

THE NEW SCORE

by Alison McMahan

The elderly gentleman's not heavy. But he's tall. Gangly. Hard to grip. He squirms and flexes like a puppy that just smelled the vet's office. Fortunately, his skin is dry so he doesn't slip through my gloved fingers. I shove him into the maw of carpeted darkness that is the trunk of the limo, gently as I can. He stares up at my masked face, his jaw working. I touch a finger to the duct tape over his mouth. "Shh. Shh. You won't be in here long. I'll send someone for you."

His tuxedo pants are too short, the shoes too big, the shirt too tight. His jacket pinches my shoulders. But it will do. And in the pockets? An ID card and a VIP invitation to the green room. I hang the ID around my neck.

The old gentleman's eyes are closed. I think he's praying.

I tap the card to get his attention. He opens his eyes. "Thanks for this, man. It'll really help."

I put the pass in the jacket pocket and my hand finds the old gent's wallet. I toss it into the trunk and it lands on his stomach.

He looks down, sees the wallet, and looks back up at me, eyes wide. "That's yours. I would never take anything of yours." I pull on the jacket lapels. "I'll make sure this goes back to the place where you rented it.

He struggles and shrieks through the tape as I slam the lid shut.

I take the mask off, hook the stun gun onto my belt and slide the mini-tablet into my pocket.

Something rattles in the jacket liner pocket. A pill vial. Coumadin. Old gent has heart trouble. Good thing I didn't drug him; I'm not here to kill anybody.

At least, not yet.

I leave the hotel garage and walk the few blocks to the Dolby Theatre. The cloudy day bathes everything in a flat, unglamorous light. The rain has left the surface streets glassy. Up ahead, the plexiglass tunnel

over the red carpet doesn't look like much, especially with all the people in ponchos and raincoats huddled around it.

The way they're all jammed in makes it easier for me to slip through. People make way for a tuxedo on a red carpet.

At the first layer of gate-checkers, I pick the youngest, prettiest female and hold up my pass, making sure my hand covers most of the picture.

She glances at my face and immediately looks away, like everybody does. She scans the old gent's ID without asking me to take my hand off my picture.

"Welcome to the Academy Awards," she mumbles, already looking at the person in line behind me.

It can't be that easy.

Now the shimmering length of the red carpet lies ahead of me, the press boxes are jam-packed, the entertainment mannequins on their altars, the microphone scepters in their hands, waiting for the sacrifices to be led to them. How many times did I dream of being one of them? My work nominated like them, a pass to the VIP room like them, walking the red carpet like them.

And here I am.

Focus.

Robert. Just ahead.

Proof that the gods are with me.

That short, suave, shiny, smooth, bastard. As glittery as any Hollywood glitterati.

He vamps for the paparazzi. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was Tom Cruise.

We're in the line that's supposed to shuffle along, hoping to get glimpsed by the cameras, not stopping. But as soon as an A-lister moves away from the curvy interviewer chick with the E! Logo mic, Robert slips into his spot.

The ease with which he fits in astounds me. The only reason I haven't been thrown out yet is because I'm invisible to people, or rather, I become invisible to them after that first glance at my ruined face. I inch forward and sideways until I'm in earshot.

The interviewer looks at Robert, squints, checks her cue cards, then checks the ID card hanging around his neck. She doesn't recognize him.

He slides his eyes along her body with a come-hither smile.

She knows the camera is on her. "Hey! You're that actor—you were in—remind me."

No one can resist Robert's grin. "I know, I look like Russell Crowe, right? And just think, I look this good without having had any ribs re- moved."

He guides her hand inside his jacket. She feels. She pulls her hand away with a smile.

"But actually, I'm a composer."

His smile morphs into his best hangdog expression. Will she melt or smelt?

She melts. "What are you up for?" "

Best Song, for *Lena, Spy Warrior*."

He hums a few bars. Waves his hand for her to join in. He's so trans- parent, trying to create an Oscar moment, something the TV editor will use to break up a tedious stretch of divas in designer dresses.

Just as I think she's going to sing along with him, she pounces. "Oh, right. You're the one who sued—"

Robert's smile gets sucked into the thin-line pursed-mouth expression I know so well. "I was sued. Baselessly. And I won. Now I'm scoring the reboot."

His glower intimidates the interviewer. She turns to the camera. For a moment I glimpse the tendons in her neck. She's not as young as she seems.

"And there you have it, everyone. Robert Cattrell, composer of the theme song for *Lena, Spy Warrior*."

She clicks the microphone off, looks over her shoulder. "Ooh, look, the youngest Tanning sister is coming up!"

This is clearly Robert's cue to keep moving down the carpet, but instead he leans in to her ear. I inch forward, close as I dare.

"Such a pity about the little Tanning sister. All that plastic surgery. Such a young girl. Should be illegal. Don't you think?"

He air-kisses her. She does a double take, reaches out as if she wants to say more, but he's already slipped into the crowd.

I shuffle after him, making sure to keep Robert two people ahead of me. We reach the security enclosure for the Dolby Theatre.

This is the moment where my plan makes or breaks.

The security guards here are the real deal. I aim for the rookie, but that's a mistake. He points at my badge, which I've turned backward.

"Turn your badge around, sir."

Overzealous little prick.

I turn the badge around, my fingers over the old gent's face. The guard studies my face. He's too new at this to hide his reaction. His lip

curls, his nose wrinkles, his head shakes. He slides his eyes down the picture on my badge.

“That is certainly not you, sir.” Rookie’s all business now.

I look at my badge. “What? What do you—”

With my other hand I shove the stun gun into his side and zap him. He shudders. Collapses into my arms.

“Hey! Hey!” It takes two beats for the other guards to look at me. “Help! This man is sick!”

I stumble, as if he were too heavy for me, and drop the unconscious rookie on the ground. The guards leap to my assistance.

“What’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know. Heat stroke, maybe?”

The rookie’s body is now blocking the entrance. A crowd piles up. I slip away, hoping no one will notice how tight my jacket is or how short my pants are.

I have to hurry now. I only have a few minutes before that guard comes to.

The *CW* interviewer is talking to J.J. Abrams.

And there’s Robert, edging his way toward J.J.’s spot, as if some of that A-lister glitter might rub off on him.

A young assistant, so sizzling hot he should be at a casting call, blocks his way. Robert leans in to whisper to him, but I can hear his *sotto-voce* clearly from where I am. “Do you think Fox would still want his show if they knew he was gay?”

Hot assistant goes pale. “But he’s married—he has three kids.”

“You want your moment on TV? Ask him. See how he reacts.”

The supermodel-wannabe tries to question Robert further, but Robert has moved on, humming the theme song from *Lena, Spy Warrior*.

This is my moment. I grab his shoulder with one hand and press the stun gun to his ribs.

“Go that way.”

I can’t see his face, but hear him gasp, and then his breathing speeds up.

“Trent?”

He’s hyperventilating.

I jab him in the ribs with the stun gun. “Don’t make me use this.

Millions of volts, hurts like hell, and you’ll shit yourself right here on the red carpet.”

Robert straightens up. I stay just behind him and slightly to the side, like I’m his plus-one, like we’re the best of friends, like we’re really partners.

The way we should have been.

We stop. Pose for a gaggle of photographers.

I press my cheek to his. A few lower their cameras when they see my face, others snap away, unheeding.

I know none of those pictures will make it to the blogs or the glossies.

“How did you get in here, anyway? Weren’t you driving a limo?” The cameras still flash, so Robert doesn’t move his lips or shift out of his snow-queen smile.

“One of my clients helped me out.” I push him away from the paparazzi and we start down the aisle again.

“Someone with a talent like yours shouldn’t be driving a limo.”

“Just figured that out, did you?” I steer him out of the line and toward the green room. Robert hesitates at first, but I jab the stun gun into his ribs again, and we move forward.

“I couldn’t talk to you while you were suing me, Trent. Let’s sit down and work things out now.”

He makes it all sound reasonable, his voice soothing, seductive, shattering.

I do my best to keep control of the situation, to not get sucked into the quicksands of his manipulative mind. “Sure. How about here?”

I show my greenroom pass to the assistant guarding the door. She avoids making eye contact with me but preens under the wattage of Robert’s smile. She waves us in.

“VIP pass for the green room. Wow.”

I keep my voice cheerful and jab him in the ribs with the stun gun. “Let’s have a drink before the show starts.”

We step aside to let Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson leave. Robert jumps forward, his hand out, which means I have to move forward with him or the stun gun will be revealed. Hanks shakes hands with Robert but makes no move toward me.

“Wonderful to see you again.”

I know Hanks has no idea who Robert is. A-listers are really good at this red-carpet playacting.

Rita includes both of us in her pasted-on grin. “The shrimp cocktail is divine!”

A shudder starts in her shoulders and runs down the length of her lovely body. Yup. She saw my face.

Her shudder, more than anything, reminds me why I’m here. Robert befriended me, in spite of my face. He brought out the beauty I was capable of, for anyone to hear without having to look at my face. And when it all paid off, he promised the income would go to fixing my face.

He gave me all that, and then he took it all away.

I push Robert into the green room. There's a screen in the corner that shows the crowds pouring into the Dolby Theatre. A message flashes, urging people to take their seats.

There are still a few people in the room, but when the lights flash red and yellow, everyone files out.

We are alone.

For the first time since I realized I was betrayed.

There's a nice, plush sofa, but I push him into the wooden chair with chrome arms. "Whiskey?"

Robert looks up at me, that artificial smile still glued to his face. "You know it."

He looks around at the room. I wonder if he's looking for a phone or an intercom or something he can use as a weapon. Let him try.

I step up to the counter, set down the stun gun, select a whiskey bottle, and pour. I can see my face in the smoky mirror behind the bar.

Really, with enough money, everything is fixable.

Robert's promises still echo in my head.

Just wait until we make it big, then we'll fix it.

I drop some ice cubes into two glasses and stir them both vigorously with a spoon. I know this will irritate him, and sure enough, it does.

"You don't need to stir it. Didn't you learn anything from me?"

He jumps up, reaches out. He pretends to reach for the glass, but what he really wants is the stun gun on the bar top.

I step forward, and he instantly takes a step back. His fear brings a tickle of pleasure to my middle.

I take a step toward him again. He takes another step back. Hits the chair, sinks into it. I push the heavy crystal cocktail glass into his hand.

I hold my glass up. "Did you really get the contract for the reboot of *Lena, Spy Warrior*?"

Robert smiles, although his cheeks still glow hot. "Sure did."

I clink glasses with him, then take a sip of my whiskey. Robert does the same.

I cough. Robert's eyes crinkle, his mouth bunches up in a patronizing smile.

"Not used to the good stuff, eh?"

I shake my head, ball up my fist and pound my chest.

To remind me how much better he is than I am, he downs his drink. "Oh look, they're playing our song."

Sure enough, the TV now shows a woman dressed in the steampunk getup that *Lena* made famous, singing her heart out.

"It's *my* song," I remind him.

"Let me turn the sound up." Robert starts for the remote, which is also on the bar.

Next to the stun gun.

I grab the remote. "Allow me."

I turn up the volume, but not too much. Robert's eyes are now glued to the screen.

"Louder. I've waited my whole life for this!"

The fake smile, the patronizing grin, all gone. He's not lying. This really matters to him.

I push the button that says mute. It's so much fun, to watch him cringe, to make him realize that this is my moment.

I refill both our glasses, as if nothing had happened, add more ice, and stir vigorously, to the beat of the song I can still hear in my head.

"I said. You don't. Need. To do that!"

"Sorry. Got carried away, with my song and all." I hand him his drink.

"So, how'd you do it?"

"Do what?" Robert takes a big swig. He knows we're getting down to business now.

"How'd you get the contract to score the reboot? You can't write music to save your life."

Although his cheeks are red with anxiety and whiskey, Robert beams at me, proud. "Did what I always do. Played your tunes over their foot- age. Put on my act. Works like a charm, every time."

Yeah, I remember.

I try to look soft, like the way he's playing me is working. "Your silent-movie-accompanist shtick. I used to love watching you do it."

Robert doesn't fall for my act. His eyes flicker over to the stun gun, still on the bar, then back to me. Now he looks at me with steady eye contact, his lips slightly parted, and leans forward. As if I was still his friend and partner, his boy toy and whipping boy.

"I need you, Trent. I can't do this alone."

My traitorous heart believes him. A drumming in my chest radiates warmth through my body. Everything goes super-sharp. The smell of the shrimp cocktail sauce on the coffee table, the taste of whiskey on my lips, the whirr of the air-conditioner.

"Please, Trent. Let's work together again. It'll be just like old times."

"As your partner?" I try not to let any hope leak into my voice.

Robert looks at me, as if his answer is obvious. "You're the one who writes the music. I just sell it. I need your music. And you need me to sell you."

I almost believe him.

"So you want to be partners again."

Robert's face lights up. He's hopeful now, I can see it.

I've got him.

But there's hope inside of me, too, like a hungry baby that sees his parent hold up the bottle, almost ready. He'll agree to my conditions, we'll smile, he'll lead me into the theater, we'll accept the golden statuette together, at the after-parties he'll introduce me to everyone as the real composer, I'll play my ideas for the reboot for him—

“We are going to be so rich, Trent.”

I pull the tablet out of my pocket. “Prove it. Sign this.”

It's not so much that his expression changes. It doesn't. It just freezes on as his relief evaporates.

I show him the signature page. “You agree that I get equal credit, my name first, and we split the money 60/40.”

Robert holds up his finger.

There's applause coming from the theater.

For me.

For my song.

The song Robert stole.

“And if we win tonight, you take me up on stage with you and introduce me as the real composer.”

Robert tsk-tsks. Like a teacher scolding a child. “I can't do that. You know I can't. I've already sold it as my work. I can't just show up with a partner now.”

“Sure you can.” I point to my twisted, scarred, face. “You could say it was me who didn't want to come forward. But you couldn't let me miss my moment of glory. So you made me come up with you.”

Robert shakes his head.

“I can sell your talent, Trent. But I can't sell your face. Don't you understand? This is Hollywood. Just take the money. Think. Of all. That. Money. Trent.”

I take a step back and hold up my glass.

“Another one?”

Robert studies me. I look back with his same frozen grin. The one I've learned from him.

“Sure.”

I take his glass, take it to the sink, rinse it out. I rinse my own out too, carefully, with soap, and dry them both with a paper towel, taking care not to let my fingers come into contact with the glass again.

“Hey, I thought we were having one more.”

“I'm not sure you have time.” I put the glasses back where they were, then put the paper towel and the stun gun in my pocket.

“They're about to announce best song.”

I gesture at the screen, where Machete, the MC, wears a baseball cap backwards over his long black hair, a blue “We’re #1” foam finger in one hand and a yellow plastic bat in the other, and mouths his jokes silently. Robert stands up. Straightens his coat. Runs a hand through his hair.

He really thinks he’s out of here.

Robert wobbles. His hand clutches at his stomach. “Shh, shh, you better sit down.”

His eyes go wide.

“You said I was your partner.” Now it was my turn to play the scolding teacher. I listen to the timbre and melody in my voice. Perfect pitch, right on key. Really, I’ve learned a lot from Robert.

“You didn’t tell me I was your ghost-composer. You did wrong, Robert. You were a bad boy, very bad.”

“What ... have you done to me?”

“Just a little broken glass. In your first drink. Tiny, shimmering stars of broken glass. So small. They won’t work too fast.”

Robert is pale and sweating now. I hold the tablet out to him.

“But you might want to sign this before it’s too late. Before you bleed too much, inside. It will take a while, but then, it will take a long time for someone to find you in here, and even longer for them to figure out what’s wrong. And you have that rare blood type, Robert, you were always so proud of it. How long will it take them to find the blood you need? Do you think all that can happen before it’s too late?”

Robert’s mouth opens and closes. He takes a deep breath. “How much time?”

“Well, I’m not sure, old man. I happened on this bottle of Coumadin—” I hold up the old gent’s pills and shake them for him “—brilliant find, so I put that in your second drink. That’ll make you bleed more. Unless someone gets you to the hospital soon, you’ll bleed out internally.”

“You didn’t. You’re lying. You couldn’t.”

“I could. I did. You’re feeling it a little now, aren’t you?”

He doesn’t answer, but he’s white around the eyes and green around the lips. It’s not pretty. He points at the cameras in the ceiling. “You won’t get away with this.”

I nod. “Yep. While you were slandering celebs, I pulled out some cables. Good thing I know my electronics. And it got the guards running around, trying to figure out the source of the problem.”

I hand him the tablet. “Better sign while you still can.”

Robert takes the tablet, but his hand is shaking, so he sets it back down on his lap. He holds the tablet steady with one hand and signs with the index finger of the other.

As soon as he’s done I pick up the tablet, check the signature, save it.

I give him back the tablet. “Email it to me and to our lawyers.”

Robert looks up to say something, but I shake my head and remind him of what he already knows: “It has to come from your account or it’s worthless.”

I watch him go to his email, address the document to me, and cc our lawyers.

He hits send.

A surge of adrenalin goes through me. It’s done. I’ve succeeded.

I take the tablet and put it in my pocket. If Robert lives, I’ll get half the proceeds from the song.

If Robert dies, I’ll get it all.

“Oh, look.” I point to the screen. “It’s the littlest Tanning sister. Aw, isn’t she cute?”

“Trent.” Robert’s voice is desperate, his breathing jagged.

“Ooh, and Russell Crowe is her co-presenter. She’d make a great Lena, don’t you think? When they do the young Lena episodes? And he can be the warrior father that teaches her all her martial arts skills.”

“Trent. Call an ambulance.”

I turn to him, smiling the smile I learned from him. As if we were back to how we were, back in the old days, when I thought we were really partners. “Sure, Robert. Sure.”

“Trent, you need me.”

“Not anymore.” I’m talking to him, but watching the screen. “Once you’re gone, they’ll have to start another search. And I’ll be ready. New face, new suit, new score.”

I tap the tablet in my pocket.

“Trent!”

“Shh. I don’t want you to miss this.”

I turn up the volume just as Robert screams for help. It doesn’t take much to drown him out.

“And the Oscar for best song goes to ...” Russell Crowe hands the open envelope to the littlest Tanning sister.

Robert staggers to his feet then collapses onto the rug. I nudge him with my foot.

“Oh my god, Robert, Robert, here it comes!”

“Robert Cattrell, for the theme song to Lena, Spy Warrior.”

The Academy orchestra plays our song.

My song.

I nudge Robert with my foot again. He doesn’t move.

Onscreen, Russell Crowe and the littlest Tanning sister look around expectantly, but no winner appears, as he is on the floor, at my feet. Where he belongs.

“Thank you for this, Robert. Really.” I address him as if I was addressing the Academy audience. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

As I speak I wipe down everything again. I check Robert one more time. He won’t wake up.

They replay the opening measures as I make my way out of the green room. I stroll down the now empty red carpet.

As soon as I’m outside the Oscars enclosure I stop at a payphone and call 911. I hold the paper towel over my mouth and tell them about a limo parked where it shouldn’t be, and it sounds like someone might be in the trunk.