend's

fondness for *Housewives* of all cities and people who pronounce *library* as “libe-ary.” Not like I ever spy on Ian’s Instagram or anything.

I haven’t seen Ian in person in—how many years? I do the math. Beau and I were married for ten years. He left me to marry Ian. They lasted six years. I remember Izzy telling me the news that Daddy and Ian were getting divorced as I helped her dress for her junior prom. Ian was waiting for her on the front lawn with her prom date, ready to take photos of the couple. Ian had made excuses for why Beau wasn’t there, apologizing for being there at all. *So just don’t ever come back*, I said.

He didn’t.

Izzy is twenty-three, two years older than I was when I married her father, one year older than when I gave birth to her.

X age minus however many years ago equals: We. Are. Fucking. Old. Now.

It’s jarring to see Ian’s accomplishments and accolades on the screen behind him, because he looks so oddly defeated. He pauses to look at his notes, then picks up with his speech. “Can I confess something to you?” he asks the audience. There are mumbles of affirmation. “To be honest, I feel the crushing weight of your expectation. You want to be dazzled. And I’m just not up for that. Maybe I’m the creator of some of the world’s favorite stories, but me, Ian Hawkins . . . I’m just . . . human. Struggling.” He wipes a tear from his eye. Oh shit! “My boyfriend just broke up with me. Sent me the text right before I came to this stage. Said I’m married to my work. And truthfully . . . I’m not enjoying that work these days.”

For a moment, he’s the Ian I knew when we were college students over two decades ago, just after his first real boyfriend dumped him. I want to run to the stage and pummel Ian into a hug and let him sob on my shoulder, then hold his hand across the table at our favorite Viennese café while

we indulge in our favorite Viennese winter treats, apfelstrudel and glühwein—thin pastry filled with sweet, spiced apples, and mulled red wine.

I'm getting hungry. Maybe I should reach out—

Then I remember. He's also the man my husband left me for.

I stay where I am, frozen. Hurting for him. Hating him.

Ian looks to his speech notes again, then tosses the index cards to the floor. He's given up. "I'm so sorry," he tells the audience. He pauses again, doing what I used to call Ian Recalibration, when he rethinks a situation and comes out with a new verdict. Suddenly, he announces, "Actually, it's *you* who should be apologizing to *me*. And to readers. I'm going to be real for a moment. Publishers today don't care about children or literature. Publishers just care about profit and exploitation and regurgitating the same idea." There seem to be murmurs of hostility coming from the audience, but Ian continues digging in. "I've got news for you. *Publishers* are the reason children don't read. You blame TikTok, but it's your didactic, boring books that are the problem. Publishers are so busy virtue signaling diversity or rebooting stale ideas, they wouldn't know an original story if it kicked them in the ass. Think about it. Would anyone here publish *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* today?"

Now it's not just murmurs of discontent that are coming from the audience, but outright offended cries. I kind of wish I could order some popcorn.

"Liars!" Ian admonishes them. "You would water down the character and story so hard that Alice would never even find the rabbit hole, much less dive into it."

Very loud music suddenly booms from the room's sound system, drowning out Ian's rambles, signaling his speech is being prematurely ended by the booing audience.

I can't believe what I've just seen. Vienna, you really know how to awe.

Ian walks off the stage in disgust and, I suspect, horror over what he's just done.

But one person applauds.

Me.

As he exits the stage, Ian glances to the back to see where the clapping is coming from.

He sees me.

He smiles.

For a moment, Ian looks radiantly happy.

Excerpted from My Ex-Husband's Ex-Husband: A Novel by Rachel Cohn and Melissa de la Cruz. © 2025 Published by Little A, November 18, 2025. All Rights Reserved.