

Creative Control

People saw her. She was attuned to the “Don’t look now but…” whispers, the odd stare when they thought she wasn’t looking. Jade knew that her presence at Damien Blue’s show was an all-important signifier, an indication that the young man was really on to something, maybe even going places. His music had been sufficient to cause a veritable rock goddess to descend into the depths of a basement rock club on a Thursday evening, after all. She was wearing what looked like a prom dress salvaged from a thrift store, dark and sequined, and made up with plum-colored lipstick and heavily-applied eyeliner to match. Sighing with feigned indifference to her surroundings, she examined her black-polished nails, owning the room with diva aplomb. She sat at one of the few tables in the place and certainly the best, set up high in back where one could see everything and be seen by everyone.

Jade was, however, having trouble catching sight of anyone that she would call a friend, and that was certainly not what she would call Sid Wheeler, who saw her just after she noticed him, made his way across the room, and sat himself at her table.

“Of course you can have a seat,” Jade bit off sarcastically once Sid was comfortably settled in. Her distinctive, smoky voice was already weary with annoyance, her arms were crossed, and she was raising one eyebrow. Sid grinned and ignored her petulance.

“Hello Jade! What brings you here tonight?” His mirrored sunglasses were perched on top of his head, nestled into his spiked black hair. He was in his late thirties but didn’t look much different than he had when he was twenty-five: a few more creases around the eyes maybe, but he had the same grin, the same cocky attitude, and just about the same wardrobe. But Jade knew that behind the wrinkle-free mechanic’s shirt and pristine black-and-white checked slip-on Vans was a businessman as sharp, and if need be as ruthless, as you would find decked in Armani on Wall Street. Once upon a time he used to run his own record label, but he effectively closed down its operations when he got a shot at the majors; it became an imprint in name only, and he became a most unabashed corporate shill.

“I’m here for the kid,” she said flatly, toying with the bright red maraschino cherry that she’d plucked out of her rum and coke. “They say he’s the next big thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Sid replied with smug faux surprise, his eyes narrowing into slits as he continued to grin at Jade. He turned from her and scanned the modest expanse of the club that lay before them both. It was dimly lit, with bare pipes decorating the ceiling, a stage at the far end of the room, a dusty old bar hugging the right wall, and tables selling band merchandise lined up to the left.

The gathering crowd was casual and noisy. Most everyone there was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, eighteen being the minimum and anything exceeding thirty being a maximum of sorts. At the bar a girl was leaning against a boy with nearly the same hairstyle as her, long wispy bangs swept across both of their faces. The boy had his hands on the girl’s hips, and they were sharing some rather conspiratorial exchange, laughing at a private joke. Kids were milling around the merchandise tables and calling loudly to one another, and a young man with long black curly hair and Birkenstocks was handing out Xeroxed pamphlets with a photo of the planet Earth on the front. Heaving a contented sigh after taking it all in, Sid turned back to Jade. “I love being around young people, don’t you?” he asked her cheerfully. “They just make me want to – give blood and believe in things.”

Jade popped the maraschino cherry into her mouth. “I always thought of you as the type to take blood, Sid.”

He shrugged. “I’ve left my share on the floor.”

Jade rolled her eyes. Her own involvement with Sid had been brief. She had been a fixture in the area rock scene longer than anyone, and for a time had been its most talked about, if not its most accomplished, musician. Not that she had recorded a thing in years. After fronting the all-girl rock group The Amputees for maybe five years, releasing two albums and a flippant EP of cover songs like “Dream Weaver” and “Magic Man,” Jade had broken up the band. She was now dedicating all of her time exclusively to the exhausting enterprise of being herself. The plan had been to record on her own, but that hadn’t happened yet. Neither had the art gallery that she was going to open one day. Neither had her DIY clothing boutique. But there had certainly been a time when The Amputees were this town’s hot ticket, the ones that the

kids and the men with the money were turning out to see. It was then that Jade had first encountered this particularly fresh-faced and tenacious businessman prowling around packing contracts and trolling for signatures. It hadn't gone far.

There were certain things that Jade could not abide. She didn't mind music journalists: those who insisted that she was nothing but surface flash and hated her for it, and those who conceded that she was nothing but surface flash and loved her all the more. Publicity was publicity, right? She didn't mind the poseur fans that showed up to see her band because it was the thing to do, but struggled to credibly mouth the words that most of the crowd could scream by heart. Hey, they paid their cover, right? But she hated it when roadies talked down to her, couldn't continue singing if a thrown bottle threatened her or one of the other girls on stage, bristled if you called her by her Christian name, Janine. And she would *not* be told what to do. It was that last commandment that Sid Wheeler had broken, and The Amputees had signed with someone else.

"This take-no-shit-girl-punk thing of yours has been a great way to gain attention," Sid had said. "Now we reel them in by having you adopt a more melodic, more accessible sound."

"The bleach blonde thing is fun, baby, *believe* me, but I want to see you with a more classic look. An old school pin-up goddess. You'd look gorgeous, not to mention incredibly marketable."

"You're already bigger than the rest of the band. One more album and you become a solo act." He held out his hands and gasped at an imagined marquee. "Jade. One night only, sold out. Down-and-dirty rocker turned rebel diva, desperado fashion plate."

*Desperado fashion plate.* A cringe-inducing turn of phrase in casual conversation, to be sure, but it had made a great second album title, and it had served as a fantastically extended middle figure to Sid Wheeler.

Of course, Wheeler had taken wing the second The Amputees went off the market, the ink still wet as he headed for his next attempt at conquest. But he couldn't quite let it end there. Interviewed by a youth-skewing magazine after he landed his label a string of hot bands out of New York City (the article had been titled "The New New York Sound"), Sid had worked in a parting shot about the ones that got away.

“The Amputees? You know, I thought at the time that I had missed out on the big one, maybe that I was going to lose my job. But I see now that The Amputees were largely a reiteration of an old sound, and largely a production of hype, which I don’t want our label to be about. We just want to bring really great music to people you know? That’s my passion: finding something new and real and getting it to as many people as possible.”

The article indicated that Sid’s “face crinkled with laughter” before he spoke again.

“I think I might have thought I was in love with Jade for a while. She’s a very abrasive personality, and not conventionally beautiful, but I think she does have a very sort of rude charisma that hypnotizes people for a time. And of course, the war paint works wonders.”

Here the article mentioned that Sid “took another bite of sushi and began talking about his favorite Clash record.”

Jade had written a manic thrash song called “War Paint,” but The Amputees never did record it. For all of Jade’s refusal to be defanged or Svengalied by Sid, she had come to a conclusion similar to his when it came to The Amputees. She *was* bigger than they were, and she deserved creative control. It was only a matter of time before she hit the scene again. There was still plenty of time for that. Sid had had a lot of nerve to sit down with her tonight and insinuate that she was the same age as *him*.

“Can I get you another drink?” Sid asked as he eyed Jade’s glass, now filled only with melting ice cubes.

Jade shook her head. “I was taught to always get my own drinks. There are a lot of creeps out there.”

Sid raised his eyebrows as if she had shocked him with her response and held up both of his hands as if she’d drawn a gun. She rolled her eyes again and looked toward the stage as the crowd erupted with cheers and applause for Damien Blue.

A very handsome boy, this one was, with an open, honest and unlined face and the most attractive bedhead Jade had ever seen – a head full of artfully arranged, sandy blonde cowlicks. He accompanied his quiet, vulnerable singing with quiet, vulnerable acoustic guitar and closed his eyes as he delivered his tender lyrics, face bathed in lights of his own namesake hue. Oh yes. Damien Blue had the makings of a very dear heartthrob for a very large portion of the population.

Let Sid get his hooks into this kid, and he would sell millions of records – and anything else someone wanted to sell: concert tickets, DVDs, soft drinks, T-shirts, nightshirts, *dolls*. Of course, Jade mused, Blue Boy’s soul would have to be forfeited first. In between songs the kid was all nervous charm, thanking the crowd profusely and running his hands through his hair, looking abashed by the loud shouts of “I LOVE YOU!” that seemed to spring up whenever he wasn’t playing and holding the rapt attention of the crowd. As he stood readjusting his tuning for a moment, Jade leaned across the table and whispered to Sid.

“Hey – Sid!”

He turned to her with his eyebrows raised and an expectant look on his face.

“I just wanted you to know,” Jade told him huskily, “you are *not* signing that kid.”

Sid grinned. “You don’t think so?”

Jade pursed her lips and shook her head. The pair sat in silence for a few moments, watching the young singer standing and strumming in his pool of blue light, eyes closed and body gently swaying, carried away on the enchantment of his own music.

Sid leaned in and whispered again to Jade. “I bet you two hundred dollars that I sign that kid *tonight*.” There was a glint of excitement in his eyes. Sid loved a challenge, or at least a challenge that he was fairly certain he would be able to meet.

Jade snorted her disdain. “I don’t need two hundred dollars from *you*.”

Sid smirked. “I don’t need two hundred dollars at all.”

Jade gave him a look of irritation. “Keep your money.”

“It’s a point of honor then.” Sid said resolutely. “You have my word that I will sign Damien Blue this evening.”

“Not on my watch.”

“Buy me a drink if I do?”

“Get the hell out if you don’t?”

“Deal.”

They watched the rest of the show in deceptively civil silence. As soon as the set finished, Sid quietly rose and disappeared out of Jade’s sight. She guessed he was probably going to try and get backstage, but she didn’t follow. There

was another band coming on – they had scene seniority over Blue even if they couldn't match the buzz around him – and she was sure that the lovely young man would be making his way out into the club fairly soon, and then the game would be on. Jade examined her nails and yawned, pretending to be watching the next act setting up even as she was really scanning the room for any signs of Sid or the kid.

She was surprised to feel a rather fierce protectiveness when she finally spotted Damien Blue, standing toe to toe with her own nemesis. Sid was chatting the kid up and handing him a business card, the lovely Mr. Blue was nodding either out of politeness or a genuine naïve respect for Sid – she couldn't be sure. Concerned but unwilling to show it, Jade yawned again and waited for her turn.

Sid ambled back to her table, a whitened grin spread across his overly tanned, slightly leathery face.

“How'd you do?” Jade asked as Sid slid into his chair.

“I give it an hour.”

“You'll be out on the sidewalk in less,” she countered, her eyes trained on the kid, now leaning nonchalantly against the bar. She slid her glass across the table – melted ice cubes would have spilled into Sid's lap if he hadn't caught it at the last moment – and strode over to the boy.

The kid had been holding court with a coterie of friends-and-admirers. A girl with long black hair stood next to him, nodding eagerly at whatever point he was making and smiling rather fawningly. When Jade had just a few paces left to go, Jim Bailey, who had been covering the local music scene longer than she had been a part of it, caught sight of her with a visible start of recognition. He whispered in the ear of the girl with the long black hair, and she stole a glance at Jade before stepping away from Damien Blue. He had instinctively turned and watched Jade's approach, maybe just a little transfixed.

A slightly naughty smile seemed to flash across the kid's sweet, smooth face for a moment when he greeted her. “Hello there.”

“Hi,” Jade replied. It turned out to be her final opportunity to speak at a reasonable volume – the next act had finally kicked into gear, with guitars and distorted vocals breaking into their conversation. They both turned and

watched the new band's singer, a chubby, thirtyish blonde man shouting into the mic and wearing glasses with black plastic frames. He rhymed "corporate" with "desperate." Jade shouted.

"I saw you talking to Sid Wheeler?"

The kid turned to her again, wearing a look of mild surprise. "Um, yeah, the record company guy."

"That guy is trouble!" She was still shouting.

The kid smiled and shrugged, then held out his hand.

"I'm Damien."

She nodded. "I know!"

But he was still standing with his hand extended, expecting something from her. Jade felt a pang when she realized just what it was: an introduction. She felt the blood rushing to her face, but after missing just one more beat, she took his hand.

"Jade."

"Nice to meet you!" He was shouting too.

Jade studied his face. God, he *was* young. Very young. Too young.

"Look, about Sid Wheeler. He really tried to screw over my friend's band. I think you should --"

The kid shook his head. "Don't worry about it!" He shouted. "My agent has something lined up for me with the works. Three albums, full creative control and my choice of producers. Royalties, everything." He gestured with his head to indicate Sid. "I was just being polite to that dude!"

"You rock Damien!" someone shouted from behind them. The young man smiled and sheepishly waved his thanks.

Surprised by the kid's savvy, Jade managed a nod of approval at his business transaction and stole a quick look back at Sid, who was watching them both as much as he could while still pretending to check out the band. She turned back to the kid, smiled and took another step closer.

"Glad to hear it! Your music is great!" She pulled him nearer to her so she could kiss him on the cheek.

A bit startled, Damien Blue blushed. "Thank you!"

"Thank *you*!"

They stood regarding each other for a moment, an awkward silence settling over them.

It was Damien Blue who broke the silence, offering his hand again.

“It was wonderful meeting you.” Neither of them knew how to take the conversation anywhere further than that, and more people were shouting at and crowding around Damien Blue.

Jade made her way back to the table, doing her best to look imperious as she sat down with Sid once again. She waited for him to question her, which he did almost immediately.

“What did you say to him?”

She took a half-moment to savor the power that she was wielding over Sid and let a femme fatale smile curl across her lips.

“I just let him know that you’re a greaseball, and that I’d love to – collaborate with him some time. Kid was pretty starstruck.”

Sid glanced anxiously back at Damien Blue.

“You might as well leave now,” Jade added. “I doubt he’ll come within ten feet of you again tonight.”

Sid narrowed his eyes at her, but she could tell that she had him.

“I already gave him my card,” Sid said lightly if not confidently. “He’ll be in touch if he needs me.” He looked at his watch. “I actually need to be at the Avalon by ten. There’s a great band playing there tonight.”

Jade nodded with all the smugness that she could project and sat with her head held high as she watched Sid make his way out of the club. She would count this one in her win column, even if things hadn’t gone exactly how she’d anticipated. Her eyes fell on the band again. They were churning their way through a fast song about a politician and his dog. Or maybe it was about how some politician was a dog. It was hard to make out the words.

Her eyes wandered from the earnest lead singer and she began to scan the crowd – the young man in Birkenstocks was standing calmly near the back of the room, nodding in affirmation with the singer’s every yelp, the conspiratorial couple were still close together with arms entwined. Damien Blue was still at the bar, surrounded by the same core group of people but regularly fielding approaches from passersby who wanted to shake his hand, give him advice, tell him again that he was wonderful. Jade was tired. Her eyes swept over the crowd one last time and failed to connect with anyone else’s. She stood and headed to the ladies’ room.

The mirror over the dingy white sink was cracked at eye-level, as if a baseball – or more likely a fist – had been lobbed into it with great force. The splintered bits offered a kaleidoscope of tiny Jades, splayed in front of her like a peacock’s tail unfurled. Jade bent lower to examine herself in the unbroken portion of the mirror’s surface. She moved to gently touch the fine lines that had begun to spider their way under her eyes. Her mascara was smudging.