

Never Too Much

by BlendingIn

A/N: This is the first time I've written a song-fic. I suggest you go listen to *Never Too Much* by Luther Vandross. It sets the stage for this one.

Chapter One

He had started the record over four times now.

Not because of the record. The record was flawless. The record was, if anything, the entire problem, because the man singing it had walked in on the very first bar sounding like someone who had never once in his life wondered whether he was too much for anybody, and Chuck had been pacing the four available feet of his bedroom for the better part of an hour trying to borrow that and learning that it did not lend.

He lifted the needle off the little turntable on the dresser. Set it back at the lead-in groove. The crackle of nothing before the horns, that half second of held breath, and then the horns again, bright and certain and completely unbothered.

"Okay," he said to the room. "Okay. Sarah."

He stopped. Cleared his throat. The window was open to the night the way he left it open most warm evenings, the screen long since gone, the dark sitting square in the frame. He had his back half to it.

"Sarah. There's something I've been wanting to say to you for a while now, and I think the reason I haven't said it is that I keep deciding it's going to come out bigger than you

want it to be. Which. That's already too big. Nobody opens with the size of the thing."

He lifted the needle again.

This was the part he kept doing. He would get four words into the real version, the version with the actual feeling in it, and some interior editor with Sarah's exact posture would lean in, circle the whole sentence in red, write *smaller* in the margin, and he would obey. He had been obeying for an hour. The speech had started somewhere around a paragraph and it was down now to roughly a sentence and a half, and the sentence and a half was no good either, because by the time he had cut everything that might land too heavy there was nothing left in it but weather.

He set the needle down a fifth time.

"You don't have to do anything with this," he told the dark in the window, the dresser, the horns. "That's the first thing. I'm not handing you a bill. I just. There's a version of me that's been managing the amount I let you see, the way you'd work a faucet, so it only ever comes out at a temperature you can stand, and I'm tired. Not of you. Of the faucet."

He winced. Lifted the needle.

"Too much," he said. "See, that right there was too much."

He pressed the heels of both hands against his eyes, which at his height meant folding down toward himself like a deck chair, and when he took them away the horns were still going and he had not gained a foot of ground.

"Fine. Short version." He squared up to the open window like the window was her. "Sarah. I'm in love with you. I have been for a long time, and I keep it at a size I think you can live next to, and I don't want to do that anymore, and the part where you don't

have to say anything back completely stands, I mean that, you can let this just sit on the floor between us and I'll —"

"Stop."

He turned fast, half a word already on the way out of him, the wrong name, the one that came through that window on a normal night. "Morgan, I swear to —"

It was not Morgan.

She was standing in the Morgan Door. Outside it, on the far side of the frame, the dark behind her and the lamp of his room laid across her face, both hands flat on the sill where it met the open air. Her jacket was zipped. She had not knocked, and she had not come around to the front, and she had not climbed through. She was just standing there in the one rectangle of his life that belonged to the people who didn't have to ask.

The horns kept going. Neither of them moved to the record.

"How long," he said.

"Long enough." Her fingers spread on the sill and went still. "You're cutting it down."

"I'm aware of the —"

"No." She didn't come through. She held the frame instead, the way she held most things she was deciding whether to let herself have. "I've been standing out here watching you say a thing and then take half of it back. And then take half of *that* back." Her jaw worked once. "I know that move. I do that move. I have been doing it since before I met you, I'm very good at it, and watching you teach it to yourself is the worst thing I've seen in a long time."

He did not say anything. He had learned, over a long time, when she was building.

"You think it's too much." Her voice stayed low and even, pitched to carry the short distance across the sill and no farther. "You've decided there's a number somewhere in you, and over the number you turn into a problem, and the whole job tonight was to come in under it." Her eyes came up to his and held. "I have lived my entire life under the number, Chuck. I am *under the number* right now, standing at your window instead of using your door, because the door felt like more than I was allowed to want. It is the loneliest place I have ever been and you are in there practicing how to move in."

The horns turned the corner into the bridge. She let them.

"So don't," she said. "Don't come down to where I am. I'm asking you not to."

"Sarah —"

"I'm not finished." Quiet. Not sharp. Whatever the unfinished part was costing her, she paid it. "The faucet. You said the faucet." She breathed out through her nose. "There's no faucet on my end. There's a wall. And you've been standing patient on the far side of it for so long that I started to believe the wall was load-bearing. That if it came down the whole building came down." Her right hand lifted off the sill, opened at her side, a small unclenching. "It's not load-bearing."

And then she came through the window.

Not gracefully. She had done it before, enough times that her body knew the geometry of it, the hand on the inside frame and the duck of the head and the long step down to the floor of his room, and she did it now the way you do a thing you've done a hundred times, which is the opposite of a performance. There was nothing smooth she was trying to show him. She just put herself on his side of the wall, in the lamplight, jacket and all, the same way she'd come in to wake him for a thousand emergencies that were not this

one.

She straightened up an arm's length from him. Didn't close the rest.

"You don't have to do anything with this," she said, and he heard his own line come back out of her mouth, stripped clean of the apology he'd folded into it. "That part doesn't stand. I'm doing something with it." A breath. "I'm telling you that you stood in here tonight afraid you were going to be too much for me, and you were never, at any point, in your whole life, anywhere close."

The record reached the place where the man lets himself go all the way open, every horn and every voice arriving at once with not one ounce of reservation in any of it, and Sarah Walker stood in the middle of it with her jacket still zipped and finished his sentence for him.

"Don't keep it at a size I can stand," she said. "Stand it at the real size. I'll learn to live next to *that*."

He never finished the speech. He never would. There was nothing left in it to finish. She had come through the window he'd left open his whole adult life and taken the words out of his hands and turned them around and given them back to him true, out loud, at the full size, and the editor with her posture had finally, mercifully, set down the red pen.

"Okay," he managed.

"Okay," she said.

From the foot of the bed the orange cat that lived in 4B and did not respect doors regarded the two of them standing there with the last few inches still between them, the way they'd stood at every distance for longer than it had been climbing through this

particular window, and went back to sleep, satisfied that tonight, at least, they were going to get it right.
