

POWER LIES IN SURRENDER



*Ace of All
Hearts*

ROSE'S DUET BOOK 2

LOLA KING

ACE OF ALL HEARTS

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*This book is for everyone who ever thought being vulnerable meant being
weak.*

Remember that to be strong, we must embrace the weakest parts of our being.

I reserve the right to love many different people at once, and to change my prince often.

Anaïs Nin

CONTENT WARNING

This book is a **dark romance for 18+ readers only**. Please, make sure you understand what the genre *dark romance* implies.

This book contains extremely triggering situations and you must think of your personal wellbeing before reading it.

If you are unsure if this book is for you, please contact Lola King at lolaking.books@gmail.com for a full list of triggers.

Before you turn this page, be aware that this book depicts some sexual fantasies that might trigger some readers. Please, understand that the fantasy starts on the next page and you are entering at your own risk—there will be no further warning and no safe word. Once you have started the story, the only safe word/gesture at your disposal to end the ‘scene’ is to close the book.

Lastly, if you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, you can find international helplines numbers through this link: <https://www.helpguide.org/find-help.htm>

Lots of Love,
Lola ≡

PLAYLIST



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Heaven - FINNEAS
Empires - Ruelle
Nightmare - Halsey
Golden hour - JVKE



PROLOGUE

ROSE



Bells - The Unlikely Candidates

Eight Months ago...

A knock on my door startles me awake. My head is pounding from yesterday's over-consumption of vodka and cocaine. The Bratva throws wild parties, and I can't always keep up.

"Come in," I rasp from under the covers.

"Rosalind, are you still in bed?" Viktor asks as he pushes the door open.

"No?" I lie.

He comes to stand by me, and I hide a little further under the covers. That makes him chuckle low.

"How much did you have to drink last night?" he asks gravely. I feel like a scolded teen and our age difference comes to the surface. Seventeen years.

"A lot. You said you didn't need me today."

"That's true, I don't."

I pull the duvet down slightly, peeking out. It makes him smile and even laugh a little. Today, he's wearing a dark blue suit the exact color of my eyes and a light blue shirt the same color as his. The first few buttons of his shirt are popped open so I can see the golden cross he always wears.

“Why don’t you join me, then?” I ask. “I’m a bit cold.” I exaggerate shaking under the covers, and this time his crystal laugh fills the room, making my heartbeat double.

He runs his fingers against my cheek, my neck, and my collarbone and then grabs the necklace he gave me a few months ago, playing with the pendant.

“You never give up, do you?” His eyes come to meet mine.

I shake my head ‘no’. No, not with him. Because I know that when I insist long enough, he does join me. He lets his guard down, puts away the mask of the respected Pakhan, and lets himself lose.

“Not today,” he says more seriously. I offer him a big pout, and he runs his thumb against my lips. “Don’t, you’ll tempt me.”

He takes a step closer before gathering himself. Now I recognize him—the intelligent, collected man who’s been keeping an eye on me all day, every single day.

“I have something to tell you.” He sits down on my bed and caresses my hair. “I haven’t mentioned it before, but I think it’s time you know. Mateo Bianco is going to be released from prison.”

A wave of nausea engulfs me, and I force myself to sit up so I don’t vomit.

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“What if he comes for me?” Subconsciously, I grip Viktor’s thigh, digging my nails into him.

His gaze goes to my hand and back to me. “He won’t. I can promise you he’ll never find you. But for that, we have to move.”

“What? Did he already find this place? How...where are we?”

“Bianco hasn’t found us, yet. But Samuel Thomas did, and he’s the one helping him out of prison.”

My heart drops in my stomach. My headache doubles, and my mouth becomes dry. Something doesn’t add up, making my defenses go up.

“How?” I ask coldly.

“Bianco’s lawyers appealed his sentence. Samuel testified in his favor.”

“That’s impossible,” I tell him, like he’s the one who doesn’t understand. “Sam hates Bianco.”

Sam has always protected me against my old foster dad. He would never betray me like that.

The apology in Viktor’s eyes tells me that he’s not lying, that this is his

direct knowledge of the facts.

“But—”

“He’s here. Samuel. He found you.”

Sweat covers my back, the hangover making the situation worse. I shake my head, dizziness engulfing me. “Is he here for me?”

Viktor nods. “We caught him trying to breach our grounds. He wants you to go home with him.”

Viktor’s voice resonates in my head, banging against my skull. Did Sam really testify in favor of Bianco?

“I told him he could see you.”

“Why would you do that?” I snap. I don’t like when he plays his games.

“Because,” he explains, “I want you to decide if you want to stay or go with him.”

My eyes widen, my heart exploding in my chest and releasing adrenaline. It makes me shake.

“I don’t know if I can talk to him,” I admit. What if he tries to bring me back just so Bianco can get to me again?

No, he wouldn’t do that.

Then, why is he trying to get him out of prison?

“I think you should,” Viktor insists. “You’ve been here for more than a year, Rosalind. Don’t you think you deserve that bit of freedom?”

It’s hard to take a deep breath, though I manage. And I nod, giving my approval.

We’re waiting in the compound’s drawing room for some guards to bring in Sam. Viktor is sitting next to me, a reassuring hand drawing circles between my shoulder blades. I’m terrified to see him again. It’s been too long. It was easier to never have to think about anyone outside of here. In one morning, I’m forced to think of both Bianco and Sam.

How could he testify for him? I don’t understand.

The door is pushed open, and after a few grunts, Sam is dragged through it. There are four guards surrounding him. Probably the same number it took to neutralize him. He looks exactly the same as he did the day I was taken.

I wonder if he has the same opinion of me. Do I look the same? I haven’t changed anything. His nose is bleeding and he snorts, attempting to stop the flow. Blood drips on the floor and I wince. I’d never seen him hurt before.

“Rose,” he rasps. “You’re here.” There’s a sigh of relief that leaves him despite perfectly knowing he’s not in a good situation.

“Hello, Mr. Thomas. You wanted to see me,” Viktor says calmly.

Hands tied behind his back, Sam can’t do much when the guards push him to sit on the sofa opposite us.

“You finally found our compound,” Viktor smiles. “It took you quite a while, didn’t it?”

“Are you okay?” Sam asks me, ignoring Viktor completely.

I nod, not being able to find my voice. He notices the way I bring myself closer to Viktor, looking for comfort. He looks away for a few seconds, his nostrils flaring.

“So, what’s the objective of your visit?”

Sam chuckles. “Fuck you.”

“You’re here to take Rosalind home.”

Sam raises an eyebrow at the mention of my full name. It’s such a horrible name. I hate it and never go by it. I don’t even know who gave it to me.

Sam knows I would punch the first person to call me by my full name. Somehow, it’s become a habit I can deal with when it comes to Viktor.

“Will you let me?” Sam asks Viktor, showing his cuffs to point out he can’t really bring me home without Viktor allowing it.

“I thought we could give her the choice. Right, Rosalind?”

“Right,” I huff, not sure what else to add.

Sam’s eyes light up, not quite believing he heard my voice again. “Rose,” he calls me. I only realize then that I keep avoiding his gaze. “Rose, come home with me. Everyone is missing you so much, you have no idea. Jake is dying without you.”

There’s a long deafening silence, both men waiting for me to speak. I should ask about my twin, my other brother, my friends. Yet there’s only one thing at the forefront of my mind, one thing freezing my thoughts with fear.

“Is Bianco going to get released from prison?”

I can see the shock in his eyes. He didn’t expect me to know.

“I don’t know,” he admits.

“But you testified in his favor? You’re helping him get out?”

He glares at Viktor and fights against his bonds slightly. “You fucking bastard,” he tells him.

“I didn’t lie to her.”

“Sam,” I insist. “Did you, or did you not, testify for Bianco to be released?”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he struggles to swallow. “I did,” he murmurs.

I can’t quite describe the pain that pierces my heart, but I know it hurts like nothing ever has before. I know it burns through my flesh, tears up the muscle, and leaves me bleeding to death.

A true betrayal.

It doesn’t matter what I was to him. A friend, more...less...it feels all the same.

“You want me to come home...to a reality where Bianco is free? Where he could get to me at any time?”

“No, of course not!” he defends. “You don’t understand, Rose. It was the only way. How do you think I found you?”

“With his help,” I tell him with all the disgust I can muster.

“And I would do it all over again if it meant finding you!”

Fear grips me deeply. I imagine going back to Stoneview. Bianco finding me and forcing me into his car. I imagine the pain he would impose on me. The promises he always said he’d keep. The anger at having put him away.

I shake my head. “I can’t...”

“Rose—”

“I can’t do it. I can’t go back to him.”

“You’re not going back to him, you’re coming home to me.” The panic is palpable in his voice.

“You work for him! With him...I don’t even know anymore.”

“No! I used him to find you.”

“He used you to find me. And you played right into his hands.”

“You can’t do this. You can’t possibly choose Volkov over me—”

“Leave.”

“Rose...” He gets up, but two guards are on him right away. “I’m begging you.”

“I want him to leave,” I tell Viktor, avoiding Sam’s gaze.

“There’s just one issue,” Viktor tells me. He grabs my hand with his and puts the other on my cheek. “I made a little deal with Samuel. I told him he could leave this place with you if he convinced you to. But I also said that if he didn’t, he wouldn’t leave at all. He seemed so sure you’d choose him.”

I let out a huff of disbelief. “You shouldn’t have put your life on the line.”

I finally look at the man I used to be in love with. “Not after you betrayed me. Not after siding with Bianco.”

“I did this for you,” he tells me. His voice is calm, not trembling to the rhythm of fear like mine.

I get up from the sofa, unable to look at him anymore.

“They’ll kill me...Look at me! They will fucking kill me!” he shouts at my retreating back. “Rose, don’t do this to me.”

I turn one last time. “Your life doesn’t matter to me anymore.”

ROSE



Slowly Obsess - CHRIS RAIN

Today...

How can one explain, dissociate, and define their emotions? I have always gotten it wrong. I have never appreciated the people who love me unconditionally, taking them for granted and becoming comfortable in their infatuation with me. I live on passion, jealousy, and possessiveness. They are emotions that drive me, push me to act, *consume* me, and I often mistake them for less than love when they are my own fucked up way of loving abundantly.

I have rejected people who would have gotten me the moon and framed it for my own personal enjoyment.

But the worst?

I have welcomed with open arms people who use love against me, and who will undeniably hurt me. If they haven't already.

People like Viktor Volkov.

I am not exactly sure at which point I started feeling the confusion. When the hatred and fear traded their sharp edges for softer ones. Ones that felt more like lust and delight.

I know something switched when he saved me from his brother.

Despite the united front they show to the rest of the world, Viktor and Aleksei Volkov resent each other and the murder of their father Vladimir, by

yours truly, divided their criminal organization, the Wolves.

In a sense, I split their brotherly bond in more ways than one. They always had to work together when their father was the head of the family, but as soon as he died, Viktor became *Pakhan*. As the eldest, it was his duty. Cool, collected, sociopathic Viktor left the only job he didn't want to do to his younger brother: human trafficking.

It wasn't Viktor who organized my kidnapping. In fact, he never wanted me in his compound in the first place. No, it was resentful, heartless Aleksei who sought to execute his vengeance on me. To honor his father by destroying me.

And then Viktor discovered a way to use me.

Yes, I think when he saved me from the horrors Aleksei put me through, my mind associated him with a savior.

I didn't fall head over heels for him like some stupid child who gets given attention for the first time in their life. I'm smarter than that, I have a sharper mind. I know it wasn't the only thing. That moment was a shift, but I fell slowly over time.

Viktor knew what he was doing, I'm sure of it. Older, wiser, manipulative. A married man who found interest in this new, young thing who had been brought to his compound. And when he unearthed a use in me, he knew he couldn't let me go.

He would wake me up every morning, letting me know how much I was wanted. He would let me do whatever I wished and run free as long as I stayed within the compound. He would put my genius to good use, cherish my beauty all day long, and put me to sleep every night reminding me how exceptional I was. He saved me from the lowest moment of my life, protected me against his own brother. He let my wild and sick side free and allowed me to discover myself and my limits in the most liberating way.

I know I had no choice but to stay there, yet I wonder if I could have fought more. If I should have given it all I had. Where was my stubbornness, my feistiness, when Viktor took over me?

I escaped because I didn't have a choice. It was a life-or-death decision and I was barely conscious when Aaron Williams drove me away.

And now here we are again. Viktor and I reunited in a Stoneview café as if we had never met because I was kidnapped in the first place.

“You thought I wasn't coming to get you, didn't you?”

My eyes don't quite reach his, and I can't tell if it's out of respect or fear.

The only thing that matters right now is Viktor and the noise of the café becomes a dull background.

It takes me a minute to gather myself and finally look straight at him, bracing myself for how I know my body will react.

The small lines at the corner of his bright blue eyes crease as he smiles. For such a strong, elegant man, he's always had a brazen smile.

I can't reply to his questions. My heart is beating too loudly in my ears, and I can't hear my own thoughts. His blond hair, almost white, is combed back and his dark blue suit shows the stylish, neat man he is.

"I made a promise to you, didn't I? I never break a promise. You, of all people, should know that."

"It's been more than two months," I finally push past the tightness in my throat.

Of course, Viktor always said he'd find me if I left. It never felt like a threat, though, more like a reassurance. He's not the reason I wanted to escape the Wolves' compound.

His wife was.

His jealous, harpy of a wife who made sure my life was a living hell.

And since the moment I woke up in that hospital bed, I have always known he would find me. I feel stupid and ashamed for fearing he wouldn't keep his promise.

It seems since we met, Viktor has had the power of reading my mind.

He doesn't say anything to me. He turns to one of the servers and asks her to turn up the volume on the news channel. My heart drops in my stomach when I see what's featured.

The afternoon talk has already been halted by a breaking news banner, and the anchor is changing topics quickly.

"Breaking news. It has now been confirmed that the body found in the Silver Snake River is Yelena Volkov, wife of notorious gangster Viktor Volkov."

My mouth falls open, my bottom jaw hanging heavily.

"Viktor..." I murmur in shock. "What did you do?"

In the background, the lady keeps talking. *"The body was found earlier today in the part of the river that crosses the North Shore of Silver Falls, known for its criminal activities and gang-related crimes."*

For the first time since meeting Viktor, something is weird in how I feel. I hated Yelena because she was abusive to me. I never stopped to think that she

was the wife and I was the mistress. She never stopped to think that I was the kidnapped, not-yet-eighteen-year-old teenager who was in survival mode.

And the only person who was manipulating both of us and in control of it all...was Viktor.

“She’d been warned enough times.”

“But—”

“I told her if she put a hand on you again, she’d end up at the bottom of that river. Just like I told you I’d always find you if you ran. I *always* keep my promises.”

My whole body is so rigid my back and kidneys are starting to hurt. I can’t answer, the shock is too great.

I remember he said the words so lightly the first time he had mentioned he’d never let me go.

I keep my friends close and my enemies closer. But you, I will always keep the closest.

He also promised his wife he would kill her if she hurt me again. Yelena took pleasure in her jealousy, ensuring I’d always get hurt ‘accidentally’. And now she’s gone because she cost Viktor my captivity.

“You doubted me.”

And how could I?

“I did,” I admit, shame engulfing me and feeling childish for thinking he would never find me again. Of course, he would. I tuck strands of my hair behind my ears like a teenager talking to her crush for the first time, unsure of what to say and waiting for him to take the lead.

“So,” he relaxes in his chair, and one of his hands lands on my thigh under the table, “time to come home.”

I nod even as reluctance shows its head, spreading slowly and numbing my limbs. “I need a bit of time.”

He raises an eyebrow and I feel his hand shift on my thigh, but he doesn’t tighten his hold. He’s not a violent man.

That’s a lie.

He’s not a violent man to *me*.

“How long do you need?” His voice is a light inquisition, not a forceful push.

Of course, he doesn’t mind, because he knows eventually he’ll get me back. His patience gets him everything he wants.

Gulping, I look around us. Conflict is raging through my mind, splitting

my guts. I want to see my twin, my friends, *Rachel*.

Sam and Lik! My heart screams.

No, fuck them and the manipulative war they're waging against me.

Freedom is suffocating, and Viktor needs me. Making decisions for myself has only led me to terrible mistakes these past couple of months.

'Protecting an abductor is very common after such a long time as a captive.'

I remember the detective telling me these words after I woke up in the hospital. Is this what I'm doing? Am I giving him excuses? Am I upset about Sam having a contract on him and his brother? I loathe Aleksei; I want nothing else but for him to die painfully.

But what about Viktor?

Do I want to go back?

"Rosalind," he whispers softly, cutting through the storm of feelings overwhelming me. "I will give you all the time you need, but you will come back to me. You know why I need you."

I feel my brows furrow. I do know why.

"You haven't forgotten, have you?" he insists, now a tinge of worry in his voice. His entire organization rests on my shoulders, after all. Still, no anger.

"Of course not," I tell him.

"Tell me how long you need, and I'll give it to you."

"I don't know I—"

"How long." His stern tone makes me wince internally.

"Give me a month—No, two."

"Okay." He nods as if it doesn't bother him in the slightest. "I can't just come and scoop you back to the compound." He makes himself sound like a rational man. "Two months seems reasonable."

He gets up and buttons his suit jacket. Holding the back of my neck, he bends down until his lips are against my ear. "I'll see you in two months, Rosalind. Not one more day, not one more *minute*. Say your goodbyes to Samuel. Whatever you have going on needs to be over by then."

He drops a kiss to the top of my head and exits the café casually. As if he hadn't walked in to drag me back out with him.

I let out a breath I wasn't aware I was holding.

Two months. I can enjoy my free life for two more months.

ROSE



Doubt - Twenty One Pilots

61 days until Viktor...

The low sun of this November afternoon makes her hair shine like gold. She keeps staring at me, more particularly the bruise at the corner of my lips. Then her eyes dart to my twin, Jake, and back to what's in front of her. He was beaten up only a few days ago and is sporting more purple and blue spots than I am.

She's got a hallway pass in her hand and is waiting behind Hannah and Thomas Murray to talk to the school receptionist. Our new foster parents are signing us up for our last year of middle school in our new town. Stoneview. A smile slowly starts to spread on my lips.

I did it.

I got us out.

I can't seem to think for more than two seconds of the fact that I shot my own flesh and blood. Or that by running away from Mateo Bianco, I also left behind the boy I've always loved.

I can't think of any of that because something feels right. It makes my body light as a feather, tastes like cold water on a summer afternoon, and smells like freshly cut lilies.

Freedom.

If I could put a physical form to it, it would probably look like the girl

waiting while Jake and I are sitting on the seats to the side. Her hair is bright, her skin pale. Her baby blue eyes keep darting to us and then she glances away. She looks so peaceful. She looks like a kid who had a normal childhood.

I want to be her.

The Murrays are invited to walk into the principal's office, so we'll just be waiting here until they're done.

The girl moves forward.

"Hello," she enunciates clearly as she shows her hallway pass. "Mr. Ashton said he was missing ten textbooks after lending them to Miss—"

"Ah, yes," the receptionist cuts her off. "Wait here, I'll get them for you."

After two trips, the receptionist brought all the books back. "Are you going to be alright carrying them all?"

"Uh..." she hesitates. "I didn't think of that."

"I can help," Jake says. "Is it far?"

"On the other side of the road," the receptionist replies. "But..." Her mouth twists while she scrutinizes Jake's bruises.

"I'll do it." I smile at the girl. "I'll take five, you take five."

I get up and grab the other half of the pile. "Thanks," she whispers shyly.

We're waiting for the pedestrian light to turn green when I talk again. "Do you go to the high school side?"

"Yeah," she nods. "I'm a freshman. Do you go here? I've never seen you around."

"I'm going to start eighth grade next week. Do you like it here?"

"I prefer it on days when my best friend doesn't leave me behind to sit with a guy just so she can flirt with him."

I blink a couple of times to try and get my head around what she just said. This sounds like such a stupid problem to have. So normal.

She's mad that her friend is flirting with someone and not sitting next to her in class...

I love it.

"Sorry, that was dumb to share. I'm just in a bad mood. And, like... everyone always flirts with her. Give it a break."

"I bet lots of people flirt with you, too," I say softly.

"Yeah, right," she snorts. "Maybe once I start growing boobs like Camila."

I look down at my own flat chest, then hers.

“I’m in trouble too, then,” I joke, so she doesn’t feel alone in her misery.

“Yeah, but you’re gorgeous. There’s a difference.”

My eyes widen, but she’s gone, crossing now that the light permits.

She thinks I’m gorgeous.

And for once, the word doesn’t come out of Mateo Bianco’s mouth.

For the first time...it feels good to hear it.

“You coming?” she shouts without looking back.

I accelerate to reach her again.

Once we’re standing in front of the school, she turns to me. “You can pile them on top of mine now. I’ll be fine to get to the classroom.”

I do so gently, ensuring she can take the weight before letting go.

“Thanks for the help. And I guess I’ll see you around. My name’s Rachel, by the way.”

My heart accelerates to the rhythm of her name’s syllables, and it takes me a minute to realize she’s already stepped away.

“I’m Rose,” I murmur since she’s already too far to hear.

“Rose?”

I startle in my seat, my head snapping from my book up to the person standing next to me. Brown hair, pale skin. His bright blue eyes hide behind Ralph Lauren camel glasses. They are full of recognition for me. Recognition I can’t reciprocate.

I peer around him and at the rest of the library. I came to study here because I’m pretty sure Lik never steps foot in here. After the conversation with Viktor yesterday, I have no idea what I’m doing at college anyway. It’s not like I’m going to graduate. Maybe I’m just not accepting what’s going on yet. I’m keeping on with my everyday life because I haven’t processed that I’m not staying here or that I’m going back to the Bratva compound.

The man standing next to my table chuckles and shakes his head. “You don’t recognize me, do you?” He puts both his hands in the pocket of his jeans and balances on the back of his heels before his feet come flat on the floor again. “I’m Simon...”

Who?

My face tells him everything he needs to know.

“We have two classes together. American History and Writing 101.”

“Right,” I nod. “Sorry, so many people in those classes.”

He runs a hand through his hair and nods, uncomfortable. You picked the wrong time to come and try to be my friend, man. He glances at my books on the table and back at me.

“Studying for our midterms?”

I inhale deeply and huff a long breath. “Hardly. That shit is hard, and it’s been a long day trying to make sense of some of this.”

“It’s ten a.m.”

I almost want to laugh. He’s got that impassive way of talking that makes everything he says a statement without any judgment.

“I think I’m going to give up on Writing 101.” I smile at him while closing my book. “Wanna work on American History with me?”

His eyes widen and he points at himself. “Me?” He can’t believe it.

I’m guessing he doesn’t have too much experience with girls and especially not girls like me. He’s cute, but I can see his social awkwardness and public anxiety. I find it sweet.

I look behind him, pretending there’s someone else then back at him. “Yeah, you.”

He sits down right away, his back straight as a rod.

“Do you have what you need with you?” I ask him, noticing he doesn’t have any textbooks.

“Oh.” He stands back up in a sudden movement. “No, I don’t.”

“It’s alright,” I chuckle. “Me neither, but we can go to mine if you want?”

“Uh...”

“Let’s go.” I stand up, put my leather jacket on and shove my books in my bag.

I start walking away, and just like I expected...he follows.

Sometimes I wonder if there’s a God up there. If there is, do they do shit just to have fun? Like putting Simon’s car right next to Sam’s in our college’s parking lot. He must have come to pick Lik up. His windows are down while he’s smoking in the driver’s seat and patiently waiting for his boyfriend. I haven’t given him any news since his little trip with Rachel and Lik. Barely more than twenty-four hours.

I’ve ignored all of their calls. Rachel and Lik have been harassing me non-stop. Sam, however, seems to want to give me time to compose myself. He’s a calm man, but I feel his patience wearing thin as he observes me settling in Simon’s car with him.

His eyes narrow into slits as smoke billows around him. He doesn't say anything, just observes silently as usual.

Despite the freezing cold outside, I ask Simon to lower both car windows as I light up my own cigarette. Once I'm sure Sam can hear us, I enunciate clearly the words that'll hurt him.

"We're going to my place, right? I'm in Silver Falls."

If Lik had been in the car with Sam already, he would have probably jumped out, opened Simon's car and dragged me out. He's not used to dealing with jealousy.

But Sam has spent his entire life watching me with other people and stopping himself from acting out. He shakes his head at me, as if my attempt at making him jealous is pathetic. Just a stupid girl trying to get back at him after what he pulled. He still heard me, though. He knows we're going to his penthouse I've been staying in.

And while I secretly hope he comes and finds me there out of pure jealousy, I'll settle for simply hurting him.

ROSE



Rumors - NEFFEX

Simon is at the dining table next to me, sitting awkwardly. Everything he does is awkward.

Our books are open on the table, but we've only spent about five minutes on our lesson before quickly switching to talking about ourselves and what we want to do after college.

I prefer talking about the future, it's safer than the past. Sometimes, I truly see myself growing older. Sometimes, I pretend so people don't worry about me. The future isn't so scary when you know it won't happen, when you don't plan on living long enough to see it through. Or when you know someone is going to steal it from you.

But today, talking to Simon, isn't one of those days. I happily tell him about wanting to go to law school at Duke and that I want to defend defenseless kids in court. Children who have no one to fight for them. He tells me about wanting to be a history professor, about his passion for American immigration history and that he wants to write a thesis on the hypocrisy of American supremacism.

"Did you go to school around here?" Simon asks me.

"I went to Stoneview Prep," I nod. I pick up the iced tea I'd poured, drink, and bite on an ice cube.

"My younger sister is trying to get in there for her senior year. She wants

to study at Silver Falls University, and it helps to have attended Stoneview Prep.”

I always find it strange that two colleges in the same city can be so different. North Shore Community College, where we study, isn't even the best of the worst. Silver Falls University, on the good side of Silver Falls, is one of the best colleges in the country. Many of the kids from Stoneview end up there.

I nod. “It does help. How many siblings do you have?”

“Two younger sisters, they're twins.”

I smile, thinking of the other half of me. I've had three missed calls from him since yesterday and need to get back to him before he shows up here. “I'm a twin.”

“No way. Do you get along with her? My sisters are always at each other's throats. I bet it's gotten worse now that I've left home.”

I take a sip of iced tea and bite on another cube before replying. “We're very close.” Because we had to survive so much trauma together, I don't say. “Except we're fraternal twins, and he's a boy.”

“I see. Do you guys look alike at all?”

“We do, actually. Freakishly so.”

“No way. Show me.”

My heart skips a beat. Pretending to be normal is getting harder and harder by the minute. I don't have any pictures of Jake and me because I currently own a new phone given to me by the FBI after being kidnapped. I don't have any photos on it, and I haven't downloaded any social apps.

“It's a new phone, I got nothing on it.” That's not a lie.

He nods and grabs his own glass. He drinks, and I watch his tongue lick a drop at the corner of his mouth. He's kinda hot in that innocent way he's not even aware of. And having talked about ourselves sparked a somewhat soft spot for him.

I'm not surprised. It doesn't take me long to be attracted to someone. I like attention, and I like someone taking an interest in me. The desirability doesn't usually last long, however. It disappears as soon as I'm given what I want.

I never fight temptation, no matter how small it is. If I feel an attraction, I go for it, feeding a never-ending lust in me.

After all, Rachel, Lik, and Sam didn't fight their attraction to each other when they decided to all have fun without me. The pain is still too fresh for

me to get over my need to hurt them back.

Just like that, I know how to get back at the trio who thought they could play me.

“Do you want to have sex?” I ask him. I don’t even know if I really want it, but I can’t get myself to accept that I’m acting out of pure jealousy.

His eyes grow twice their size. He shakes his head, desperately trying to stop the smile that’s spreading on his lips.

“Th-that’s not why I came here. I’m sorry if I came off too forward. I mean...of course, you’re super-hot and cool and...yeah, I’m attracted to you, but I-I don’t want you to think that’s all I’m interested in. I wanted to get to know you, that’s it. I’m sorry, it was so obvious I was hitting on you...wasn’t it?”

It’s never been less obvious that someone was hitting on me. I’ve been to parties where men asked nothing except the closest location where they could fuck me. And I showed them.

I’ve had women becoming friends with me for months before admitting they wanted to fuck me all along. I’ve had men writing letters, pouring their hearts out, and declaring their love when they had only spoken to me twice. I’ve had possessive friends, too possessive for it to be only friendship.

And I always give in. Selfish lovers, undying love, jealous relationships, eternal lust. I’ve slept with more people than I can count. And I’m young. Young and so profoundly broken. I find salvation in warm bodies and dirty sex. People used to say my name like a trophy, to wear their ‘I’ve slept with Rose’ badge like proud members of an elite society.

How laughable. I give myself to anyone who wants it.

Just to feel *needed*.

Rose White talked to me today.

Rose White locked herself in a room with me.

Rose White fucked me.

Rose White, Rose White, Rose White.

The beautiful girl, full of broken dreams and hopes for a better life.

The flawless flower that cuts you so deep you’ll forever wear her scar.

Pretty girl wants nothing but to stop swimming against the current. Pretty girl wants to see what happens when you drift away, let yourself drown, and stay at the bottom. Until the oxygen has run out, until your lungs are burning, and your heart is fighting for life. Holding onto it because it knows there will be better days.

My poor, naïve heart.

My kingdom without a monarch.

I could tell Simon how broken I truly am. I could tell the truth: I'm a slut, Simon. A proud one on top of that. This will lead nowhere and you should know it before you sleep with me. Protect your heart at all costs before the queen breaks it.

Only I don't. Because this is who I am. I offer hope and golden dreams on a platter. I pretend they can have me, just to rip it all away from them.

That way, I know they will forever wish they could have had me.

They will forever *want* me.

There's a room at the back of my chest where I lock away all the hearts I've stolen. I keep them as a collection. A reminder of all the times someone has desired me. All the people who have wanted me for themselves.

I can't put my parents' hearts there. I can't put anyone's unconditional love. But I will keep collecting until I fill the void that was created the day I was abandoned.

Less than a minute later, we're making out on the dining table. I'm sitting on it and he's in between my legs.

"Get on here," I say between two kisses. I help him get his clothes off and he does the same with mine. We push the books out of the way and I lay down. He goes to put his head between my legs, but I bring him back up.

"I wanted to make you come before I fuck you," he murmurs in my ear.

Yeah, that's not happening.

"Don't worry about it, just *fuck* me."

He quickly rolls a condom onto his dick and brings it to my entrance.

"Do it hard, Simon. Keep me in the moment," I order him.

But he doesn't get to because the front door opens. Both our heads snap to the side, him still between my legs and keeping me flat under him.

Earlier today, I wished for Sam to walk through that door. I wished for him to be jealous enough and come running back, apologizing for his behavior. Telling me he regretted everything.

He came, and with Lik, nonetheless. Two for the price of one. But clearly, they didn't come to apologize. No. Nothing prepared me for their reaction.

There's a long silence as both Simon and I are frozen in place.

And the sounds of Sam's steps as he walks closer.

And closer.

And closer.

Until he's right by the dining table, facing the two naked people on it.

I don't know if it's because I've known him for so long or if the change is just that apparent, but his eyes force a chill to run down my spine. They used to be a comforting darkness. Now they're just a black hole. Ready to destroy everything in its path.

I didn't see it at first. Didn't realize why his hand had gone behind his back. My eyes were too focused on the hellish fire in his stare—the violence ensuing there.

And the sound is silenced. Like Sam. Deadly silent.

Pop.

Just like that, Simon is dead.

A bullet, right through his left temple and out the other side.

The shock makes me scream. One, single loud shriek that doesn't disturb Sam in the slightest. I gag, disgusted by the blood now pouring out of him as he falls forward onto me.

"*Fuck!*" I cry out. The heaviness of his still-warm body crushes me under him. I try to push him off even though it's impossible. He's too heavy. So fucking heavy.

"Get him off!" I screech as I feel his blood flowing on my naked body. "Sam! Get him off me, you piece of shit! You fucking *psychopath!*"

He stays quiet, watching me with his gun by his side, a silencer attached to the end of it.

Scratch that, he isn't watching me. He's looking at Simon's dead body with a twisted smirk on his face.

I start shaking, going into complete shock while I fight with my whole strength to try and slide that corpse off me.

"Please, *please* get him off me. I'm gonna pass out!" Not only because he's crushing my chest and making it practically unbearable for my lungs to take in oxygen but also because he was alive a minute ago and is now completely dead. A dead body touching me. Dead yet so warm.

"Lik!" I try. "Fucking *do* something."

"Do you know how many men I've killed for you, Rose?" Sam's voice is emotionless, and it's utterly terrifying.

"Get him off me. Get him *off me!!*" I shout.

"You should answer the question, princess." Lik is so calm. How can he be so calm?

“I don’t know,” I cry out. “Please...”

“Eighteen,” Sam answers.

Eighteen?!

It’s like he’s got a direct line to my thoughts. “Yeah. That’s including whoever the fuck that was.”

Lik’s body appears next to Sam, his face grave, noticeably disappointed.

“Another soul left this earth to pay for your mistakes,” Sam explains dryly.

“What mistakes?!” I shriek. I’m shaking harshly, but my body can barely move with the heaviness of Simon on me. “Get him off.”

Get him off. Get him off. I chant on repeat. Every second that passes, the body loses its warmth and I feel his death too close to me. It’s like an infectious disease, seeping into my bones and contaminating me. The essence of death running from him to me.

Sam comes to stand at one end of the table. He’s right by my head, looking down on me. He wraps a large hand around my throat, making it tighter than it already is.

“The mistake you make every single time you forget who you belong to,” he admits.

As children and teenagers, we had always had an unspoken agreement. We belonged to each other; we would never pick anyone else over the other.

However, that agreement has been broken too many times to count. It started when I chose myself over suffering at Bianco’s hands. When I shot my own brother to escape hell.

And with time, our bond thinned until it ultimately broke. When he chose Lik, and months later when I chose Viktor.

Now here he stands, mighty and invincible, like a demi-god put on this earth to shatter my life into pieces and then put it back together. Here he is, stitching our lives back together since he can’t seem to give me up.

Sam showed jealousy before but never admitted it. I was always walking a line, wondering if his behavior was possessive toward me or if I was foolishly making it up in the hopes that he would reciprocate my feelings toward him.

He killed for me.

Eighteen people.

Eighteen times his jealousy took him over the edge.

Now I know he truly loved me back. I never made it up, no matter how

much he denied it. He was scared, we both were. I'm not sure if we feared the doom or the happiness.

Today, I finally understood how much he's always loved me, desired me, and needed me, and now I've discovered the irrationality that runs through his veins when he bares his feelings.

The follies of love.

The violence of lust.

He gestures to Lik with his chin, and I feel the latter settle on the other side of the table by my feet. I can't see him because I'm unable to sit up; Simon's dead body is still crushing me into the table.

Then, they move him. One grabs his legs, the other his armpits. Finally. I heave a breath into my deflated lungs. I try to sit up, but Sam's hand is already in my hair, pulling me back down. I'm naked, covered in blood, completely exposed. A shyness comes over me even if I know they both saw everything last week.

It was different. Rachel was here, and I was doing it for her and the pleasure she was bringing me. I was in another state, with lust and love running through my veins then.

I cross my legs and bring my arms across my chest since I know I won't have the strength to untangle Sam's fingers from my strands. I still manage to turn and look at Simon on the floor.

Guilt floods me. He didn't do anything wrong.

"What did you do," I croak. "He...he was a good guy."

Sam chuckles above me. "Me?" He pats my head with his free hand. "I didn't do anything, Rose. That was all you. Sacrificing a man with the aim to hurt me."

He squats so his lips are in my ear. "Because that's why you did it, isn't it? You wanted to show me you're free to do whatever you want. You wanted to make me jealous. You wanted revenge because Rachel slipped from your fingers and right into my palm."

"Fuck you!" I rage. I kick and twist, attempting to free myself aimlessly.

Lik even grabs my legs to make sure I can't move anymore.

"I didn't think you would kill him, you fucking bastard." My jaw is tight with frustration, words barely filtering through my gritted teeth.

"That's what you do, isn't it?" He gets up again. "You use everyone as you see fit. Women are for your gratification, and men are tools for revenge. I am done pretending I don't want to kill every motherfucker who looks at you,

Rose. I am done keeping you safe from me.”

There is a certain acceptance in his words. An irrevocability to them. His tone is firm but not too firm. He’s not trying to convince me or scare me. It’s not even a warning. A warning is so you can attempt to stop something, to protect yourself from it. There is no more protecting my being from Sam.

He wants me. All of me. And he will have it.

It starts in my guts, spreads up my chest, tickling my lungs with a need to scream. It rasps up my throat, squeezing my vocal cords. And it settles at the back of my mouth, tasting acidic.

The fear.

Because I genuinely see it in his gaze, luring above me and ready to pounce; that sick need to hurt me.

That’s how Sam loves. That’s how he expresses his passion and lust. He hurts, he carves, he marks. He bites and bruises. He makes you entirely his until you’re just a poor creature begging for his mercy. And in all that, he makes it feel too good to want it to stop. Or so I’ve always understood.

He sees the fear enveloping my body, seeping through every pore in my skin. Mainly, he must see the reluctance in my eyes. He feeds off of it.

I’m not ready, my eyes say when my lips can’t move.

I’m not ready to break the protective bond he had over me. I’m not ready for him to destroy my entire being, my spirit. I’ve always wanted safety and support from him. I don’t know if I can take the devastating lust.

He sees it all. My prayers, my calls for him to slow down and let me take it at my own pace.

And he smiles.

That’s when I understand, my fate is sealed.

So I scream.

Before he even touches me, I scream at the top of my lungs, bathing the room with my terror.

He grabs me under my armpits, locking me in his arms. Lik captures my legs, exactly like they had Simon. His blood is still covering me, the first layer half-dried by now.

Without a word to the other, they carry me to the bedroom. They’re a team, they know what they’re doing even if they’ve never done it before.

When they throw me on the bed, I try to put some words to my dread. “Wait,” I gasp. “I can’t—”

They manhandle me until my head hangs upside down at the foot of the

bed. My world tilts, watching Sam's legs move around the room. I feel Lik grabbing something from under the mattress while he holds one of my hands.

"Sam," I panic. My wrist is now cuffed, with something akin to leather. I pull at it and do my best to keep my other arm close. Sam is already grabbing it and putting my other wrist in another cuff.

"Don't. I can't..." The tremor in my voice tells them everything. I'm not ready. I'm scared, and I have no trust in either of them.

"Do you know why I never touched you, Rose?"

My arms are pulled to the two extremities of the bed, my head is hanging upside down, and all I can see is Sam's legs up to his crotch. His black jeans are right in my face, the same kind he always wears.

"Answer me." He slaps my cheek. It's not hard, not violent, something you'd do to someone who's fainting and you're trying to bring them back.

"No, I don't know." I can barely hear my own voice, feeling like I'm not really in my body. I squeeze my eyes and open them again, wishing all this was just a dream.

Why did I do this? Bringing Simon here, using him to make myself feel better and hoping they'd catch me. Was it worth it? His life? My sanity?

"Because I didn't want to hurt you. And I wanted you to love me."

"What?" I shake my head slowly from one side to the other, confused.

"I like pain, Rose. Like him. Like Bianco. I want to hurt your pretty little body until you're writhing and begging me to stop. Then, I want you to like it and beg me for more. I want to mark you. I want to make you bleed. I want to bruise you with my own hands, with toys, with my teeth. And I want you to thank me for it. *Just. Like. Him.*"

I shake my head more harshly, trying to drive away the images of Bianco hurting me.

"Stop," I plead. "You're not him."

"No." He lowers himself so I can finally see his face. "I'm worse."

Tears spring to my eyes. I can't honestly explain why. I'm not in pain, *not yet*. But the childhood image I had of my Sam, of my savior, is being shattered to pieces, and eight-year-old me isn't ready to accept it. "That's not true," I fight back. "That's not..." A sob clogs my throat. "You wouldn't hurt me."

I sound childish, desperate. A kid who can't accept the truth that someone is waving right in front of their eyes. Just like I hadn't accepted the first time Bianco hurt me.

“I will.” A tinge of guilt stains the strength in his voice. Remorse for something he can’t control. “Because I am done letting you off the hook. That was the last time you pushed me. The last time I let you think I’m the stupid, lovesick boy who will let you wrap him around your finger and make his life miserable. I hope you enjoyed his dick, because that was the last time I let you stray. From now on, it’s me. Me and whoever *I* allow to touch you. That’s all. I am your only focus. I am who you aim to please. I am who you exist through. *Me*. No one else.”

“You’ve lost it,” I breathe out, my voice a murmur trying to reach his crazy mind.

“Yeah,” he nods. “You’ve finally done it. I’ve fucking lost my mind.”

I pull at my wrists. Blood is rushing to my head and I feel a bit dizzy. Everything is a blur through the tears I haven’t shed. I’m stuck, terrified, and the truth slips past my lips.

“You’re scaring me,” I admit in the hopes he will find pity in me and let me go.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he tells me. A hand comes to rest on my upside-down cheek.

He’s never called me baby before; I love it and hate it, all the same.

“Look at Lik. He’s been through what you’re going through.” My eyes dart to Lik. In the short time I’ve known him, I’ve not seen him so serious for so long. I wish I could see a smile on his face, even half of one. A small dimple on his cheek, anything that would show me this is not the end of me. “And he’s doing just fine. Never been so obedient in his life.”

A single tear breaches my eyelid, overflowing the barriers of my eyelashes. It slowly rolls to the corner of my eye and down my forehead until it gets stuck in my hairline.

“I don’t want to do this,” I sniffle, trying to gather my words. “I’m not ready.”

He traces the track of my tear with his thumb, looking deeply into my eyes, grabbing a piece of my soul and twisting it for his own pleasure. “Lik,” he says, looking right at me. “What do we say about begging?”

There is not an ounce of hesitation when he replies, “Keep it for when you can’t take it anymore.”

Sam stands up as I twist some more, practically dislodging my shoulders in a desperate attempt to get free.

I don’t know what I fear the most, the pain or the fact that my masochist

side will enjoy it.

The fact that I'm saying goodbye to my childhood best friend, or that I am meeting the merciless man he has become. Ruthless, lethal, yet still very much in love with me.

Sam is a passionate artist who never tired of observing his muse and is now ready to make her his masterpiece.

ROSE



Make Me Feel - Elvis Drew

“Open your mouth for me, Rose.”

Sam’s thumb comes to rest on my lips, tracing over and over again, except I refuse to open them.

“I wish we were at home,” Lik says. “We have so many toys there.”

Images of torture devices run through my tormented mind. It’s stupid because I know what Lik means by toys. He showed me some of them when we went to Vue Club together. He showed me how much I actually loved everything he did to me there.

And I know how much I love Rachel taking over.

So why can’t I calm down?

It’s Sam, my mind repeats.

He is too big, too strong, too domineering.

“I’ve got everything I need to start training her,” Sam answers calmly.

I shake my head. I don’t like the word he uses. *Training*.

“Open,” he repeats. When I don’t, he looks down at me with disappointment. “I wouldn’t be so stubborn if I were you.”

He takes a step back and caresses my hair. “Lik,” he calls. “Why don’t you show me how you made her come in the car last week.”

My heart picks up, and my stomach twists with pleasure at the reminder. “Don’t you fucking dare,” I hiss.

I feel the mattress dip as Lik gets on the bed. I squeeze my legs together, not about to acknowledge something as little as his words got me wet. It doesn't take long for Lik to spread my legs and settle between them.

"She's wet," he chuckles.

"Of course she is. She's a little masochist," Sam confirms, not surprised in the slightest. "Open your mouth, Rose."

The daggers my eyes throw his way should have killed him by now. I don't open, not even to tell him to fuck off.

I can't see his face properly, and it isn't comforting. I would like to see his face, his eyes mainly, what is hidden in them that his voice doesn't tell me.

Lik's fingers skim the seam of my lower lips. He spreads them, releasing a sigh of pleasure as he observes me. His thumb presses against my clit and my legs tighten around him, desperately trying to close. I keep my mouth tightly shut, making sure to not give Sam what he wants.

But then Lik's thumb starts to move. Slow, regular circles that bring spikes of warmth up my body. My stomach tenses and I feel another wave of wetness pooling down. I squeeze my eyes shut, perfectly knowing he'll see it.

"Fuck," he rasps. He keeps torturing me slowly, a steady rhythm that won't relent.

"Aah..." The moan escapes my lips before I can stop it and Sam's fingers are in my mouth.

"There she is," he mocks, pretending this was of my own accord. Two fingers hook my lower jaw, and he pulls until my mouth is wide open.

The next moan is louder, resonating out of my wide-open mouth. I pull at my binds, feeling the soft mattress shrinking, yet the leather cuffs don't yield.

"Listen to me," Sam announces clearly. "You need to listen so you can learn." Another circle from Lik and my body tightens again. "Had you opened the first time I asked, I would have simply put my thumb in your mouth." Another circle, my hips lift off the bed. "Had you done it the *second* or *third* time, I would have put my dick in there. Got it all nice and wet before I put it in that tight arse of yours." My lungs heave from his words and Lik's unstoppable movements.

My brain is screaming, *so what now?!*

"Now I have to teach you what happens when bad girls don't do what they're told." He lets out a fake sigh.

Then I feel it, the silencer of his gun against my cheek...my lips. I shout

something inaudible with his fingers in my mouth. It was meant to be a *no*.

I can't attempt to say anything else now that the thick cylinder-shaped object is pushing inside my mouth. Fear grips my heart. *Is this it? Is he going to kill me?*

"Take it deep, baby," he whispers to me. "Be a good slut."

His fingers leave my mouth, now full of his gun. My tongue is flat against it, spit gathering at the corner of my lips. He pushes in with slow movements, deeper and deeper...and deeper. At this angle, my head upside down, it goes easily down my throat, making me retch much later than I usually would have.

Who knew a silencer was that long?

His fingers are tight in my hair, stopping me from twisting my head to the side. Lik doesn't stop, and I moan against the weapon. I feel the front of the barrel against my lips as the realization that I have the entirety of the silencer in my mouth and down my throat kicks me into panic mode.

I struggle to get away as Sam goes up and down with his gun, his hard dick tight against his jeans.

Fuck, I can't breathe.

He tuts me. "Stay." My arms hurt from pulling, and my wrists are chaffed from the cuffs. Tears are running down from the corner of my eyes and onto my forehead. And yet, Lik still brings me pleasure. I'm so close to orgasm his next touch could be my undoing.

Only he stops.

I cry out, but Sam doesn't relent. My body is shaking, unable to take the torture of leaving me so short of gratification. The discomfort and irritation in my throat are close to unbearable.

"Get it all nice and wet, baby."

A sob rolls up, kept down my throat by the silencer. *How ironic.*

The metal is heavy, the taste of iron making me feel sick.

Sam notices the exact moment I can't take it anymore, the precise second just before my body locks this down as a traumatic event I can't ever come back from. I know it because he pulls the weapon away, letting my cries resonate loudly in the room.

It's hard to take a breath. I taste blood at the back of my mouth as spit runs down my cheeks, sticking to my skin and mixing with the tears.

"Enough," I rasp in a voice more broken than ever. I cough, spitting some more without intending to. I feel degraded to the point of no return, and the

humiliation hurts too deep for me to attempt to say anything further.

“Shh.” His thumb spreads the spit on my face, bringing it back into my mouth and making me suck on it.

“Sam,” I choke out another cry when he pulls his thumb away. “Stop.”

“Do you understand now why you should listen the first time I order something?”

Eyes tightly shut, I give him one curt nod.

“That’s a good girl.” I barely have time to take another breath before the next order comes. “Spread your legs wide.”

A nudge from Lik helps me obey. He keeps them wide open, the sound of his needy breath loud in the room. Sam moves slightly above me, going toward Lik and back. I can’t see much more than that.

“This is a turning point in your life, Rose,” he tells me. “Because from now on, every time you try to find anyone else but me, you’ll remember none of them is capable of bringing you to the extremes you’re going to reach tonight.”

Something presses against my entrance, slowly pushing in. Hard, wet...

“Fuck,” I scream when I understand it’s the exact same object that was in my mouth a minute ago. “You’re fucking insane!”

Lik chuckles by my legs as he pushes the gun slightly more in, going in and out in tiny movements that bring me more pleasure than I dare to admit. “If only that was the craziest thing he’s ever done.”

“Focus,” Sam tells him.

“Yes, Sir.” There’s a playfulness in his tone and I can imagine him winking at his boyfriend. He’s so eager to keep going.

He comes out, and every time he comes back in, he pushes in a little deeper. The pressure builds inside me, even as the pain comes again.

“Sam,” I rasp. “I’m sore...” My breath catches in my throat, dying to turn into a moan. It’s true, I’m sore and it hurts, but it feels good. I don’t understand it. I can’t make sense of it.

“Just let go,” Sam tells me softly. My pussy tightens around the silencer as Lik pushes it further in.

“Almost there, princess,” Lik adds with encouragement. The nickname he’s forced on me liquifies my insides.

How? How did he turn something I hated so much into the praise I live for?

I can’t fight it anymore. Pleasure pushes a scream past my throat. It

comes out ragged, broken, and builds back again at the same time as my orgasm does.

“Don’t let her come,” Sam orders his boyfriend.

“How am I meant to control that?” Lik throws back, making the former laugh.

I can barely hear them, lost in my own desire and yearning. My entire body is taut and ready to snap. My hips are undulating to the rhythm of Lik’s thrusts, and he sounds fascinated when he talks again.

“It’s all in. She’s taking it so fucking well. I…” A long sigh. “I’m fucking jealous of your gun, Sam.”

They laugh together, humiliation coursing my body and mixing with the pleasure in my veins. The mix of both dulls the pain I was feeling. It only lets out a fountain of pure, crystal gratification.

Sam’s hands are on my tits, spreading Simon’s blood. “You’ll know when she gets close.”

I don’t know if it’s the fact that his hands are huge or my tits are tiny, but he takes two handfuls effortlessly. And he pulls so much that my back lifts off the mattress.

I scream as my whole body trembles with a new need. Lik’s thrusts become harsher, as my legs start to shake and a flame sparks from inside me. My moans shorten until they turn into a shattered sound.

And they both stop.

I yell something in frustration, cursing them both.

“I see,” Lik admits, like studying a scientific experiment.

I’m writhing on the bed, rolling my hips to try and fuck myself on the gun some more. Lik lets go of the weapon, leaving it inside me.

“Don’t stop,” I plead.

Something clinks, it must be Sam’s belt. It’s confirmed a moment later when he wraps it around my throat, slipping it through the buckle. He’s got one end in his hand, and when he pulls, it tightens against my airways.

“Open your mouth,” Sam orders. It’s like my body truly learned from earlier. My mouth drops open, my tongue sticking out until I can feel it against my chin. “Good little slut,” he praises.

I didn’t hear his zipper or him shuffling. I was too taken by my own need to come. I startle when I feel his hard dick sliding against my tongue as he coats himself in my spit. With him so close, I can do nothing but feel him. All of him. His musky scent, the softness of his skin. And I see the tattoo on his

dick.

It's strange because I thought I had seen every single one of Sam's tattoos. He's got too many to count, that even he doesn't know anymore. But I had never seen *this* one. I can't quite tell what it is.

I don't get a chance to think about it too much. He pushes along my tongue until the tip slips inside my mouth and catches against my inner cheek. On the outside, he slaps my face. He grunts, and I feel his feet shift on the floor.

"Fuck, Rose..." He pulls on the belt, and it pinches the skin around my throat, making me hiss.

I can't explain how challenging and satisfying it is to be in this situation. All I've ever wanted in my life was for Sam to lust over me. I've dreamed of the things he used to do to other people. Yet having it done to me feels like I'm betraying the kids we used to be. He's becoming a stranger who makes my body feel good, using it for his own pleasure. I struggle to separate the two.

Pulling out, he comes back in stronger. He shoves his hard cock into my mouth, down my throat. Then he pulls on the belt.

I gag completely. Instantly, I feel the blood flow to my head being cut. My lungs attempt to expand, begging for air. Tears flow down my face and my body spasms.

"Keep fucking her with the gun, Lik."

The gun starts moving again, and pleasure spreads even though I'm certain I'm about to die. Moans choke down my throat and Sam fucks my mouth relentlessly.

There is not an ounce of mercy left in this man, and he isn't afraid to prove it.

My nails bite into my palms, cutting bloody crescents through my skin. My toes curl and my legs shake as I feel my orgasm building back to life. The noise of Sam throat-fucking me resonates loudly and past the ringing in my ear.

My body follows Lik's movement until Sam lets go of the belt and pulls out. My breath intake is loud, clogged with spit falling from my mouth to my throat. I moan loudly when Lik pushes the gun far inside me and then stops short.

"Fuck," I weep. "Fuck..." My words mix with my breath. "I need to come."

“You sure do,” Lik chuckles. “You’ve made a big mess down here.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, not liking the sound of that.

“Lik, come here. Leave the gun in.”

A whimper passes my lips, knowing I will still feel full and have no way of moving the toy myself.

When did you start calling a fucking gun a toy!

Their presence is mighty when they settle by my head. I hear them kiss, and I feel them touch each other. I watch Sam’s hand undoing Lik’s jeans and pushing them down. I see as he grabs his hard cock and starts jerking him.

And I want to be part of it.

I writhe and shiver, dying for their touch. My clit is swollen, aching with a need to be touched. Lik curses, grunts, and I hear their mouths clashing against each other. A moan bubbles up his throat, transferring into Sam’s mouth and down to his chest. They tremble with need, and I feel the electricity coursing through them. It’s like feeling it in the air when a storm is coming.

Sam guides Lik to my face, and it’s his turn to push past my lips. I open my mouth wide for him and let him slide down. He’s not as big as Sam, so his girth doesn’t hurt as much. Still, I feel him choking me, forcing past the back of my throat. He comes back out, and Sam replaces him. On each side of my face, I hear them hiss with pleasure. And above me, I listen to them kissing. I barely see them, yet I know it’s beautifully chaotic.

They use me like this for longer than I can keep up with. My throat is raw, and I am covered in spit. It’s gone down my neck, over my ears, and in my hair. And I’m wetter than I could have imagined. They both grab my breasts simultaneously and, in turn, pull at my nipples to ensure sure they stay hard and taut. My shoulders ache from remaining in this position for what feels like hours. It might not be, but it surely feels longer than I should have ever been in that position for.

Lik grunts loudly when they both push inside my mouth. They don’t fit down my throat, making me gag. Still, they push, pull out, come back, and moan at how tight they both feel in my mouth and against my inner cheeks.

When they finally stop, I can’t utter one word. I can’t swallow or do anything. I’m spent and can barely feel anything anymore. Their aftertaste is all I taste.

My pussy is pulsing around the gun, and I’ve attempted to grind on it so many times only to fail as many in bringing more pleasure out of it.

Sam stays where he is, while Lik takes back his space between my legs. I feel him pull the gun out, and I hold onto whatever small pleasure that brings.

“Say ‘fuck me, please, Lik.’” I hear Sam, barely. I’m in a different universe, where everything sounds like I’m underwater, where everyone looks far and blurry.

The belt tightens around my throat, a warning. “Fuck me...please...” My voice is barely above a whisper, so raw and broken. “...please, Lik.”

“My pleasure, princess.” He’s in a world far away.

And not only he slams inside me, but on the other side, Sam buries himself in my mouth *again*. He’s holding tightly on to the belt, making sure tears mix with the stars that spark in my vision.

It’s almost unbelievable to think Lik has only ever fucked one woman: me. There’s a sense of ownership that spreads through me at the same time as the pleasure he imposes on my battered body. The ache from yesterday has wholly disappeared, drowned in how wet they’ve made me and how malleable I now feel.

He grabs my legs, pushing my knees against my chest, and pounds harder. Every single one of my moans is pushed back down by Sam’s cock. When Lik pushes, I crash against Sam. And every time Sam pushes back, Lik gets deeper inside me.

I writhe, tensing under the torture. Every time I wonder how much longer I can take, Lik switches positions, forcing more pleasure to flood my veins. More endorphins to control my brain. He puts one leg above each of his shoulders coming closer to me, deeper. He’s so tight against me I can feel all of him. Not only his dick filling me up and the tip hitting against my insides but I also feel my ass cheeks against his pelvis, the back of my thighs going up his abs and chest, and my calves against each of his shoulders. One of Sam’s hands comes to pinch my nipples one after the other, and the other drops the belt and starts stroking my clit.

I’m so full of them, my skin so intimate with theirs that we are becoming one. Their movements are synchronized, my body a victim of their thrusts and lust. Sweaty bodies, pants, moans, grunts...it all becomes a mess of pleasure and emotions.

“You’re going to come for us, Rose. And when you do, I want you to remember exactly who owns you. Scream the name of your new king.”

It’s not one thing that makes me tip over the edge. It’s a fusion.

It’s Sam’s finger rubbing harshly against my clit.

It's his other hand that comes to caress my cheek.

It's Lik's powerful thrust and the kiss he drops on my shin, so different from the violence battling inside all of us right now.

I can't see it, but I can imagine it clearly. His eyes focused on where his cock meets my boiling heat. His head tilting to the side slightly, where my long leg rests on his shoulder, and his plump lips cherishing the moment they meet with my burning skin.

I do exactly as Sam asked. I scream his name as I explode. It's muffled by his big cock, not giving a chance for my word to be heard.

I let go of everything and let my body take over. I let my primal needs follow the movements and the pleasure they bring. They both pull out practically at the same time, and they come on me. One on my face and throat, one on my stomach. Lik moans loudly, and Sam hisses like it hurts him to have pleased himself using the girl he used to protect against this harsh world.

They take long, extending their golden moment and making sure they cover me as much as they can, marking me with the warmth and heaviness of their cum.

None of them untie me. They step away from the bed and I come to realize how heavy my head feels, the blood putting pressure on my face from the inside.

A whimper escapes my sore throat. My head hurts, and my body is starting to shiver.

"Untie me," I rasp.

One of them grabs my shoulders and slides me down onto the bed so my head isn't hanging anymore. I can now see theirs above me. Sam's is flushed, his pale skin showing the fact that he's just exercised and orgasmed from it. Lik's eyes shine with a type of gold you only hear about in myths. A drop of sweat is running down his temple and he wipes it with the back of his hand.

I expect the cuffs to come off next. Nothing.

"Sam..."

"I want you to take time to think about what you've done today. You were jealous and angry because Rachel followed us without asking your permission. She enjoyed herself independently from what you allowed her, and you couldn't take it. Because you've taken a liking to Lik and he still sides with me, you didn't like that. And because you hate the fact that I can own every single one of you. Yes, including your free self."

“I—”

“I’m talking, and you will listen.”

I pinch my lips together, the cum there tastes salty. I have no room to negotiate right now, I just want them to untie me. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I can pretend I’m listening until he undoes the cuffs and then fight my case.

“You wanted to hurt Rachel by showing her anyone can still have you. You wanted to pretend to Lik that you don’t care that much about him. And you wanted to tell me I can’t control you. Someone died because of your vindictive jealousy, because you want everyone at your feet and to want you.”

He runs his fingers through the cum on my neck and up my chin. He pries my mouth open and pushes it in. I instinctively lick his fingers, swirl my tongue around them and swallow his cum. And I curse my body for it. Curse the fact that I’m too weak and dumb from pleasure to fight back.

He smiles. “I *can* control you, Rose. And not only will I train you until you accept it fully, but I will also let Lik play with you however he wants. And I will take time and effort to teach Rachel she can own you until that smart little brain of yours has turned you into a total dumb slut for her and all of us.”

My breathing has accelerated and grown ragged from the rage building inside me.

“Is that what you want?” I ask him. I wish my voice was stronger than the squeak it currently is, but it’s impossible after the torture they put my throat through. “You want to kill the Volkovs, and then instead of killing me as you promised, you want to turn me into *this*.” I point at myself with my tied hands, at the mess I currently am. “You want nothing else but to use me?”

He chuckles. “What’s worse for you? To die or to become my stupid, little slut who thinks of nothing else but begging for gratification?”

He knows the answer. He knows I think of death as a liberation from my unwanted life. And he knows I think of submission as torture.

“Isn’t it horrible to enjoy and hate something so much at the same time? To have a body that loves being used and a mind that fights every step of the way? You’d kill to be completely independent.” He shakes his head, a wide grin on his face as he prepares for the last blow. “And, fuck, it must be so hard to know that independence now belongs to *me*. Someone who knows you inside out and will turn every single part of your body and mind against

you.” He smears more cum around my face, now forcing his thumb against my tongue as I try to fight him off. “I offered you everything you wanted, and you threw it back in my face.”

That’s not true. He left me after we all shared something special, and then offered me what I wanted to hear as a pathetic excuse.

“Think about that,” he concludes. “We’ll come back for you in a bit.”

He backs away, and I choke. “What?!” Their silence drives me mad. “What did you just say? Untie me!”

My thoughts close in on me as the shutting of the door resonates in the room. He shut the fucking door. He *shut* it.

I scream so loud I taste blood in my mouth. I can imagine how I look, covered in their cum and the blood of the man he was too jealous to keep alive.

“Sam!” I fight with all I have, yet it doesn’t last long. Dark thoughts invade me, and primal responses of fight or flight kick in. My feet kick against the headboard, as my shoulders attempt to lift off the bed. After a few minutes, my head starts spinning and the mattress swallows me. It’s deep and dark, exactly like my mind.

I was naïve when I told Sam he wasn’t like Bianco.

He was realistic. ‘*No. I’m worse.*’

He uses the same techniques as the man who broke me when I was just a child. He uses me, forces me to feel things I don’t want to. And then leaves me alone with my own thoughts.

And I don’t only hate it because it reminds me of the worst moments of my life.

I hate it because, someway, somehow...it works.

I think of the things he said, because they were true. He turned the technique around, forcing me to focus on myself when Bianco used to force me to focus on him only.

I think of how I felt when I heard the tone in Rachel’s voice, the regret she expressed for enjoying herself without me. The jealousy when Lik taunted me with what they had done. The fear when Sam offered me everything I’ve ever wanted on a silver platter. The need to bring Simon into the mix and make sure I would make all of them regret it.

It’s all there, bouncing against the walls of my skull.

The fact that I’m starting to believe how pleasurable it would be to belong to them. To live only for their pleasures and mine. To forget about all the

deep thinking that makes my life a living hell. The constant thoughts of the things I never forget, the beauty that shouldn't belong to anyone else but Sam or *them*.

My eyes flutter shut, a certain peace falling over me.

When he'll come to untie me, I know my true self will come back. Stubborn, feisty. I love her. She is my rock, she is the girl who survived.

But for once, I let her take a rest. Let a tame side of me bring harmony and balance to my being.

When they enter the room again, I'm exhausted. I'm cold, my body shaking and my teeth clattering. I don't know how long they left me in here, but the sky is dark outside. Lethargy has taken over my limbs, and I've lost my voice completely.

So I don't say anything. Sam unties me silently anyway. Not bringing anything up. Lik helps me up and massages my shoulders. He undoes the belt around my neck.

Cum, spit, and blood have all dried on me, and I feel utterly disgusting.

Disgusting, humiliated, used.

"Shower," Sam says softly as I walk out of the room. Soft yet still an order as if he knows no other way to talk to me anymore.

It's not like I was going to do anything else.

I shower, warming my cold body as much as I can. It doesn't stop the trembling, although I can feel my extremities again. I feel like I've run a marathon, climbed a mountain, and swam an ocean. Lik, Sam, myself: the triathlon of death. My muscles are burning, and my mind is foggy.

When I've finally scrubbed everything off my skin, I watch red patches form with a sick satisfaction.

I come out of the shower, wipe the steam on the mirror and stare at myself. Dark circles decorate my eyes, the shade fitting strangely well with the midnight blue. I look down and skim the bruises on my throat with the tips of my fingers. They're dark, some bits still red from the irritation. It's evident where the belt pinched my skin, making it an ugly purple. I shiver, and a heavy nausea settles in my stomach.

In the past, I've seen people leave Sam's bedroom with those exact marks. I've dreamed of being at the receiving end, yet I feel no satisfaction now that it's happened.

I look like I've been beaten up. My knees buckle for a moment, and I have to hold myself on the counter. I'm coming down from a terrible high. I feel it all at once: the ache in my pussy, the tightness in my throat, and the bruises around my neck. I peer down at my wrists since they burn. A redness shows on the scars I have there. These two circled scars that don't quite reach all the way around.

On the hard floor, my face rubbing in dirt. My arms fight against the zip ties around my wrists so hard I'm bleeding. I can feel it trickling down my hands. It's the third time I've passed out. Third time they force me back into consciousness. My tears have dried, so has the blood that spilled from my lips.

Hands on my hips. They dig deep into my skin.

A laugh. Something spoken in Russian.

And pain. Radiating from between my legs and all the way to the top of my head.

My ass hitting the floor brings me back. I blink a few times, then force myself back to a standing position. Because no matter what, I'll always be the one who picks myself up. I look into the mirror, right into my eyes, and pointlessly look for the pieces of me that were stolen.

And then the anger comes.

Hot as fire, bright as the sun. It comes from the depths of my being, the darkest parts that bring nothing but *chaos*.

SAM



Painkiller - DREAMERS

Lik settles his head on my lap and turns the TV on. I can't focus on anything, my mind reeling, everything tossing and turning.

"We're going to have to go home at some point. I know we didn't move too long ago, but we have a cabin where we *actually* live."

He doesn't even mind that I don't respond, he's used to making conversation on his own.

"Oh my god, look what's on," he beams as he nestles further against me. My hand goes to his hair, playing with the tight curls rolling them around my index finger, unrolling, repeating. But my mind isn't really here.

It's in the bathroom with Rose, where I can hear her shower. It took us two hours to move that guy's body with the help of Lik's brother, Xi. Now he's buried in a ditch, and I hope he wasn't anyone important. I can't have the police after me, not when I'm on my final contract.

I think of the words I told Rose. The fact that I had promised her I would kill her after I found Volkov. A promise she knows I never intended to keep.

What did I say now, lost in my lust, anger, and jealousy? Empty threats, shit I could never do to her.

Because I love her too much.

I can't kill her, and I can't make her life a living hell. It's too hard. I love Rose for everything she is. Her stubbornness and feistiness are part of it. I

don't want to take the strong woman out of her, simply...simply own her. *All of her*. There's no high like getting her vulnerable and pliable. What we did to her in that room...I want to take it further than that. I want to utterly destroy her so I can build her back and then do it all over again. Like I do to Lik. I want Rachel to be part of that too.

Running my knuckles against my jaw, I try to trace back how this all started. Not my love for Rose, that's become a timeless ache in my heart. But more of when I started losing sight of my goal; killing the Volkov brothers. My money, my promise to Lik. My personal vendetta against them and, specifically, Viktor.

When did I start letting Lik lust over her and allow him to play with her like a shiny new toy? I felt reassured that he found her as irresistible as I did.

That he, too, can't think of anything but her when she's around. That he also can't help but touch her, dominate her, and obsess over her. It took a weight off my shoulders: the weight of guilt. Because if we're both hopelessly consumed with her, I don't have to choose him or her.

My stomach twists thinking these thoughts, perfectly knowing I could never choose one over the other. Lik wants all of me, accepts me, cherishes me. Rose fights me every step of the way. Just the way I like her.

Sometimes I think she still fights me because she's always loved doing so, knowing that she'd be happy to let me win in the end. Her stubbornness used to keep her rebellious, but if there's one person she was happy to let take over it was me. Because she wholeheartedly trusted me. Something we don't have anymore and that I'm not sure how to build back on both sides.

Sometimes I think she still fights me because she would truly be happy with Rachel only. They share a love I can only yearn for from Rose. She doesn't know how to handle it when it comes to her insecurities, but I know her, and I know she would die without her shy girlfriend.

And I know exactly why I've come to want to protect Rachel. I used to be jealous of her, and I still am in some way. But everything's changed since I saw the bruises on her.

I throw my head back, resting it on the back of the sofa. Lik says something about a hot guy in his show, and I mumble some sort of 'take it back'. I think he does.

My eyes close, and at first, I see the images of just only a couple of hours ago. Rose on the bed, that guy's blood all over her stomach. The way her tits felt in my hands, the way her mouth felt wrapped around my dick. The noises

she made with a gun silencer down her throat, the view of her body tied to the bed. The cries, the whimpers, the pain. She is positively the most magnificent woman who's ever walked this earth.

It's not hard to understand wars that have been fought over women. We are merely humans; our pride leads us, and our love controls us.

Menelaus fought for ten years to get Helen back from Paris. Armies left their kingdoms, children died, queens were turned into slaves, and Troy burned to ashes.

The stupidity of men never ceases to astound me. Mine, in particular, when it comes to admitting that I would have happily fought the strongest Greek hero if it meant I would keep the woman I love by my side. I would have fought one more year, one more battle, gutted Achilles in front of the Gods if it meant Rose would be mine forever.

Or, like the insane person she has turned me into, blinded by jealousy, I would kill an innocent man who had no idea what he was getting himself into. Add him to the list of fallen men in my own personal Trojan war.

Slowly, I drift into my own world—the one where Rose only had eyes for me.

15 years old

From the living room, where I'm sitting with Nate and my father, I see Rose dash through the hallway toward the stairs. Her long hair is up in a tight ponytail, exactly how Bianco loves it. I can't see the scar at the back of her neck from here, yet I know it's there, burnt into her skin.

"It's not that big of a deal, boy. And you gotta learn somehow. Sam never minds, do you, son?" My father's words are slightly slurred because he's drunk, as usual. He always smells of alcohol, but he's good at covering it when we visit Bianco's house.

He's got one job and one job only; to kill for the Bianco family. He doesn't want to lose it. He's a dangerous man, though he doesn't want to get on the wrong side of the Cosa Nostra.

Nate's foster dad wants him to go on a kill with my father. A sort of initiation. Nate will go, because he always does what he's told. He's got that coldness in his eyes and nothing in his heart.

My father ignores the fact that I didn't answer his question. He doesn't mind that I barely ever say a word. In fact, he likes it—often demands it.

My body is fully present while he and Nate keep talking, but my mind is with Rose. She must be upstairs in her room. She spent forty-five minutes with Bianco in his office, then he left and locked her in there for another hour. He just opened the door to let her out, and she sprinted upstairs.

She needs me and my body is buzzing to be close to her. We've known each other for four years, and in the last two, both our bodies have changed. We used to be able to hug without either of us feeling the electricity that courses through the other's body. Now, she fits perfectly in my arms, skinny and small. My height is already taller than the average fifteen-year-old, and with my dad constantly forcing me to do physical exercise, it's turned my muscles rock hard.

Now when we hug, we embrace fully. She disappears within my hold, protected by my huge body. I know she needs this right now. And she'll have bruises that need tending. I want to do that for her, I want to soothe her and tell her that she's done nothing wrong. That it's all him.

I stand up without thinking, heading for the hallway.

"Where are you going?" my father asks. I hate his American accent.

I preferred my mom's; British, sharp in the softest ways. I was born in London, even though my dad quickly insisted that we move back to where he was from. By ten, I was an American citizen. But even in the US, she was the one always at home, taking care of me while her husband was in bars or burying dead bodies. So I kept my accent, thanks to her. Now that she's gone, I never want to lose it. It's a part of her, forever within me.

"Bathroom," I give him as an answer.

I walk past the downstairs bathroom and up to the hallway that leads to Rose's bedroom. I stand outside her door for a minute, creepily trying to catch any sound she could be making. Her heavy breathing tells me she's still trying to get over her latest session with Bianco.

I knock.

"Who's there?" Her voice is hoarse, tight.

"It's me." I push the door open at the same time as I answer. I know I don't need to wait for her to invite me in.

She's in a sports bra, her back to the mirror, trying to reach the bright red welts with her fingers. They're white from all the cold cream she's put on them.

Bianco usually hurts her back and her arms. Her stomach is not as often because it's harder to keep her from twisting away if she's lying on her back.

That's what she told me, anyway.

"Lovebug," I sigh. "Let me help."

My feet hurry toward her. Grabbing her hand, I run my fingers against hers, rubbing the cream off them. My skin heats up when it touches hers.

She doesn't say anything, just offers me her back. Standing behind her, our gazes lock through the mirror. Her eyes drop right away, tears stuck in her eyelashes.

"It's okay, you can cry. You don't have to hide anything from me."

She shakes her head. As I apply cream to the welts just below her shoulders, she winces.

"Why does he find me so beautiful when I cry?"

"Don't try to find a reason to his madness. There's none."

"Like your dad? Is there no reason for the way he is?" she murmurs.

Instead of answering, I focus on making sure every single red mark on her back is covered. That every single ache is soothed as much as possible.

It seems to take forever, but I could touch her skin for years and not get tired of it. She's so smooth. Her golden tan makes my hand pale in comparison. She smells of lilac, violet, and geranium—my favorite smell.

Sometimes, at night, I toss and turn trying to bring up the memory of her perfume in my mind. Every time I close my eyes, she's there. Her night blue eyes, her inky hair. The tightness of her jaw, the almond shape of her eyes. The length of her eyelashes and the red of her lips. It all stays with me, day and night. No matter what I do, no matter where I am, Rose is with me.

Last year, I gave her a sweater of mine to wear. When she gave it back, it smelled of her. So much so, I wore it to bed that night. That was the first time I touched myself to images of her. I wanked so many times I couldn't meet her gaze the next day.

I felt like I was betraying her, our friendship, that protection I cast over her. Then, one day, she looked at me differently. Her behavior changed around me. The way she touched her hair and twisted her hands. The way her fingers started to linger against my skin every time we'd touch. And I knew then that she felt the same. The guilt left me at that moment.

"I'm sorry about what your dad did to your mom," she adds after what feels like an hour of my silence. "Are you sad? Still?"

It's interesting to see how Rose and her brothers, Nate and Jake, react to human emotions. To events like life and death. To the way a child is meant to love his parents. To a mother passing away, for example.

There is no empathy in them whatsoever. They do not know what unconditional love is, like the love my mum used to fill me with. Because no one ever showed them. Her voice is flat when she talks about her. I don't doubt she's sorry that I was an unrecognizable mess a year ago, ready to take the same path as his violent, alcoholic father. She does feel sorry, but only because she's sorry I was miserable. Not because she feels anything toward what happened.

"I will never stop being sad about my mum," I admit, my eyes focused on her back. There are no more welts to cover, yet I can't move. "I will forever hate my dad for killing her."

She knows what he did, I don't need to hide it from her. If anything, it's nice to say it out loud.

"Did you see him do it?"

"Yes."

He was always violent with her, often beating her black and blue. That night was different. She'd tried to leave with me. I remember all too well opening their bedroom door, and seeing him on top of her, his hands around her neck. Suitcases were open on the floor next to their bed, half full. Her legs were dangling off the bed, and her body was convulsing. The air smelt of sweat and alcohol, the room cast in shadows.

"Did you say something?" She's turned around now, trying to catch my black gaze with her ocean one.

"I asked him what he was doing, and I told him to stop." She grabs my hands, her small thumbs rubbing circles against the backs.

"And what did he do?"

I know her. She's asking all these questions to think of someone else's misery and convince herself that hers is not as bad.

I finally look up to her, finding strength in the way she attempts to pull information out of me. I never talked about it, not even with her.

"He said unless I stayed silent, I'd be next."

I don't wait for a reaction, I pull her to me by her hands, forcing her to wrap her arms around my waist. Then I grab the back of her head and keep her against my chest.

"I was scared," I whisper in her ear. "I'd seen him kill much bigger men than himself. He's insane, that's what makes him so strong. I was scared, so I didn't move. And I didn't speak. I'm ashamed of myself for not saving her, for not even trying to." Forcing her to listen to my heart beating against my

ribcage, I continue, "I didn't want to die, Lovebug...I didn't want to leave you behind."

"I'm sorry," she tells me. "I'm not worth staying behind for."

I finally push away from her, holding her at arm's length and looking for an explanation in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I will leave, Sam. One way or another. I've got a plan, and if it doesn't work..." She pulls away from me and walks to her bed.

"Don't say that. You know I don't like when you talk like that."

"I won't marry Bianco. Ever. I would rather die. I want to die, Sam. You just won't let me."

"Because I know I will get you away from here," I defend.

"I can't wait any longer! I'm tired and in pain. I'm scared. Every day of my life I'm scared. I haven't seen the world outside of this property in months. He keeps me here, always. I get taught here, I have activities here, I suffer here."

"What's your plan?" I'm right by the bed with her now. She sits down on it, and I stand right in front of her.

"Nate is the one getting in the way. He always does. I tried countless times to contact our case worker, except Nate always tells her we're happy here and that he won't move. They won't let just me and Jake leave. She won't listen to me."

"So?"

"So he won't be in the way if he's dead."

"You sound crazy right now."

"I told him I'd do it. He doesn't believe me. It's him or me, I can promise you that."

"He's your brother."

"No. Jake is my brother, and if anything else happens, if Nate sides with Bianco again..."

"Rose...stop. You're talking about my best friend."

"Who's more important to you, him or me?"

"Don't ask me that."

"One of us will die, Sam. Who do you choose?" She sounds so angry, so real.

"I won't let you hurt him or yourself."

"If you're not with me, you're with him."

"Stop it." Before I can control myself, I've pushed her until her back hits

the bed, our legs tangle and I'm right on top of her, holding myself above her by putting my hand on the mattress, on both sides of her face. "Lovebug...just stop, please. This is killing me."

She winces and tears pearl at the corner of her eyes. "My back," she whimpers.

I don't move. Why am I not moving?

A tear drops and she shifts, hissing through the pain. "Sam, it hurts."

For the first time since knowing Rose, she stirs something in me that I used to always have under control.

I feel myself going hard in my jeans, painfully so. The pain I just caused her brought tingles down my spine, and excitement in my stomach.

I disgust myself. After everything Bianco did to her, I am getting off on seeing her in pain. I know hurting someone turns me on. I'm slowly getting to know my body and clearly notice the things that get me going. But not with her. Never. I couldn't.

I suddenly pull away, feeling empty now that she's no longer close.

"I..." I run a hand through my hair.

"What?" She gets up. "It's okay, it's not your fault." I can't find anything to say. For once, I don't want to stay silent, only the words won't come out. "Sam, I'm fine. Stop being so weird." She doesn't notice the hard-on I'm sporting, and I quickly manage to get rid of it.

I pace around her room, avoiding her gaze, trying to focus on something else. When I stop, I turn to face her.

"Maybe you're right," I finally say. "Maybe you should leave."

"What—"

"The truth is, I wish our situations weren't what they are. I wish life was simpler. I don't wish you had never met Bianco, and I know that's selfish. But then, I would never have met you and I can't live with that. The same way I don't know how I'll live once you're gone."

Her furrowed brows tell me that despite being the brightest thirteen-year-old in the tri-state area, she still doesn't fully grasp the intense feelings that pass between us.

She takes a step closer to me, wraps her thin fingers gently around my bicep and swallows.

"Sam." She swallows hard again, about to say something she shouldn't. And yet it crosses her lips, forgetting there's a chance I won't say it back. "I'm yours. No matter what happens, I'll always be yours," she whispers her

promise. As if it was the best-kept secret she has. As if Bianco could hear her all the way from his office downstairs.

I nod. That's all I can do to acknowledge what she said. I dig my gaze so deep into hers, mixing our colors in a clash of titans because I know the words won't come out from me. The disappointment in her eyes kills me.

I wish she could read my mind.

I love you.

After sharing my deepest thoughts through our unspoken bond, I share the reality of life, crashing into her with the truth.

"You should leave, Lovebug."

I watch the hurt disappear from her eyes, drowned out by the flames of independence. I know she takes my words seriously, because if there's one thing she desires above all else, it's freedom. She is going to leave because, the truth is...if Rose wants to survive, she needs to be far away from Bianco and his organization.

She needs to be far away from me.

I never knew it would be so quick, though. That afternoon, she told me she was mine, and I said nothing. The next day, Bianco forced Jake to do unspeakable things. Jake fought back Bianco's violence. Nate didn't take his brother's side. He got in the way, like Rose always said. And she shot him. A bullet she thought went right through his heart. A shot he should have never survived. To this day, we still don't know if she missed because she never wanted her older brother to die, or because it was an accident.

"...on her."

"What?" It's like having an out-of-body experience. I don't know how long I was gone. Lik is still watching TV with his head on my lap.

He huffs loudly. "You're allowed not to talk, but you're not allowed not to listen, Sam."

"I'm sorry." I massage his scalp with a soft hand, bringing him to a relaxed state. "What were you saying, love?"

I feel the shiver that runs through his body at my words.

"I was saying, should we check on her? She's been in the bathroom for a while. But you know," he turns around so he's on his back on the sofa, rather than his side, and looking up at me, "we could go home, and you could fuck my ass. I've been dying for alone time."

“You want time away from Rose?” I ask, surprised. He’s been babbling nonstop about her since the minute he met her. For so long, he heard about her, like some sort of myth. He couldn’t believe her beauty was real when he finally saw her.

“I need a bit of time with my calm boyfriend. Not the moody beast that comes out when she’s around.”

“We can have alone time. But I still need her.”

“Do you?” Rose’s loud, mocking scoff forces Lik to sit up as I shift to watch her walk into the living room. “Do you need me, or are you finding any excuse to have me around?”

“How are you feeling?” Lik asks, genuine concern sweetening his already beautiful voice.

“Free,” she simply replies. She’s got a backpack hooked on one shoulder.

“What are you doing?” my boyfriend asks while I retreat into my silence, thinking of the best way to approach the situation.

“Leaving.”

“No, you’re not.” I almost wince, regretting not being able to control my possessive instinct.

“Your plan to find the brothers failed. I’m not helping anymore.”

I slowly stand up, taking my time to round the sofa and get on her side. “I will find another way. I want Viktor and I might need his favorite toy to lure him in.”

She chuckles, cruelty leaving her lungs. “You genuinely believe it, don’t you? That I was his toy.” I feel Lik move on the sofa at her devilish smirk. “And now you think I’m yours.”

“I don’t believe, I *know*, Rose. That he brainwashed you so hard it was practically a lobotomy,” I sneer. “Stockholm syndrome hits real hard, doesn’t it?”

“Why do you want to know? Is that what you’re attempting by keeping me in your penthouse? Only a few *fucking* yards from where I was taken, by the way.”

I keep quiet. I hadn’t thought of that. The effect it could have on her to be kept in a place with a perfect view of where the Wolves grabbed her.

I taste acid at the back of my throat, remembering her screams through my open window. The run down the stairs...watching their car drive away knowing it could be the last time I ever saw her. I should have known they would get revenge for what she did. I remember all too well the night she

shot their father to save her family. To save all of us.

Bianco used to give Rose shooting lessons. They were intense, terrifying, and turned her into the most precise shooter I've ever met. She was so young when he started with her that she could barely keep her arms straight with the weight of the gun in her hands.

She did not miss a single aim by the time she was twelve. Watching how comfortable she felt with a deadly weapon was chilling.

Two years ago, Vladimir Volkov tried to end Nate. Vladimir was the head of their organization back then, previous to his sons taking over. He got to Nate before I could protect my best friend and took him to a warehouse to finish him off. The war between the Cosa Nostra and the Bratva was at an all-time high then. They were fighting over any minor territories. Surprisingly, Nate's siblings came to his rescue with me, despite their tumultuous past. When Vladimir was holding Nate at gunpoint, Rose shot him in the throat. The bullet went right past Nate and destroyed Volkov's flesh in a bloody massacre.

Rose was too young to do this or to be involved in the first place. Her escaping Bianco should have never led to that. And yet it did.

And then the Volkov brothers took her to avenge their dad.

I should have never gotten back in contact with her that year. She was living a peaceful life, and Nate and I destroyed that. And I should have been the one to shoot Vladimir. I failed her.

Yet, the feeling I get knowing she found a great life being with Viktor Volkov. Knowing she naïvely let him take over her thoughts, her feelings, her love... Hate is such a small word.

"You can't leave," I simply tell her. "We'll go to the cabin for the night if you need space, but don't make me tie you to the bed."

She cackles a dark laugh. "Sam, stop fooling yourself. You know you can't keep me. Too many have tried and failed. You're nothing special."

I can't stop my arm from reaching out and moving a wet strand of her black hair behind her ear.

"There's a difference between them and me." My thumb reaches for her cheek, caressing her. "You weren't theirs." I trace her jaw with my finger, until I can press against her plump lips. "But you are mine, remember?"

I can't help but remind her of the moment I was daydreaming about mere minutes ago. A moment I know she has never forgotten. That I'm sure of, as I see it flashing in her eyes. It's quickly replaced by the loathing she's built for

me over the years, especially in the last few weeks.

She jerks her head away and takes a step back, putting much-needed distance between our bodies. I could already feel the electricity coursing through both of us.

And then she burst out laughing. So much that Lik and I exchange a glance, wondering if she truly is completely broken this time.

“You think I’m yours?” she finally says. “Don’t make me fucking laugh. Are you so blind you really can’t see it?” She runs a hand through her hair and smirks at me. “You belong to me, Sam.” Her step toward me makes me feel the need to take one back, yet I stand still, towering over her. “And I’m not talking in some cute, romantic bullshit sort of way. I’m saying you are my fucking property.”

“Shut your mouth,” I seethe, hating the way my heart kicks into an insane rhythm.

She gives me her most beautiful fake pout, her lips so gorgeous that all I want is to bite into them. “Have you ever wondered why you never got out of my life? Why you’re always thinking of me when you fuck someone else?”

I turn my head and her hand shoots to grab my jaw, forcing me back to face her. “Have you ever wondered why you were always so silent but with me? Or why you’re so violent?”

Her fingers press hard against my cheeks, her short nails digging in. “That violence is the utter frustration of not owning yourself. It’s the problem that comes up when your thoughts don’t belong to you. They belong to *me*. I’ve made my place in your head, in your heart, in your fucking soul. And, believe me, you’re only ever free when I allow it.”

She chuckles to herself, proud of her effect. “You will never be happy because you can only be happy with *me*. I own you like a toy I paid a real fucking fortune for.” My gaze darts to the side, and her voice becomes rougher.

“Look at me, Sam,” she snaps. I do. “You. Are. *Mine*. Don’t you let yourself forget it.”

She lets go of my jaw violently, not caring about my reaction. I watch her walk to the door and call on the last resource I have.

“She’ll die, Rose,” I threaten in a voice that’s not as tough as I wish it were.

She only laughs. “Please, don’t tell me you’re still trying to threaten me with Rachel’s life.”

“I’ll make it painful,” I insist, although she’s already caught on to my lie.

“Sam,” she sighs. “How does it feel to know you’ve completely played yourself in your search for vengeance? See, had you focused on killing the Volkovs, they would probably be dead by now. Both the brothers would be. Instead, you let your feelings get in the way. Your hate because I chose Viktor over you when you found me. Your love for me, your need to have me to yourself, and your jealousy for Rachel led you to develop feelings for her. She’s quite something, isn’t she? So much stronger than you’d expect her to be.”

She nods to herself, proud of having figured out I stupidly fell for her girlfriend as quickly as she fell for Lik. “That’s what I love about her. I fell in love with her selfishly, because she could take everything I threw her way. But, thanks to you, I discovered I love it even more when she throws it back.”

She shrugs and puts a hand on the door handle. “You won’t hurt her. You’d only hurt yourself. Although I have to give it to you: trying to make a thing out of us four was nice. *Thrilling*. Back to reality now. As long as we have that hate for each other, we won’t move forward, and I’m ready to be free of us.”

When she leaves, she doesn’t slam the door. She doesn’t give me a look back. And I stand here, completely shaken. Rage and sadness are spreading through my veins and turning me demonic.

I walk to the door, and my fist crashes into the wood leaving dents of my knuckles. The wall is next, plaster exploding as my skin breaks.

“Sam!” Lik shouts in shock.

“The fucking bitch!” I yell back at him.

I’m unstoppable. When I turn around, every plant and decoration on the kitchen counter ends up on the floor. Hulk has got nothing on me when I grab the TV and throw it toward the other side of the room.

“Fucking hell. Calm down!”

“She wants to move on?” I scream, tearing my vocal cords raw. “She wants to fucking move on from *me?!?*” Another punch to the wall, blood smears on my knuckles, and pain shoots through my hand. “She thinks she can actually forget about us and move forward?!”

I rip a cushion in half, feathers exploding into the room. “Let her *fucking Try.*”

Lik grabs my arm, and I only realize too late that I’ve pushed him off so hard he’s on the floor when I look back at him.

“What is wrong with you?” he screams at me, his usual soft voice going rough. “She was trying to rile you up, don’t take it to heart! Don’t let her win!”

“What’s wrong with me?” I snort. “What’s fucking wrong is that what she said was true, Lik!” My voice dies in my throat from all the shouting.

I’m not used to losing my shit entirely. “It was all true,” I repeat in a harsh whisper. “And it hit right where she aimed.”

Rose’s poisoned arrow hit right in my heart. As rightly aimed as when she shoots a bullet through the air. It pierced through my weak muscle and killed the reason in me. Now I’m only left with a deadly obsession.

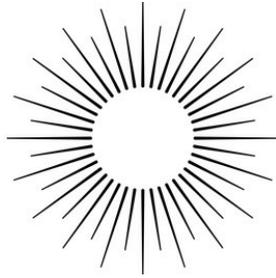
“She knew what she was doing. She did it so you would go after her, not because she truly wants to move on.”

I know he’s the voice of reason right now. And I know I should listen to him. But I can’t.

She wanted me to go after her?

I’ll give her exactly that. Play into her silly game, just to make her lose.

RACHEL



Midnight Love – girl in red

60 days until Viktor...

I knock hard on the front door four times repeatedly. For the third time. I follow up again.

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

Nothing.

Dejected, I turn my back to the Murrays' double door. I'm about to take a step when I hear it open and turn around quickly enough to feel dizzy.

"You've got to be kidding me." Rose's voice is its usual rasp, but it's emotionless. Empty of the love she usually has for me. I've become so accustomed to it I never realized I'd taken it for granted. Not hearing it pierces a hole through my heart.

"I know you're mad at me right now," I say, taking a step closer to her. "I just need you to hear me out. Please."

I look at how she's dressed, and my heart skips a beat. Black booty shorts that barely cover her. A tight, white tank top that doesn't hide her dark nipples in the slightest. Her hair is disheveled and her eyes glassy.

Automatically, my gaze goes to her right hand, checking her fingers for any clue. Wetness...I don't know.

"You... Please tell me there isn't another girl in your room right now."

Her eyebrows lift in surprise. "Wha—" Then her eyes narrow in anger.

“Are you for fucking real right now?” she growls. “I’ve got no time for your jealous shit.” She starts closing the door, but I push back.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I practically shout. “Just let me in, please. I just want to talk. You owe me that for all the times I let you justify yourself after you hurt me.”

Hesitation remains in her eyes as her jaw works from side to side while she thinks. “Come on in.” She opens the door fully, and I smile shyly walking in.

Come on, Rachel. You’ve got this.

I look around as I follow her into the house and up the grand staircase.

“Are the Murrays not here?”

“Work trip,” she replies. “I don’t see them much more than I did when we were in high school. Miss them, though.”

“Yeah, they’re so nice.” I try to keep the conversation going, but it dies after my last words.

We get to Rose’s room, and she pushes the door open. She falls onto her bed, lying down before I can even take the room in.

“See,” she yawns. “No girl here. You checked. You can leave now.”

“Come on.” I stand at the end of her bed and watch her get under the covers. I put a hand on her foot, now covered by the duvet, and shake it playfully. “I take that back.”

“Hmph.”

“Rose, I’m trying here. You could at least pretend to care.”

She buries herself deeper into her pillows. “I’m exhausted.” Her groggy voice and lethargic body kick my instinctual caring nature into action.

“Hey, are you okay?” I move to the side of the bed and sit by her. She rolls onto her side so she’s facing me. I push strands of hair out of the way, and she looks up at me. Her eyes are still glassy.

“Rose...” I put a hand on her forehead. “Oh my god, you’re burning up. How long have you been feeling like this?”

“Dunno.” She shrugs. “Since last night, I think.”

“Have you taken anything? Any Ibuprofen? You’ve got a fever.”

“I’m alright.” She weakly pushes my hand away from her face.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’ll be back in a sec.” I put my handbag on the floor and head to the bathroom. Grabbing the thermometer and some Ibuprofen, I don’t forget to check myself in the mirror. I rearrange my hair and dab at my peach lipstick before walking back to the room.

“Alright,” I announce as I walk back in. “We’re checking your temperature.”

“Are you for real,” she chuckles bitterly. “I don’t want you to take care of me right now.”

“Try and stop me.” I smile as I sit back on the bed next to her. I put the thermometer to her ear, and as I expected, she allows me.

“Damn it, Rose,” I huff. “Only you would get a 102.2 fever and act like nothing’s wrong,” I scold her. I open the bottle of Ibuprofen and drop one in the palm of my hand. I grab the water bottle on her bedside table. “Come on, sit up.”

She rolls her eyes but does as I say. “Here you go.” I give her the pill and help her drink a few sips of water.

She groans and lowers herself a little bit. “I feel like shit,” she admits. Then, digging her ocean gaze into mine, she pouts and says, “I think it’s heartbreak.”

I snort and roll my eyes at her. “You’re so dramatic.”

She fakes a gasp and smiles softly. “I like when you take care of me.”

“I know,” I nod. “You love the attention. You always have, especially mine.”

She glances away then back at me. “I’m hurt, Sunshine.”

I appreciate her honesty.

I nod to myself again and start to keep myself busy by flattening the duvet that’s now slipped down to her waist. I do it repeatedly before talking. “I’m sorry I left with Sam and Lik after we...,” I scratch my throat, not sure which word to use. “We all...did stuff.”

She chuckles, probably thinking I’m childish for not being able to say we had a foursome. I keep going anyway. “I hurt your feelings. I abandoned you after you were put in a vulnerable position. It’s really shit, and I genuinely *am* sorry.”

I look up at her, my gaze probably hardening before I say, “But I’ve been thinking, and I don’t think I’m sorry for what happened in the car.”

Her mouth drops open. “It was in the car?”

“Oh...I thought you knew that.”

“ ‘Course I fucking didn’t. Why would I?” she snaps.

“Okay.” I put my hands up to appease her. “God, *sorry*.” I take a deep breath before continuing, “Look, we did it your way for our whole relationship. My entire high school years were dedicated to loving you. And I

still love you, just not the way I used to. I don't want to let you play me anymore. What I did is the exact same thing you used to do to me. Except, in my case, the situation is confusing! We're all...whatever we're doing. It was the four of us and..." I huff. "I'm confused."

Her jaw tightens, and she looks out the window. Rain has started to pour outside, battering against the window in a mess of heavy tears.

"Do you want to have sex with them?"

"No." And that's the truth. I hope she can see that. "I'm turned on by the control, by domination. That's what Sam does with Lik, and I want to do the same with you."

"Right," she snorts. "So that was a tutoring session, was it?"

"You know what," I tell her as I stand up. "You're being a huge hypocrite. As usual. Let's give Rose the freedom of doing whatever the fuck she wants because she's got *trauma* she's dealing with, but *hey*, don't *I* dare lose my way and try something else. Don't *I* dare discover myself without you. Why?"

She ignores me, crossing her arms and not looking at me. Her eyes follow the trails the rain is leaving on the window.

"Why, Rose?" I insist. "Because I've had an easy life?"

Her cold silence heats me up. She's not replying because she knows I'm right. She can't take it.

"I'm talking to you," I snap. "Have the decency to look at me when I do! Why can't I make mistakes the way you do? Because I'm not *broken*?" I'm shouting, practically shrieking. "Because no one beat me up when I was a kid? No one kidnapped me? Because I never tried to fucking end myself with pills so I wouldn't have to deal with my trauma?!"

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she hisses as she jumps out of bed. "Do you want today to be your last day on earth?"

"Please," I snort at her. "Why is it always so hard for you to hear the truth?"

She runs a hand across her face, and I look away, needing a break too.

"Why?" I rasp again.

"Because you're mine," she snaps.

"No." I shake my head. "I can't hear this fucking excuse anymore."

"It's not an excuse," she says as she steps toward me. "It's a fact. I can't breathe when I think of you with someone else. Don't you get that? I don't go to other places because you're not enough. I do it because I know I will never

be good enough for you. You can't possibly love me the way I do you, Rach. It's too powerful. It's self-destructive, it's addicting, it's *dangerous*."

My heart stops and kicks back to life.

"I love you, Rose. How could you think otherwise?"

"Ugh." She pulls at her roots like someone sick of not being understood. "You don't get it. I know you love me just like I know it's nothing like I love you. You're my everything, okay? I see someone who just looks like you on the street, and my heart stops beating. I hear your voice, and I want to sing to the birds like a Disney princess. I smell chamomile, and I want to bathe in it. Shit, Rach, I...I see you, and I want to dig my heart out and give it to you. Crush it, keep it, I don't care, just *fucking have it*."

She takes a minute to breathe and looks deep into my soul. "Isn't that the most toxic shit you've ever heard?"

"Yeah," I breathe out. "The fact that you think I don't love you that way. The fact that you think seeing other people would help?" I shake my head. "The fact that I let you put me through hell and back, and you still think I could love you any less than you love me? Yeah...we've hit rock bottom. We finally did it. The epitome of toxicity."

She drops on the bed, sitting down at the end of it. "I'm fucking exhausted."

"You're ill," I tell her. "This wasn't a good time to talk. I'm sorry."

"No. That's not what I meant. I'm tired of this." She points between her and me, and my heart drops to my stomach.

"What?" Is she breaking up with me?

She reads my mind. "No, Rach...ugh." She lets herself fall back, looking at the ceiling. "Stop thinking the worst. I'm just sick of everything being so complicated. I need a break from my thoughts."

Sighing, I sit beside her. "Me too," I murmur.

She pulls the back of my dress until I'm lying next to her, her arm under my neck.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I was hurt because you guys left me behind. I still am."

"I'm sorry we did. I wanted to be part of it all. I wanted to be there when they found the men who hurt you."

There's a long silence while we both simply exist next to each other.

"You must have been so scared," she finally says.

"I was in the car. It's not like I went in with them," I tell her, even though

I was still scared.

“No, I mean when I took the pills in senior year.”

“Oh...”

How can I describe it to her? She did it three times, and I wanted to die with her. Because I couldn't live without Rose. But I'm too scared of a painful death. So, instead, I saved her. I forced her to step away from death and to stay in this shit world with me.

“There's no word to describe how terrified I was,” I tell her.

“You never told anyone.”

“No. You didn't want me to.”

“Thank you.”

“You really wanted it, didn't you? To die?”

I don't see her nod. I only feel it.

“Do you still?”

“Sometimes. Even though I feel like there's a reason I kept failing. My guardian angel wouldn't let me leave. She can't stand being without me.”

She turns to her side to face me, and I do the same. “No, I can't. I'll never let you leave. Rose, I would rather suffer trying to help you than ever let you hurt yourself.”

“Will you always watch over me?”

“Always,” I smile.

“Did it hurt?” she asks quietly. “Every time I disappeared on you in high school?”

“Of course,” I tell her.

“Then why did you keep taking me back? Why...why would you do this to yourself?”

“Because I was in love and stupid. I kept telling myself the happy moments outweighed the times when you stood me up, lied, or broke up to have meaningless sex with someone else. I kept thinking if she comes back... it's because she can't live without me.”

She shifts so she can be closer to me.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers. “I wish I could live without you. Then I would leave you alone so you could be happy and find someone more worth it.”

“Do you know why everyone wants you, Rose?” I tell her softly.

A shrug is her only response.

“Because you're beautiful, and you don't care about it. It's superficial. They just want to fuck you and hope you give them the time of day the next

time you see them. You're just a trophy to make them feel better about themselves."

My tone isn't insolent. It's soft, actually, like explaining something complicated to a child. Her jaw tightens at the truth she's always known yet never truly accepted.

"Do you know why I fell in love with you?" I add.

"Because I'm beautiful, and you wanted a trophy?" she mumbles.

"No," I snort. "Because you understood me. I was only fourteen when we met, and I didn't even know myself. Suddenly, I meet this mysterious girl no one knows anything about, and she just...*sees* me. You never saw anyone that way again. I know you haven't. Because you never made yourself vulnerable to anyone like you have to me. Just *me*. That's why I kept holding on. I knew that eventually, you'd come to realize I'm the most special person you've ever had the chance to have."

I take a deep breath and tell her a truth I know she doesn't want to hear.

"I will never forgive you for the wrong you did to me. A part of me will always hate you and myself for it. But I'm in this for myself. And I'm in love. As long as I'm happy, I'm staying. This isn't about you anymore, Rose. This is about me following what I truly want. And right now, it's all of you. So you get to be my girlfriend for as long as I wish."

She chuckles to herself. "What are we doing, Sunshine? How long are we going to keep hiding from your fiancé? How long are we going to keep playing with the mean boys? How can we keep calling each other *girlfriends*? So many people are involved at this point."

"Hey," I pout. "You're my girlfriend. I have literally zero other way to describe you. 'Oh, do you know Rose?', 'Yeah, I do, she's my girlfriend.' 'Have you seen, Rose?', 'Um, you mean my girlfriend? Yes, but I'm not telling you.' 'Hey, I'm Rachel, and this is my girlfriend, Rose.'"

She laughs at my acting show, and I put a hand on her thigh to squeeze it.

"I can find other ways to describe you," she tells me.

"Oh yeah? Better than *girlfriend*?" I challenge her.

"Course. My girl. My beautiful girl. My pretty sunshine. The girl I love to fuck. The gorgeous girl who makes me the happiest person on the planet. Oh, I know," her eyes are glued to mine when she says, "the love of my life."

"So cheesy," I mock her.

"I can get cheesier."

"No, thanks." I pretend to push her away before bringing her back and

doing it again. “Ugh, leave me alone, you big cheesy woman in love.”

She grabs my waist and keeps me close to her. “You wish, Sunshine.” Her fingers tickle my waist before coming to my stomach.

“No!” I shriek. “Don’t tickle me!” I explode in a laugh, letting it resonate in the room. “Rose, fuck off!”

“God, did you kiss your other boyfriends with that mouth?”

“Ew, I don’t kiss stinky boys.” I laugh.

“You better not,” she growls in my ear. “I don’t share these lips.”

“What a selfish woman you are,” I pant as I finally manage to get her away from me. We rest on our backs and take a break.

“My best quality,” she breathes.

“Rose,” I nudge her after a minute of silence. “Do you remember when we almost got caught in Mr. Ashton’s classroom?”

She bursts out laughing and grabs my hand, weaving her fingers through mine. “Why are you thinking about that?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “I often bring up the horrible high school moments. But we had so many good ones, too.”

“Fucking hell,” she huffs. “I was eating you out when he tried to open the door. Thank God we’d put the desk in front of the door.”

“Yeah, except I was sitting on said desk, and he probably heard me screaming your name as he tried to get in.” I blush at the thought of it.

“No wonder he hated me,” she snickers. “What about when your mom came back early from her day at the country club?”

“Oh my god,” I giggle. “I was fingering you on the kitchen table!”

“You had me hide in your kitchen pantry...” My chortle cuts her off, but she keeps going. “...*naked*.”

“You had to wait for so long,” I laugh hysterically.

“How many times can a woman talk about another woman’s haircut?” she practically chokes. “God, your mom is bored.”

“And boring,” I confirm. “You know, we talk about our sex, but we did tons of other things together.”

“I know,” she smiles.

“You used to take me to my favorite breakfast place.”

“The Heist!” she shouts excitedly. “Their menu is named after *Brooklyn* 99 characters! I love this place. I haven’t been since...” She hesitates, scratching her throat. “You know.” Her brows furrow as she loses herself in her thoughts. She looks like she’s about to say something else so I try to goad

her.

“You can tell me whatever you want about them,” I say. “I won’t judge.”

“It’s nothing,” she smiles.

“Please. Anything is fine,” I insist. “No matter what it is, I can take it.”

“You couldn’t,” she murmurs.

“I promise you, Rose. I am not as fragile as you think I am.”

“I don’t think you’re fragile,” she defends herself. “I think you’re pretty fucking tough, actually.”

“Then tell me.”

“I just...” This time I insist with a look. She props herself on her elbow so she can face me and I do the same, making this moment even more intimate. “Sometimes, I wonder if...if maybe I should have tried harder to escape.”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“Until the day Aaron Williams helped me leave...I hadn’t *fought*...You know?”

“You didn’t have a choice,” I seek to reassure her. “It was your survival instinct to not fight back. That’s probably what kept you alive.”

“Yeah, but...It’s more complicated than that. Sometimes I feel like maybe it wasn’t so bad with Viktor.”

“Viktor is the one in charge, right?”

She nods.

“You can’t be blamed for how you felt when your life was at risk.” The dread of my own experience drives me to say more. “Sometimes you think you’ll fight back, that you’ll leave, but then you end up hoping things will get better. Maybe if you change, maybe if you listen and do exactly as you’re told.” I gulp. “Maybe then it won’t be so bad anymore.”

Completely unaware I’m talking about something I go through, she tries to explain her side some more.

“I get that, but what about after?”

“After?” I ask, confused. “You’re free now. You don’t have to be scared anymore.”

“I know, I know. But the way I felt while I was there...what if—I mean...Let’s say they find me, the brothers, what if I still feel the same.”

The problem with talking to Rose is that it’s always like playing two truths and a lie. You know something is off in what she says, yet you never quite know what. She is doing it right now. That thing when she tries to get

help without admitting it and without wanting to tell the whole story.

“Don’t worry about them finding you,” I tell her softly. “They won’t. Sam would be on them in a split second.”

She smiles at me, like I don’t get her. Like no one can understand what she’s going through. Perhaps it’s true.

“You’re right,” she finally says, laying back down. “Tell me more of our high school memories.”

I sigh because I know she didn’t get what she needed out of me, but I let it slip. “What about that time I called after arguing with my mom because she found my collection of horror and gore films? You were throwing pebbles at my windows not even five minutes later.”

“Oh yeah...God, you’re right, I *am* cheesy when it comes to you.”

“Yeah,” I giggle. “But I loved it. You climbed up to my balcony like the best Romeo I’ve ever seen.” I start caressing her hair, scratching her head like how I know she loves, and she closes her eyes. “You spent the night consoling me. Soothing me with your sweet words and reassuring me that I wasn’t a weirdo. That my mom was just stuck up.”

“Your mom is so stuck up. I’m pretty sure that broom up her ass is made of steel.”

I burst out laughing. “I think you’re right. Anyway, it was perfect. You always make me feel like I’m perfect the way I am.”

“Because you are,” she murmurs, her voice starting to sound sleepy. Rose falling asleep is when she becomes the most honest, and I love it.

“I loved it so much when you came to make me feel better that I’d sometimes start fights with my mom just so I could call you and say she was a bitch. I knew you’d be by my window right after I hung up.”

“I know,” she smiles, her eyes still closed.

“You know?” My cheeks feel warm that she knew about my stupid behavior.

“Yeah, there was a pattern. Sometimes, I wouldn’t have the time to talk to you at school. For whatever reason. You can be sure I’d get a call that evening about you being upset with your mom.”

“Oh my god,” I hide my face in my hands, “this is so embarrassing. If you knew, why didn’t you say anything? You kept coming. Every single time.”

“Because you needed me. The true reason didn’t matter. It was because you wanted me to be near you. And I wanted that too. I will always be there

when you need me, Sunshine.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Feeling emotional from our trip down memory lane. Life would have been so different had she not been kidnapped.

“I love our memories together,” she tells me. Her eyes are open now, and she’s looking at me with a soft smile.

“Me too.”

“I want to make some more. Happy memories.”

“We will.” I squeeze her hand and drop a soft kiss on her lips. “And I can’t wait.”

“Once you’ve divorced your husband,” she tells me bitterly.

I roll my eyes. “*Fiancé.*”

ROSE



Doin' Time – Lana Del Rey

56 Days until Viktor...

It's only been a few days, but the fact that I haven't heard from Lik and Sam worries me. Five days since I walked out of his apartment, telling him words I wholeheartedly believe mixed with one little lie.

I'm ready to be free of us.

I am ready. Yet, I know I'll never be free of him.

I just can't get past the hate we share. It takes over the mutual love, makes us unsure if we could ever survive what we've done to each other.

Mostly, I refuse to be a pawn in his revenge on Viktor.

It's already too hard to know my time is limited. I was close to telling Rachel all about it a few days ago, except it always comes back to the same problem: what if she hates me for it?

What if she decides I'm just not worth the trouble anymore? This is where all the lying and disappearing always comes from. That fear that if I'm the true me, it won't be good enough for her to stay.

But if I don't tell her, and I don't tell Sam and Lik... Does this mean I've picked a side? Viktor's?

'Protecting an abductor is very common after such a long time as a captive.'

I shake my head, getting rid of that detective's voice again. I'm not picking his side. He is a despicable human being hiding behind a calm façade. The water of a smooth lake hiding the most wicked monster. But he *needs* me, and he will always come back for me. Anything else is a complete impossibility.

"Earth to Rose," Luke laughs as he waves a hand in front of my face.

I push his hand away. "Yeah, yeah. I'm here," I grunt.

"Please lighten up. You're horrible company when you're in a bad mood," he smiles.

He flew back all the way from LA to attend Conor and Rachel's big engagement party. Then he convinced me to be his date, and now I'm in his limo, in a gown. Fuck.

"They've been engaged for almost two years, and they waited for me to come back from being kidnapped to have their engagement party? If that's not rubbing it in my face, I don't know what is."

He grabs the bottle of champagne and pours both of us a flute. "Rachel sleeps with you behind his back. I think we both know who got the shit end of the stick here."

"Not anymore, she doesn't," I clarify. And by that, I mean we haven't slept together since their threesome in the car. Or whatever it was. "I didn't get an invite anyway," I huff.

"That's why you're my plus one." He winks at me and gives me my glass.

I take a large gulp, needing the alcohol more than ever.

"I get it hurts," he finally says after a moment of silence. "You two were meant to be."

I chuckle sadly. "Were we? I treated her like shit. And I was mad at her because she, Sam, and Lik wanted to give me a taste of my own medicine. God, I'm such a hypocrite."

"It's more complicated than that. We both know that." Luke is aware of everything that's been going on, since we caught up on it yesterday. I don't need to hide anything from my best friend. His mouth twists. "So you didn't really sort it out when she came to see you?"

"Yes and no. You know me, I hold my grudges for as long as I feel hurt. I still feel it."

“I don’t know how I can help except by saying, grow the fuck up, Rose.”

“Come on. How could she do sex...*stuff*—”

“Stuff?” Luke snorts. “What are you? Twelve?”

“It’s still unclear what they did exactly. My point is...how could she do that with him and his boyfriend without me?” I take another large sip of champagne. “He *threatened* her life! She makes no fucking sense.”

“Yeah, ‘cause he never threatened yours...” Luke mumbles sarcastically.

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, but I’m fucked up, that’s no secret. No one ever messed with her brain.”

“Maybe not, but,” he hesitates, shifting in his seat, “you know, you don’t have to have something happen to you to like weird sex...*stuff*.” He repeats my word for lack of a better one.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I know. And I feel like shit ‘cause I always made her feel like I had a reason for being weird and she didn’t.”

“You’re not weird,” he corrects me. “You’re rude, annoyingly smart, and full of yourself. But you’re not weird.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Possessive, kind of sociopathic. Way too good of a liar. A tease and—”

“Fucking hell, I get it,” I snap, turning to the window. “Coming from a guy people used to call fuckboy-Luke, that’s rich.”

His mischievous smile and the cheekiness shining in his baby-blue eyes tell me he got precisely what he wanted: riling me up.

“I’m so glad you’re my date tonight,” he says with genuine happiness.

“You need a membership to my fan club.”

He messes with my hair and nudges my shoulder. “I don’t even like you. I just don’t want to be there without a date.”

“What happened to that LA girl you said was the one?” I wiggle my eyebrows. He wouldn’t shut up about her a few weeks ago.

“Yeah, I was wrong. It wasn’t love.” He shrugs his shoulders.

“What a surprise,” I deadpan. He does this every single time. He is so desperate to fall in love, he acts like it is every time he meets a new girl, just to find out it wasn’t love at all. Just his dick talking.

The car parks right at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the town hall. I take a deep breath, bracing for the pouring rain and the fact that I’m going to see the woman I love in the arms of a man I hate. Yet another reminder of everything I lost while I was with Viktor.

Luke and I walk up the infinite stairs together, my arm wrapped around

his. His driver is holding an umbrella above our heads, taking two steps at a time to ensure he stays in tandem with us.

There are paparazzi taking pictures of us from down the stairs, making me raise an eyebrow. Stoneview has always been too classy for the paparazzi.

“What have you done?” I ask Luke.

“Not me, my dad. Bakers Co. is getting a bit of unwanted attention.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Nope.” Changing the topic, he looks me up and down. “You’re making me look small,” he mumbles as we get to the last step.

“Aw.” I pinch his cheek playfully. “Nothing wrong with being small, and I’ve always been taller than you.”

He gives his invite to the security guards posted at the entrance. One checks the piece of paper, and the other checks me out before giving me a big smile. My eyes fall on the ring on his finger while his lands on my tits. What a dick. They’re real fucking small, what’s so interesting there?

I’m wearing a long black dress with a bodice made of sheer mesh and a thick black band that covers my chest. Two chains of fake diamonds as straps. A long skirt made of silk and covered in black mesh with two slits going high enough that I should *not* take a long step. The tattoos on my arms and on my shoulder are showing, while anyone can also see the ones around my waist through the bodice.

That’s what it takes for that guard to keep his eyes glued to me.

“How’s the wife?” I ask him, just to remind him his ring is noticeable.

“What?” he replies, shaking his head like I was a witch entrancing him.

“She hot?” I insist, giving him a quick wink.

“Stop it,” Luke chuckles next to me. He grabs my hand, pulling me inside while I glare at the security guard.

My best friend and I sneak to the bar between the main course and dessert. It doesn’t take us long to get a few drinks in. Wine and champagne were great, but I need something a little stronger to get over seeing Rachel and Conor surrounded by their mutual families at the head table. My eyes keep returning to her, *always* finding her among the hundreds of people.

“Seriously, who needs such a huge engagement party?” Jamie asks, joining Luke and me at the bar.

“Someone with a tiny dick,” I answer, making her choke on her

champagne. “Jamie, I can’t believe you managed to escape Jake.”

She shrugs. “He can’t keep an eye on me at *all* times, can he?”

“Naïve thinking,” Luke adds.

“I need the bathroom,” Jamie tells us, putting her glass on the bar. “Rose, can you come with me?”

“Sure.” I give Luke my drink and follow Jamie to the bathroom.

Only when she’s washing her hands, she finally tells me what she’s been dying to since I’ve been back.

“How is he?” she asks out of nowhere, her eyes focused on the soap she’s rubbing on her hands.

I have to stretch my neck, refocusing myself, before I can say anything.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “That you had to be the brave one and ask about it. I should have talked to you.”

She shakes her head, still focused on her hands. “You shouldn’t have to talk about your time with the Wolves. I just...I just want to know how Aaron is doing.”

I nod even though she’s not watching me. Jamie’s relationship with her brother is precarious, and it’s not something for me to get in the middle of.

I take too long thinking of what to tell her exactly, and she spirals into that infamous curiosity of hers that always gets her in trouble.

“I’m not...I’m not saying tell me everything. I might not be able to take it. But I need to know, Rose. What kind of things does he do? Is he hurt? Does he want to leave?” She rubs her hands so harshly under the water, the skin is starting to turn pink. “Surely he wants to leave them...I still haven’t told my mom, you know? That he’s alive? What’s the point if he’s never leaving the Wolves anyway?”

“Jamie,” I say softly. From behind her, I put a hand on hers. With the other one, I turn off the tap. I’m now encircling her with my arms from behind and her eyes go up to peer at me through the mirror. “He’s fine,” I tell her.

She relaxes against me, her back hitting my chest and her head resting just under my chin.

“He’s involved. A lot. And I think his decision not to come back home is smart. Not only for his safety but for yours and your mom’s.”

She tenses slightly. I watch her close her eyes and take her in a comforting embrace. “He saved me,” I whisper in her ear. “He’s just as courageous as you, and he risked his life for me. I owe him.”

I still don't know what happened to Aaron for helping me escape. He's alive and still working with Volkov, that much I know. Lik and I saw him at Vue Club.

I wrap my arms around Jamie completely, holding her close to me as I rest my chin on the top of her head. "You're so strong," I tell her.

She nods, acknowledging my words. The door to the bathroom opens sharply, making us both jump in surprise. My gaze meets Rachel's and my heart drops.

Ding, ding, ding! It rings. *Our king is here!*

My heart. That fucking traitor.

"I'll see you later," Jamie murmurs, wiping a tear that had fallen on her cheek. She escapes too quickly for me to realize. Or maybe my body wanted to be alone in the bathroom with Rachel, and my brain hasn't caught up yet.

"Rose," Rachel sighs as soon as the door shuts behind Jamie. "You came." I watch a weight fall off her shoulders and relief flood her body.

I struggle to swallow, seeing her in her beautiful strapless cream dress. It embraces her shape so perfectly. Her tits show just enough in the heart-shaped neck. The tight bodice emphasizes her waist and the skirt flows casually down to her ankles. My insides twist, my hands dying to reach for her.

Get a hold of yourself.

"Luke didn't want to come alone," I tell her. "Not like I had an invitation."

Confusion crosses her beautiful features. "Of course you did," she defends herself harshly. "I put every single invitation in the envelopes myself. Conor sent th—" She cuts herself short, understanding what happened. "Of course, he didn't send yours." She nods to herself.

My lack of response makes her take a step toward me. "You didn't pick up any of my calls."

"I know." My voice is harsh, though I need something to keep her far from me. It's too easy to give in to my need to be close to her.

"Rose," she pleads. "Are you still mad?"

"Yes, Rachel. I'm still mad," I hiss. Without even controlling my body, I'm on her. Am I the one who pushed her against the wall? Who caged her in with my arms on either side of her head?

"I said I was sorry," she whispers, her light blue eyes looking up at me, imploring for my forgiveness.

My head drops to the crook of her neck, my lips leaving a heavy kiss before I can control it. “Doesn’t it scare you? Knowing I completely own you,” I whisper in the shell of her ear.

She shivers against me, and both her hands come to rest against my chest. I look down, watching the black of my dress mix with the white of hers. Exactly the way my darkness seems to always entangle with her purity.

“Maybe I love it too much for it to scare me,” she admits quietly, her warm breath on my neck.

“You feel something for Sam, don’t you?” I bite her neck, making her hiss in pain.

“Don’t you?” she retorts to avoid answering, and instead, it gives me exactly the truth in the process.

“I never hid that from you.”

“But now you also feel more than jealousy toward Lik,” she continues. “Quite the opposite. You admire him.”

Rachel never used to have so much riposte. I can see so clearly the influence Sam has had on her. Pushing her to believe in herself and be more assertive. I love it.

My left hand drops to her thigh. Slowly, I bunch up her dress and my fingers run against the material as it comes up, until I can feel her soft skin against mine.

“Rose...”

“Look at us,” I tell her. “Getting turned on by the same men who wanted to make our lives hell.”

I slide my hand to her underwear. It’s silk, I recognize the smoothness. I push them to the side, relishing in the wetness that’s gathered between her legs.

“And look at you,” I continue. “Always remembering who you belong to.” I insert one finger in her, not harshly, but also not taking any more time to prep her either.

She gasps, a moan getting stuck in her throat.

“This pussy knows who she belongs to. Right, Sunshine?”

She nods, her mouth still agape, breath now stuttering. “Y-yes.”

“Did you enjoy your little power trip with Sam?” I insert a second finger and struggle to keep my own sound of pleasure down my throat. I take a deep breath, doing my best to focus while I push into the tight heat.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy yourself,” she smiles. “You loved being

on your knees for us, baby.”

A wave of pleasure crashes between my thighs. I part my dress through the left slit, letting one leg out. While I keep fingering her, I place myself so one of her legs is in-between mine. She understands what I’m doing straight away and pushes her leg up until her thigh is pressed right against my pussy. I start rubbing against her at the same time as my fingers move in her. She’s panting now, and I drop my lips to her, kissing her open mouth. She gives me everything I need back, licking my tongue and my lips.

Our interaction turns too passionate for either of us to say anything. We’re kissing and biting at each other. A clash of power and proof of love. I’m rubbing harshly against her thigh, and my clit is sending sharp waves of pleasure through my entire body. I moan loudly, feeling how close I am to coming and curl my fingers inside her, rubbing her g-spot while my thumb comes to find her clit.

“Oh god,” she whimpers in my mouth. Her voice is practically a shriek, and I recognize all the tell-tales of when she’s seconds away from coming. The way her legs start to tremble, the way she starts to roll her hips uncontrollably, and her moans growing shorter and shorter until...

“Rose...” A sharp breath. “Rose..aah!” she screams. I have to put my free hand against her mouth as her pussy tightens around my fingers and she rides the wave of her orgasm.

I don’t stop moving inside her until I explode, riding her taut thigh. I keep rubbing until I’m completely spent. I pull my fingers out, and we both collapse to the floor, our legs entangled and our foreheads falling against the other.

She chuckles, which quickly turns into a giggle, then a high-pitched laugh. I grab her face and push her away to look at her.

“Are you alright?” She’s obviously lost her sanity.

“It’s my engagement party,” she chortles. “Only you. I swear... Only you would do this to me today.” When she’s finally calmed down, she kisses me again. “I love you.”

My hands slide to her waist, and I squeeze tightly with a need to keep her close to me. She winces, suddenly jumping away from me. She crawls back.

I don’t know why or how, but I understand it *now*.

I can’t explain how it falls into place at this specific moment. Maybe it’s written on her face, or maybe it’s because I’m more aware in my post-orgasm state, more connected to her.

Something twists inside me—an anxiety I can't control. Something's wrong, and I can feel it right away. It's like everything becomes clear. Signs I've ignored now shine in bright neon in front of my face.

"Oh my god," I whisper to myself, barely believing I completely missed what's been right in front of me the whole time.

I've been so selfish, so focused on my own problems that I never realized what Rachel was going through. The familiarity with which she talked about abuse a few days ago. The bruises she had on her ribs, the fear of Conor. She doesn't just dislike him. She is utterly terrified of him.

Acid rises to the back of my mouth, burning its way until I feel the need to scratch my throat.

"Sunshine," I whisper, barely a squeak past the tightness around my vocal cords.

"Don't say it," she whimpers, sobs clogging her throat.

"Show me."

She shakes her head, squeezing her eyes together and trying to keep the tears at bay.

"Rach, please...let me see."

When she doesn't move, I slowly crawl to where she is now, her back against the wall. I settle next to her, and with the least threatening gesture, I slowly pull down the zipper at the side of her dress. She turns her head away, ensuring she's not looking at me. Her arms are lifeless by her sides.

I part the dress, letting the front fall forward. Her generous boobs come into their natural position, and for once, my eyes ignore them. My gaze is stuck on the purple bruises covering her stomach and ribs like a horrific tapestry—multiple shades of purple, blue, and green. My stomach churns, knowing the pain, recognizing the fear as a familiarity I will never disconnect from.

"No." I shake my head, not believing it. "No, no, no...Sunshine. You said it was them. That night y-you said it was Sam and Lik."

"I didn't say anything," she murmurs, her head still turned away from me. "You assumed, and I didn't correct you."

She's right. I saw the bruises after that evening at Sam's cabin when they used her to threaten me. She was on my kitchen counter at the Murrays. I opened her blouse and...I remember her staying silent and me putting it on Sam and Lik. The next day, I was ready to end Lik for what they did to her. Only he was surprised when I mentioned the bruises. I was too angry to make

sense of it, since I just wanted to put a bullet through his head.

I swallow my sadness, the bitterness of rage replacing it. It's slow, spreading through my veins and warming up my body.

It starts from my heart.

Thump. Thump. All the way through my stomach, my legs, and to my toes. Tensing my abs, bringing life to every single one of my limbs.

Thump. Thump. It goes up my chest, a thick poison bringing my voice low, heating my face, and ringing in my ears.

I bring a hand to her cheek, turning her face toward me. To her credit, she hasn't shed a tear. Keeping them on the edge of her lower eyelids, making sure she doesn't push them over when she blinks. My other hand palms her other cheek, and I pierce my dark blues into her light ones.

"I'm going to kill him, Rachel. I hope you know that." The seriousness in my low voice makes her tremble.

"Please," she pleads. "Don't get involved." She puts a hand on mine, helping me cover her cheek. "He isn't scared of you, Rose. He's stronger than you think. Violent...cruel."

I don't remind her I've had my fair share of cruel men, and that none of them scare me anymore.

I zip up her bodice. "I'm going to look under your skirt," I tell her, so she doesn't get alarmed about what I'm about to do. I push up the material until it's around her waist and spread her shaking legs.

When I see the other bruises on her hips, on her thighs, the scratch mark around her underwear, my jaw tightens to a point where I can hear my teeth grinding against the other, gritting and fighting against my jaw muscles. One of my hands turns into a fist against her cheek.

"Tell me the truth," I say softly. "Just one question."

"No—"

"Is it consensual, Sunshine? When he touches you?"

"It's not like that. You don't understand...He's my fiancé."

"It's a simple question," I insist.

I try to keep my hold on her light, but how can I? How can I when I know he's been touching her, hurting her, trying to break her. I need her close. I need her to know I would protect her against anything. A hundred Conors is nothing against the love I hold for her.

"My dad...he doesn't trust him," she keeps going, justifying his actions. "He won't give him the company unless we have a child who could take over

if Conor tries to kick Daddy off the board—”

“Just answer the question,” I snap, regretting the vehemence in my voice straight away. I drop my forehead against hers, taking a deep breath to try and calm myself. “Just the truth,” I murmur.

She finally stops talking, stops trying to throw up a flow of words that would avoid answering.

“No.” She shakes her head, and the tears finally come. “It’s not.”

My head falls back, looking up at the ceiling. My heart breaks into a million pieces. Looking at the colors and patterns on the ceiling instead of her doesn’t help. Trying to push back the images of Conor’s forceful hands on her doesn’t work.

Flashes of Volkov’s men grabbing my hips, pushing my head against the floor. Their laughs resonating so loudly in my ears it mixes with Conor’s. I see it all, the way she would fight him and then slowly give up. The same way I did.

A scream makes its way up my throat, I try to swallow it back by grinding my teeth and it becomes a grunt in my chest. So much frustration builds up I can’t control my shaking body.

When I look down at her, I smile.

“It’s going to be freeing when I end his life, Sunshine. I promise you.”

“I don’t want you to,” she tells me harshly. She pushes away from me with a force I didn’t expect. Going back up on her feet, she dusts off her dress and runs her fingers through her hair. “For once, I’d appreciate it if you listened to me.”

I follow her up. Putting my own skirt back into place. “You won’t marry him,” I drop without being able to control it—an order rather than a suggestion.

“What?” she chokes. “This isn’t even the wedding.”

“I know...but believe me, Rach. You won’t marry him.” There is no way for me to not make this sound ominous. I’ve made a decision, and she won’t change my mind.

“Rose,” she fights. “Please, don’t.” She attempts to turn away, but I grab her wrist.

“I’m back, Sunshine. This doesn’t have to happen. We can pick up where we left off, we can still leave together.”

“It’s not that easy anymore, Rose!” she snaps.

“What do you want from me then? To be your dirty little secret for your

entire life? While you go home and pretend you can stand him? Do you want me to meet you secretly and hide in the closet when he comes home early? I'm a shitty person, I might not deserve better than that. But *you* deserve better than a life of hurt with a man who rapes you!"

She flinches at my choice of word. She shakes her head, more tears welling up in her eyes. "Don't use that word."

"The truth is hard to hear, and I get that. But there's a difference between not loving him and marrying your abuser."

"I know that," she sobs. "The pressure...you don't understand."

But I do understand. The loss of rationality when you're stuck with an abuser. There is no thinking anymore. Only the fear.

That fear that chokes you from the inside. That makes you feel sick all day, every day. A thousand bugs crawling inside of you, burrowing in your stomach, planting their eggs that will turn into larvae of dread. That fear that makes you believe there is nothing outside of this relationship. You get so blindsided, so controlled. He makes you believe you're a sinking ship without a captain, and he's the land not far from where you are. That the world is worse than this. There is no way out, no one who would come and protect you.

Somehow, abusers have a hold on you strong enough that life without them would be a terrible fate. A life as plausible as a Shakespearean tragedy with no reality whatsoever, and that yet leaves the strongest belief in your heart that it is your own doom.

You lose sense of yourself so severely that the pain and tears are worth it when followed by moments of calm and kindness.

Your worth depends on their mood, not who you are.

And that's your truth. Simple as that, no questions asked.

I want to get Rachel away from that.

"You know you found something in me—fuck, you found something in Sam and Lik. Surely this all means something to you. We've got your back, Rach."

She finally manages to get out of my hold. She steps away from me slowly, clumsily, holding herself against the wall.

"You can't ask this of me. Not here, not today." Taking a moment to compose herself, she then adds, "I'm going to go back to the party, and you're going to behave yourself. Understood?"

I clench my jaw, feeling like a scolded child. I'm all-too aware of how

harsh I'm being with her, although it won't matter when Conor's dead body is at her feet. She thinks there's no escape now and feels stuck in a world she can't control. It's only too normal for a victim of abuse. She doesn't need to find an escape, I will pave the way for her.

By sticking a bullet between Conor's eyes.

"Okay. I'll behave," I lie.

"Do you think I don't know you," she hisses in return. "Control your temper, or I will kick you out of this party myself."

"Sure thing," I smile. It's wicked.

I'm the dangerous witch ready to end the evil men who hurt women. Conor is a good start. I catch the wet spot I left on her dress. "Got something there, bride-to-be. Better clean your dress before going back to your fiancé."

She blushes, and her eyes go down to her skirt. While she's busy with that and can't stop me. I leave the room.

I try not to slam the bathroom door behind me, but moments of me controlling my reckless behavior are rare. Right now isn't one of them, and I imagine Rachel startling at the loud sound, realizing I might be about to ruin her great party by killing her husband-to-be.

ROSE



Till Death Do Us Part - Rosenfeld

Party music is playing in the grand reception room of Stoneview's town hall. It gets louder as it announces the end of the fancy dinner. My skin is electric, my ears buzzing as I look for Conor. I haven't felt this kind of adrenaline since living with Viktor. He would let me do whatever I wanted, let me be the true violent being I actually am. No restraint, no rules. Pure freedom. As long as I stayed within his territory.

I turn around to check if Rachel has come out of the hallway that leads to the bathroom, and my mouth drops open in shock when I see her talking to Sam.

What the fuck is he doing here? Did she invite him? Two pairs of eyes dart to me as she talks to him hurriedly, panic in her gaze. Sam nods, runs his knuckles against his cheek and shakes his head 'no' at me. I take it as my sign to act faster.

I hurry across the room, catching Conor on his own by the bar. I feel like it takes me forever. Avoiding bumping into a waiter, trying not to step on everyone's feet, and not kick a kid by accident. I push people out of the way, squeezing between groups of friends. I don't have any weapons, but I don't care. Strangling will do. A wave of guests unconsciously slows me down, but I keep going. I push past the last two people. I know he's behind them. For a second, he's out of view, just while I squeeze through.

“Conor,” I call, but I don’t think he hears me.

I bump into someone else getting in my way. Tall, large, hard...

One of Sam’s hands comes to the small of my back when I bounce against him, stopping me from falling backward. The other grabs my wrist tightly, and he forcefully drags me along as he walks toward the dance floor and away from Conor.

“Let’s dance,” he tells me calmly.

“Fuck off,” I grunt, fury so hot in my veins I can’t hear myself think.

Unsurprisingly, he doesn’t listen. He drags me with him until we’re among the other dancers. *Ocean Drive* by Duke Dumont comes on. A quick rhythm that has couples attempting messy dances next to us. In the middle of them all, Sam calmly wraps two strong hands around my waist. He doesn’t hold me tightly, though my breath hitches anyway. My heart picks up the already crazy rhythm from my need to end Conor. I put my hands on his wrists, trying to get out of his hold. Futile.

It’s unsettling to see Sam in a suit. I’m used to his black jeans and black tee. To the casual darkness that he surrounds himself with. Tonight, he looks handsome enough that I want to lose myself in the new person I’m discovering. A simple white button-up, while the rest is a dark blue suit. The same color as my eyes. The midnight blue tie is tight against his throat. While the white shirt contrasts with the tattoos on his neck, the color of the suit reminds me of the danger that hides within him.

His strong hands encircle my waist, his long fingers are covered in tattoos too, and I feel myself squeezing my thighs when my eyes go from his tattooed wrists to the long sleeves of the suit.

He’s beautiful. As rare as it is to see him like that, it’s a sight I’m glad I didn’t miss.

Putting a hand at the back of my head, he brings me close to him, my cheek against his chest as if we’re about to slow dance to the fast song.

And we are. He starts moving, making sure I follow and that I can’t get out of his hold at the same time. I’ve lost sight of Conor already, and it brings me more frustration. Not knowing what to do with my hands anymore, I wrap my arms around his neck. His cologne envelops me, enthralling me and luring me to him. Grapefruit mixed with the base notes of patchouli and cedar.

“I heard you’re trying to get yourself arrested for murder,” he says quietly in my ear. A shiver runs through my body, starting at the exact point his

warm breath touches my skin.

We're slower than the music, than all the people around us, but no one cares. Some look at us with a smile on their lips, thinking we're a loving couple who just can't get enough of each other.

"You knew, didn't you?" I growl against his chest. "Do you think I don't know what you're doing?"

His silence tells me he wants me to keep talking, so I do. "You're trying to save her. She reminds you of the situation your mom was in. Stuck with an abusive piece of shit. You couldn't save her, so you want to save Rachel."

He doesn't deny it. In fact, he even confirms my thoughts, knowing there's no point insulting my intelligence. "And yet, you don't see me murdering Conor McGill, do you?"

"Shocking, since you've got such a sensitive trigger finger and no problem hiding bodies."

I trip on his foot, my dancing skills being much more limited than his. I never knew he was such a good dancer, and I find it hard to believe that he can still surprise me. Despite his height and size, he's got an agility I don't compare with. He catches me, putting me back in rhythm by lifting me by the waist and spinning us with my feet above the floor. He puts me back down, and our argument continues.

"While your bullshit technique of trying to make Rachel stronger and getting her to leave by herself is cute," I hiss in his ear. "She is still dealing with a violent man every day."

"You, more than anyone I know, can understand what it is like to be in an abusive relationship. Rachel is scared to leave and yet found the courage to ask for my help. Running away would only mean he'd find her. Killing him would bring attention to her, and she doesn't want that. She wants to leave him safely. It's her choice to make, not yours. I know it's hard for you to comprehend, but not everything goes by your rules. People are allowed to make their own decisions without thinking of how it affects you."

"If you saw the bruises—"

"Oh, I have," he cuts me off.

My words get lost in my throat. It doesn't stop him from moving. One step left, one step right. I'm the silent one now. He puts his mouth against my cheek, pretending to give me a kiss, but instead, I feel his lips spread into a smile.

"What did you think, baby? That just because you decided you didn't

want to see any of us anymore, we'd stop enjoying each other's company?"

The jealousy that spreads through my entire being makes me feel dizzy. He grabs my hand, gives me a slight push, and I take a step back. Guiding me with a flick of his wrist, he holds my fingers while I mindlessly do a spin. He pulls me back, and his lips meet the skin below my ear. He inhales me, like my perfume is a drug.

"Rach...she wouldn't do this to me." My voice is shaking.

He chuckles against my skin, warmth spreading through my face from him and the embarrassment. "Rachel was lonely, scared, and needed you. You weren't there because you were bitter and jealous. But Lik and I were."

I shove against his chest, yet he doesn't budge. "Let me go," I order in a wobbly voice.

"Don't be so hurt, Rose. We all want you badly enough that we'll wait forever for you to come back to us. Just stop being so stubborn."

Back on my waist, his hands tighten around it, this time practically stopping me from breathing. "But the more you make us wait, the harder the punishment will be when you do come back to us eventually. And you will."

"Fuck you, Sam." I push against him some more, and it infuriates me how weak I feel against him. How easy it is for him to keep me right where he wants me. "Let me go. I swear I'll scream."

This time he laughs. He pulls his head away slightly, until we can look into each other's eyes. "You'll only damage your throat. I've got better ways to do that."

The reminder of his silencer down my throat makes me flush. For the first time in my life, I feel myself genuinely blush. I start to imagine patches of red covering my cheeks.

Sam makes us twirl again, maneuvering my upper body until my back is bent and I'm almost falling back. Then he puts a hand behind my neck while the other slides to the small of my back. My arms fly up to hold his strong shoulders, the fear of crashing to the floor stifling my lungs. He keeps me mid-air as one of my legs comes up to balance myself, making its way past the slit in my dress. He forces me to put my trust in him, forces me to believe he won't drop me.

His head is right above mine. So close, yet I can still make out every single one of his features. His black, longer hair at the top is gelled and combed back. Like always. A style he's never changed.

Clean-shaven, as usual, his cheeks look smooth enough I want to rub my

face against them. His black orbs are making a point to stab into my soul.

His voice is so deep when he talks again, it resonates through my entire body. Vibrating to the rhythm of his sharp British accent. "I'm handling the Conor situation, Rose. Trust me. All you have to worry about is who, between Lik, Rach, or I, will get to punish you when you come crawling back for our forgiveness."

My heart is kicking so hard, I can barely hear his voice anymore.

"In the meantime, *behave.*"

He drops a kiss to my neck, forcing a sigh out of me and my whole body to tremble.

He brings me up quickly and forcefully. My hands come to his chest, so I don't crash against him. Then he lets go of me. I'm too shaken and dizzy to even notice where he's going. I turn around multiple times, lost in the crowd of dancers.

Of course, Conor and Rachel are nowhere to be seen.

When I come off the dance floor, Jake and Chris are on me within a split second. "Was that Sam you were dancing with?" my twin snaps.

"Jake," Chris scolds him. Right, his way of giving me life lessons is usually gentler than my twin's.

"Change your contacts," I bite back at Jake. "You clearly can't see shit anymore." I push past them, my rage not tamed one bit by Sam's interaction. I hurry toward Luke, knowing that if one of my friends will have what I want, it's him.

But they catch up before I can reach him.

"Rose, what exactly have you been up to while we're away?" Chris insists. They're walking at the same pace as me, one on each of my sides, making sure to keep up.

"I don't know, Chris. Being unsupervised and yet still alive. Turns out I *can* survive even without you two constantly on my back."

"Yeah? 'Cause I could swear I just saw you dancing with a hitman," Jake hisses quietly, making sure no one except us can hear him.

I stop dead in my tracks and turn to make sure they both see me. "Hey," I tell Chris. "Remember when you were fucking your best friend's younger sister behind his back? And *never* told him about it?" I shamelessly remind him of when he used to date Luke's sister. I spit my next words at Jake. "And remember when your girlfriend almost died because of your involvement, albeit reluctant, with the *fucking* mafia?"

They both watch me in silence, and, fuck, it feels good. “That’s what I thought,” I conclude. “Now, if you don’t mind. I’d like to get fucked off my face in peace.”

I take my time reaching Luke because I know they won’t try anything else tonight. I bought myself an evening free of them. They’ll either join me or leave me be.

“Tell me you’ve got powder with you,” I huff as I sit next to my best friend. He was talking with Jamie, and her eyes widen at me. I guess she’s still a good girl. That’s nice for her.

Can’t say the same for myself.

Luke reaches inside the pocket of his suit jacket and grabs what I’m assuming is a pack of cocaine. He keeps his fist close until he drops it into my hand.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “I’ll be back.”

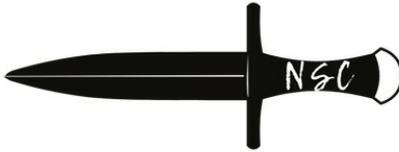
Except I don’t come back. Because post powdering my nose in the ladies’ bathroom, I have the brilliant idea to join Emma on the North Shore. I’m a bit done with this Stoneview engagement. A quick change out of my annoying dress, and I’m ready to have some fun.

I didn’t tell my twin. I didn’t tell my two best friends. I kept Luke’s cocaine with me, knowing he won’t care in the long term anyway.

I guess I did precisely what they always accuse me of: disappearing. But I want to forget about my limited time out of Viktor’s clutch. I want to forget about Sam’s chokehold on my thoughts. I want to forget about the fear and anxiety that comes when I think of Rachel’s situation. And I want to think about anything but the promises Sam made about me crawling back for forgiveness.

Fuck them. *All* of them.

LIK



DELINQUENTS - Call Me Karizma

I grab Xi as he falls on me, turn him around, and push him back to the middle of the circle. Not before slipping a ‘come on, brother, fuck him up’ in his ear. The crowd in the backyard explodes into screams of cheering, and some, disappointment.

Friday night fights are standard on the North Shore. Even between members of the same crew. There’s always tension, always someone who thinks they can take over the leaders. We don’t want to end up killing each other, or worse, betraying our crew. So we release that tension in a good no-rule fistfight. The last one standing wins whatever argument they had. You’re not allowed to kill your opponent.

Some insignificant small dealer named Logan called out Xi on a shitty decision he made when he retraced our territories following Bianco going to prison. It’s been a difficult situation not having the Cosa Nostra’s protection while the Wolves back up our enemies. They’ve been eating away at our turf a little more every month and Logan believes it’s because we willingly gave them too much territory when Bianco left for prison. We didn’t. We gave back what we had stolen, but it’s too complicated for Xi to justify his actions, so it’s better to solve it all with fists and a bit of blood.

We just didn’t expect Logan to have a deadly hook. I twist the golden ring pierced to my nostril, rolling it around in an anxious gesture. If Xi loses

this fight, our whole hierarchy will take a hit. We can't afford civil war when we're already struggling against the Kings' Crew. Our gang is fragile at best, and Xi losing a fight against a meaningless dealer is something we don't need right now.

Under the rain, the hits resonate loudly, and the two bodies keep slipping in the mud of our shitty yard.

"Hey, Xi," Logan calls while my brother tries to take a breath by bouncing on his feet. "If I win this, do I also get to fuck your brother's tight ass?"

I bet he wouldn't think my ass is tight if he knew the size of Sam's dick.

The crowd laughs, forcing me to roll my eyes at their lack of respect for their boss's brother. Aka me. We're mainly surrounded by our drug crew tonight, and that's who Xi handles. While Emma takes care of the big deals like firearms and money laundering businesses, Xi is happy to stick to what he knows. He makes these kids tons of money every day, and they owe him respect, at least for that.

I wish Sam were here, and I hate thinking that. But while he would never get involved in such a petty fight, people wouldn't try anything. They know who he is, what he does, and who he used to work for. They're nothing compared to his skills and strength, and I would have been able to enjoy my night without all this bullshit. This is the first party I've been to in a while.

"Sure thing, Logan," I tell him over the crowd's shouts. "And why don't you let Sam know your thoughts as well."

He turns to me, a smug smile on his beautiful face. "Eh, he can join us. The more, the merrier."

That slight loss of focus just cost him his win, and I'm surprised he didn't expect that. Xi gets him with a jab to the mouth and an uppercut that knocks Logan out cold.

Well, that's that.

I grab my phone to check if I've got a text from Sam. Nothing. He went to Rachel's engagement party. Not that we were invited or anything, but getting past security guards is not a problem we've ever had. He was worried for her, especially after seeing what he'd done to her the last time she spent the night away. He wanted to stay close in case Conor became out of control. He also knew the likelihood of Rose being there, and he wouldn't have missed that for anything in the world.

The crowd finally disperses, leaving Xi, Emma, Billie, and I behind.

“Fucking hell,” Xi growls just before he spits blood on the floor. “Remind me to send you next time Logan is feeling rebellious,” he tells me.

“I’m not using sex to calm Logan,” I snap back.

“I meant to fight, *ya hmar*,” he glowers, calling me a donkey in Arabic like our mom always does when we’re being stupid.

“Right,” I laugh. “My bad.”

“I’m not gonna lie, that was pathetic at best.” The fact that Billie feels the need to chime in after everything she’s been putting us through lately when it comes to the Kings raises my hackles.

“You know what,” I snap at her. “Don’t even open your mouth. Why are you at our party when you could so easily be with Caden King, huh?”

Instead of getting angry, she laughs at me. “I don’t think you want to talk to me about hanging out with people you shouldn’t. Your Stoneview girlfriend is coking herself up with Tamar in our bathroom.”

“What?” I choke. She has to be lying. I turn to Emma automatically, knowing she’ll tell me the truth.

She nods. “She arrived mid-fight.”

A huff leaves me out of pure frustration. That girl is a beggar for trouble. She lives for the thrill of getting caught doing something she shouldn’t. And at this rate she’s going to take me down with her.

I go back inside at the speed of light. With the rain falling hard outside, everyone’s crowding in the living room. Jumping to *Delinquents* by Call Me Karizma, the crowd of sweaty bodies loses itself to the drugs and alcohol they’ve consumed. And in the process, none of them notices me trying to make my way to the bathroom.

I have to intentionally push people out of the way, shoving through them and driving in-between tight groups. Someone calls my name in the background, but I ignore them. I need to get to Rose, because if Sam realizes where she’s gone and gets to her first, she is not in for a good time.

Pushing the door to the bathroom open, I find one of Xi’s good friends, Tamar, running a hand against Rose’s back while the latter is bent over the sink snorting coke.

After all the times Rose must have gone to North Shore parties during her senior year, I had never seen her at one. Somehow, she always went when I wasn’t there. It’s probably for the best, because I’m not sure how long I will be able to hold back from grabbing her and dragging her out of here.

“Tamar, babe,” I call out to her. She turns to me, her pupils so wide I

know coke is not the only thing she's done tonight. Rose comes back up and smiles at me. At least she looks less drugged up than my friend.

“Sup,” Tamar says as she grabs Rose by the waist and brings her closer.

I know they slept together before. Way before I did. Shit, they slept together before I even knew I liked pussy. But the jealousy that spikes through my body makes me want to chop every single one of Tamar's fingers that is touching Rose.

“Lik, this is Stoneview coke,” Tamar cuts off my violent thoughts. “It's pure as fuck. You should try it.”

I doubt that. We sell to Stoneview, and our coke is far from pure at the moment. Our supply problems are only starting to resolve with the help of the Luciano family, but it's not sorted as of yet.

Rose shakes her head. “That's Luke's. It's better than the shitty powder we get in Stoneview.”

I struggle to swallow. The temptation to do one line just to be part of the fun and be closer to Rose is electrifying my body.

Sam would kill you. Absolutely destroy you. It wouldn't be the fun kind of pain.

I shake my head, refocusing on the problem at hand.

“Tamar, you need to leave.”

“Why?” she whines. “We're having fun!”

“Yeah,” Rose adds, her gorgeous smile wide on her face. “We're having a lot of fun, Lik. Why don't you join?”

She puts her arms around Tamar's neck, and when their lips meet, I feel Kill knocking on the door. My beautiful alter-ego who adds a dangerous edge to my fun.

Knock. Knock. Time to fuck shit up.

Teach her a lesson.

Kill Tamar for putting her hands on your property.

My property? Rose isn't my property. She's nothing. She *should be* nothing. She's doing this to trigger me. She's not even enjoying it, I can see it so plainly.

What is so special about her? Why can't I get my head around what it is exactly? What is it about her that caught me off guard and drew me to her so powerfully that I know there's no way of coming back? It took her a few days to get me in her web, to wrap me in it, and promise to never let me go.

Tonight, she's wearing straight black jeans and a pink hoodie with a

drawing of Totoro from *My Neighbor Totoro* on it. That's it. And I bet half of the people in that crowded room stopped to look at her when she walked in. For fuck's sake, what do we all see in her?

She's too skinny, too tall. She's got no boobs, and her hair is way too long to be practical. She's a rude bitch who doesn't care about anything or anyone, not even herself.

And yet, here I am. Ready to grab Tamar by the hair and drag her out of the room, kicking and screaming, for attempting to steal her from me. Because despite all her flaws, Rose is *herself*. And that's all I need.

Nothing I ever liked, nothing I wanted, and yet *everything* I need.

A moan rises out of Tamar's throat when Rose bites her lower lip and runs a hand between her legs.

Fists tight and my voice low, I talk to Rose. "If Sam could see you." I take a step closer to them, and my girl finally gives me her attention. "You wouldn't want a repeat of the last time we caught you with someone else, would you?"

While I believe with all my being that she will heel, show me respect, or at least some fear, I seem to forget she is *still* Rose White.

"What's Sam gonna do?" she taunts me. She grabs Tamar by the back of her neck, pulls her close again, and hovers her lips over hers. "Put a bullet through her head?" She brings two fingers to Tamar's temple, pretending to shoot her.

Tamar's eyes widen with fear. "W-what?" Terrified of my big, dangerous boyfriend. Just like everyone else.

"Just fucking leave," I hiss at her. After that little show, she doesn't need to be told another time.

She escapes Rose's hold and runs out of the bathroom.

Rose watches her leave before her gaze falls on me. "You're not very fun," she tells me, disappointed.

She turns to the sink again and bends over to snort another line. I'm on her in a split second, grabbing her tightly by tangling my fingers in her hair.

"Not even in your wildest dreams will you do another line in front of me," I seethe. I haul her up harshly, loving the way she hisses in pain.

"Why don't you want to do coke with me, Lik?" she chuckles. "Is it the same reason you got punished last time you had a drink?"

I fucking *knew* she heard us that night. Instead of lying to her, I go for the truth. I'm not ashamed anymore.

“Because I’m an ex-addict, and you know it,” I growl in her ear. “I was deep into drugs, sex, and alcohol after my father’s death. And while I was a high-functioning addict, I was still very much one. Sam put me back together, helped me recover, and I swear to God I won’t let you disrespect his hard work by trying to get me to have *a little fun*.”

With my free hand, I dust the counter.

“What the fuck!” she screams as powder flies into the air. “You could have joined and had a good night with me,” she growls. “Now you’ve ruined perfectly good coke and my mood.”

I slap her ass, relishing in her squeal and the fact that she can’t get away if she doesn’t want her hair to rip from her scalp. “Well, my night just got much better. So, I think it’s safe to say I don’t give a shit about your mood.”

“Alright, what’s the plan, Lik?” She rubs her ass against me, making both of us too aware of the hard-on I’m sporting. “Why don’t you bend me over that sink and fuck me? Let’s enjoy our time, just the two of us. Unless,” she laughs. “Unless you’re scared Sam would put a bullet through *your* head.”

I still for a second. What if...she’s right?

I shake my head to dissipate the stupid thoughts. Of course, he wouldn’t.

“Which one of us do you think he’d choose? Tough choice.”

I smile at her and push her until she’s bent over the sink.

“You’re so desperate to hurt us that you forget that we’re all happy to share. You’re the one too selfish to get your head around it.”

Her head is against the white tiles next to the sink, and I slide my hand from her hair to her neck, keeping her in place. I undo her jeans and pull them down until I can enjoy the view of her round ass.

“Nice thong,” I taunt her looking at the white piece of lingerie.

“Enjoying the view? ‘Cause you’re not the only one.”

I pinch my lips to not play into her game. Instead of answering, I rip her underwear off and pry her jaw open with my other hand. She’s too stunned to do anything when I shove the soft material into her mouth. I grab her wrist as she goes to take it out, then the other one, and pin her arms to the small of her back.

She says something unintelligible, and I chuckle. “I can’t quite hear you, princess.”

I undo my jeans and push down my boxers before rummaging through a drawer. Xi will have some condoms in here.

“Aw, it’s your lucky day,” I say when I get my hand on a rubber. “A

quick fuck in a bathroom. Is that what you think you're worth?" I rip it open with my teeth and manage to put it on with one hand. I stroke myself as I watch her try and wriggle out of my grasp. Her grunts of annoyance keep me rock-hard. I slap her ass cheeks twice on each side, and she stomps her foot with frustration.

I slide my hard length across her slit and her breath catches. "Look in the mirror," I tell her low. "I want you to see who finally got you to shut that pretty mouth."

I enter her in one harsh stroke and the air gets stuck in my lungs. How could I forget how good she feels in less than a week?

I stay deep inside her until she looks up at me through the mirror. Her eyes are hooded, her pupils dilated. As soon as I start moving again, a moan gets stuck behind the lace in her mouth. I keep my movement slow and she shivers every time I pull away and come back in. My eyes go down and I'm fascinated by the exact point where I disappear inside her. My body temperature is rising by the second, and I start accelerating as the need for pleasure becomes unbearable.

"Should I make you come?" I ask, knowing perfectly well she can't reply. She wiggles, pushing her ass against me.

"Princess," I smile wickedly as I look at the mirror again. "If you want to come, just say so."

She shrieks from the frustration, and I go harder, deeper. I grab her hip with one hand and use her wrists for leverage with the other. I push inside her one last time, coming with a grunt, and I know from the despair on her face that she didn't get to come.

I release her as I pull out and she falls to the floor in front of me, her legs unable to hold her anymore. I throw the condom in the bin and look down at her as she takes the thong out of her mouth. "I didn't come," she pants, trying to find her breathing again.

"I told you to say something if you wanted to come," I say, smiling down at her.

"I fucking hate you," she spits at me.

"Mm," I bite my lower lip before talking again. "I think I like that you do." I ruffle her hair and zip up my jeans.

"If you think that's a way to make me come back to you, you're fooling yourself."

I think I'm about to reply. Say something, fight back. But then a better

idea comes to mind.

For the last five days, Sam's been telling us she'll come back to us at some point. I think her pride stops her from doing so. I think she just needs a little nudge.

"You're right," I lie. "Better leave you alone."

"What?" She's so confused I want to laugh. She wanted a fight, she didn't get it, and now she's not sure how to act.

"Enjoy the rest of your night, princess."

I'm dying to turn around when I leave the bathroom, but I resist. There are much better things coming that I will take pleasure in watching.

I notice the blue and red lights outside the window before anyone else partying at our house. There's no siren though. On the North Shore, you don't stop to think if sirens are for you when they ring, you just run. They know we'd all be gone before they set foot inside the house if they put them on.

I'm not the one who shouts 'cops!'. I wait until someone else notices, and then when the commotion begins, I lean against the living room wall, hands in my pockets, and I wait patiently.

People scurry out of the house, drop their bottles, and make a run for it. I warned Xi, so he could hide the bags he couldn't afford to lose. But they're not here for that, anyway. My brother gives me a shake of his head and walks to his room. This is our father's house, where my mom doesn't live anymore. Only Xi still lives here. Emma and Billie stop by me before leaving. Emma doesn't have much to worry about, since she's got nothing on her and is older than twenty-one. Billie isn't scared of much, anyway.

"We're heading home, you coming?" Emma asks me.

I shake my head. "I got some stuff to deal with." They don't need anymore. They leave through the front door at the same time the two cops come in. They don't even bother to talk to them.

"Officers." I nod, taking my hands out of my pockets and crossing my arms over my chest. They both nod at me.

Whoever is left they have to make a little show of asking for IDs and searching them. They find a small bag of weed on some girl I don't know and take it from her. "Just go home, and don't let me catch you at this kind of party again," one says.

I know him well. Lucian. He's been an ally of the North Shore Crew for a long time. He's been a cop for too long, and he lost his belief in the justice system a long time ago. Now he just takes our money and makes sure to arrest more of the Kings' Crew than ours.

I point toward the bathroom with my thumb and watch Lucian and his colleague open the door without knocking.

"Police," Lucian simply says as he walks in.

I can almost hear Rose mutter 'shit', the way she does when something she didn't expect happens. I don't follow into the bathroom, I wait where I am and close my eyes. I imagine her trying to talk her way out of it, maybe looking for a fake ID. Unfortunately, fake IDs won't help with the drugs I know she has on her. I overhear Lucian saying she has to follow them to the station.

When the three walk back into the living room, I have to run my palm against my mouth to hide the smile that wants to force its way onto my lips.

"Lik," she growls when she walks past me, hands cuffed behind her back and an officer on each side of her. "Did you fucking do this?"

I don't doubt she knows I did. It's hard to hide anything from someone as bright as her. Still, I play dumb. I raise my hands in front of me, a sign of innocence. "Who calls the cops on their own party?"

She stops walking. "Come on." She twists slightly, clearly uncomfortable in the cuffs. "I get the message," she exhales.

"What message?" I ask innocently.

The guy with Lucian nudges her. "Keep walking. We're taking you to the station. You can make a call there."

She ignores them, still talking to me. "Lik, seriously?!" she snaps.

I shrug, but this time I don't hide my smile. "Don't worry, princess. I'll make sure to tell Sam to come get you."

"Fuck you!" she shouts as she is forced to exit the house.

I would give anything to be a fly in the police car. Just to see how she reacts during the drive.

I don't need to call Sam. I told him what I was going to do before even calling Lucian. No, he's waiting patiently at home with Rachel. I can barely hold back a laugh of excitement. I need to hurry the fuck up and drive there too.

Rose is in for a great night.

ROSE



Need To Change - Landon Tewers

As soon as the car door closes, my head hits the window. Fucking asshole called the cops on his own party just to spite me.

While the younger cop starts the car, the other one turns around, looking at me through the metal grid.

“What’s a pretty thing like you doing at a party on the North Shore?” the old one asks. “You’re not from around here.”

I avoid his gaze, making a point to look outside while I ignore him. That’s how I realize we’re not driving back to the station. The police station in Silver Falls is on the south side of the river. We’ve just passed the bridge that would take us there.

“Where are we going?” I try to make my voice sound tough. It’s hard enough to achieve with a raspy voice like mine. It’s even harder now that my heart is beating in my stomach.

“Hey,” I insist since they both decided to ignore me. “Why are we not going to the station?”

After another half-minute of silence, I kick the passenger seat. The back of the seat is reinforced with steel plating—to avoid being stabbed through it, I’m assuming—and I have to stifle a squeal of pain. “I’m talking to you!” I bark at them. “Where the fuck are you taking me?”

The old one turns around. “I’ve beaten up kids your age for less than that,

girl. I'd suggest you sit back and stay silent for the rest of the ride."

My pride forces me to have my back hit my own seat instead of calmly settling against it. I hate fuckers telling me what to do.

Fear gripping my chest, I stay quiet until they turn onto a dirt road that leads deep into the forest—a road I recognize all too well despite having only taken it once.

"The fucker," I chuckle to myself.

When they park in front of Sam's cabin, I'm ready to absolutely annihilate Lik and Sam. I'm still feeling the overconfidence from the coke I took earlier, and I don't think even the cuffs can hold me back.

That old cop isn't gentle when he takes me out of the car and walks me to the front door without his younger partner.

Last time I was here, Sam and Lik were holding Rachel against her will. They were threatening her life to get me to help them find Volkov.

Tonight, when I step in, hands cuffed behind my back and a cop's hand on my shoulder, the three of them are sitting on a brown leather sofa in the open living room. A fire is burning in the fireplace, and a comfortable rug is at their feet. My jaw tightens at seeing how close they have become. Jealousy darkens the blood in my veins, even though I don't say anything.

Rachel is sitting in between the two men. She's not wearing her engagement dress anymore, having replaced it with a tight black leather skirt and a Rolling Stones t-shirt. A style different from the housewife clothes she wears in Stoneview. Her bleached blonde hair that doesn't quite reach her shoulders makes me want to run my hands through it, to bury my nose against it, and forget about everything else.

Lik gets up, a smug smile on his face, showing his perfectly straight teeth, and that tells me he got precisely what he wanted tonight. He exchanges a few words with the cop, but I can barely hear them, because Sam's gaze is burning a hole through my body.

Still wearing the same suit as earlier, he is relaxing on the sofa, his arms splayed across the back. His left arm is behind Rachel and his hand is coming down right where her shoulder is. Something bubbles in my chest when I notice his finger tracing circles against her skin. Jealousy is boiling my blood so hot I can barely breathe.

The door slams, the cop has gone, and something takes me out of my hate daze.

"Wait! The cuffs!" I startle.

Lik is right behind me. I feel his breath on the back of my neck. Something cold and hard runs against my arm. The key.

“Don’t worry,” he says in my ear. “We’ve got all we need.”

I’m sick of their game already, and my mind keeps displaying details that hurt me at the forefront of my thoughts. Like Sam telling me they’ve all been seeing each other behind my back in the last few days. I feel ill imagining Rachel’s body in between Sam and Lik. She told me she didn’t want to have sex with them, so why can’t I stop all sorts of scenarios running through my head?

“Uncuff me,” I tell Lik quietly, my eyes seemingly unable to move away from the exact spot Sam’s fingers touch Rachel.

“Sounds a lot like an order, princess. You’ll come to understand you’re not the one who dishes those out here.”

I feel my nostrils flare when my jaw tightens. My breathing accelerates, and I can’t even figure out if it’s because of the anger or the zap of pleasure that just crossed my body.

“I’m not in the mood for one of your sick sessions,” I spit.

I’m talking to Lik, yet my eyes are now locked on Sam’s. Just so he knows exactly what I mean by sick sessions. The sort of thing he does with his boyfriend. The kind he forced me to do on Monday and that made me feel so good I had to try and walk out of their lives for good.

Rachel must have taken a page out of Sam’s book tonight, because she is as silent as a winter night. Those nights we spent on her balcony, looking at how the moon reflected on the clouds. Clouds so thick they swallowed any sound around us. They soaked in our moans and whimpers from the way we loved each other while her parents were fast asleep on the other side of the hallway.

A chill runs down my arms remembering how cold we were but how scared she was of having sex in her bedroom out of fear of waking them up. We would warm each other with kisses and touches, love and passion.

And tonight, here she is, sitting next to the man I told her betrayed me. I didn’t tell her what happened exactly. I never told anyone. Not my family, not our friends. Not Rachel.

Not even Lik.

“I’m in the mood for one of our sick sessions,” Lik tells me, his lips dropping kisses all over the back of my neck, the sides, just below my ear. “And I think they are too.”

I ignore the shivers that start from my skin and dig so deep inside me they force waves of pleasure toward my lower stomach.

“I don’t get you, Sunshine,” I admit. “You won’t let me end Conor’s life, but you don’t mind going to *him* for help.” I do my best to spit as much venom as possible when I mention Sam.

My girl shakes her head, seemingly disappointed with my behavior, but she doesn’t engage.

“Oh my god,” I cackle a laugh. “What is your plan, Sam? Turning her into your clone? A little silent *coward*?” My anger pushes me to take a step toward them. The second my foot touches the floor, Lik grabs the chain from the cuffs and pulls me back.

I hiss, feeling the cold metal dig into my wrists.

“Play nice, princess,” Lik chastises me. “We’re not here to argue. Are we, guys?”

Rachel shakes her head, but Sam doesn’t give me anything. So I push. The only way I know how.

“You think he’ll help you, Rach. And he’ll pretend he will. He’ll say he’ll protect you. He’ll say he’ll always be there.” I snort. “Trust me, he won’t be there when you need him the most.”

“That’s enough.” Sam’s voice is calm. A deep resonance hitting the walls of the room and imposing silence.

“What?” I mock him. “Can’t handle what I truly think of you? You’re a traitor, Sam. Your boyfriend is a little dog that’s too blinded by your dominance to see it. And *you*...”

I face Rachel until I see her slightly squirming on the sofa. Good. I want to say something to show how much she will regret siding with them...then Sam’s words during our dance come back to me.

“Is it true?” I rasp. “You came to my house. You sent me texts to apologize...but you were sleeping with them?”

Her eyebrows furrow, clearly confused.

“I never said sleeping, Rose,” Sam intervenes. “That’s only your jealous mind talking.”

“You said—”

“I know what I said. Rachel wanted to learn a few of my tricks, you know, my *dominance*,” he repeats my own word. “She wanted to learn more about authority, power exchange, and what a Dom does. Seeing the situation she’s in at home, it helps her to take back control.”

Rachel's eyes dart to the side when I try to catch her gaze.

"So I took time teaching her. She's an amazing student, you should see her. We might not have been entirely dressed the whole time, but it didn't include sex."

He slowly gets up from the sofa, walking to me. "BDSM is not *always* about sex. Sometimes, it's just a simple interaction of pain or humiliation." He shrugs his jacket off and throws it on an armchair. "Sometimes it's just about giving power away to someone else because they need it, and you don't."

He undoes his cufflinks, putting them in his pocket, and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt one after the other. Slowly I watch him uncover his tattoos. His muscular forearms, pale skin under the black ink, thick veins, and dexterous fingers as he folds up the piece of material do something to me. I shift, feeling the sudden need for pressure against my clit. Behind me, Lik runs his knuckles along my spine.

As he rolls up his sleeves and walks toward me, Sam keeps talking. "BDSM is not always about sex. But with you? Tonight?" He stops right in front of me, a carnal smile spreading on his lips. "You'll get the whole experience."

He pushes a strand of my long black hair behind my ear. My mouth has fallen slightly open, taking him in. I get a hold of myself, attempting to take a step back just to have Lik press harder against me. I can feel his hard-on against my ass.

"I-I'm not getting any experience. You're not fucking touching me."

Sam runs his thumb against my lips, slowly, taking all the time in the world to show me he can. "You're so cute when you stutter. Rare occurrence. It's to be cherished."

I stupidly try to push him away, my hands stuck in the cuffs. All I do is an awkward jiggle with my shoulders.

"There are rules tonight, Rose. You follow them, or you get punished. And I have no patience for your ridiculous attempts at rebellion. There will be no warning."

"Fuck y—"

"First rule," he smiles. "You don't speak unless allowed to. Do so, and I'll gag you. Second rule, when you get an order, you execute it. Don't, and we won't repeat it, we'll just punish you."

Despite my heart now beating harshly against my chest and loudly in my

ears. Despite the wetness between my legs and the dying need to touch myself, I laugh. I mock him and make sure to glare at him before I tell him a piece of my mind.

“As I was saying before you so rudely cut me off. *Fuck. You.*”

“Damn, princess. You really are a sucker for punishment.”

Sam nods at me, only the corner of his lips tipping into a smile. He steps away from me silently, and I remember one of the rules he goes by.

Never make threats you can't follow through with.

“Wait!” I shout as he walks away from the room. I turn my gaze to Rachel. “Rach, uncuff me.”

She only smiles at me. “I want to play, doll.” She uncrosses and recrosses her beautiful legs, making sure to show me she’s not wearing any underwear. “Don’t you want to play with me?”

“Fuck,” I huff, pleasure crossing my entire body. My mouth waters at the thought of being close to her pussy. “I do. With *you*, not with them.”

Lik chuckles in my ears. “Liar.” From behind me, he slides a hand across my ass, between my thighs, and until he can put pressure on my clit.

Despite biting my lower lip, a sound reverberates in my mouth, loud enough for both of them to hear it.

“Don’t worry,” Lik tells me. “In a minute you won’t be able to hide any of your beautiful moans from us.”

“Rach...” My voice is a small squeak as Lik presses against my jeans again. “Let’s leave.”

Slowly, she brings her index finger to her lips. “Shh, no more talking now.”

Sam walks back into the room, holding a big black box, its contents completely hidden from me.

He puts it by the sofa and bends down to grab something. He holds it tightly in his fist when he turns around, but I can see the two straps of leather very clearly.

“Come on,” I huff, feeling my cheeks heat up. I remember too well the last time Lik made me wear a ball gag. “I didn’t realize you—”

“One more word, and I will get a bigger gag, Rose.” Sam’s sturdy voice hits me right in the stomach.

“Remember how much you loved it at the club, princess. Don’t be so ashamed of what you like.”

A whimper escapes my mouth when Lik grabs my jaw from behind,

prying it open with one hand only while the other one starts rubbing against my jeans and ultimately putting more pressure on my clit. The pleasure it makes me feel brings shame onto my entire being.

Sam shows me the gag and I almost choke. It's not the same kind Lik used. No, this one is a metal ring rather than a silicone ball.

"No," I squeak before Sam pushes his thumb against my bottom teeth and pushes my mouth open wide. My arms pull at the cuffs, rubbing my skin raw.

"No more talking," Sam mocks, repeating Rachel's words.

Once it's past my lips, Lik is the one to fasten it at the back of my head. It pulls at my hair, and he ensures it's tight enough so I can't push it out of my mouth. And in some ways, that reassures me. I can try as hard as I can, but it won't move. I don't have to pretend-fight when they take my choices away from me.

Lik's hand comes back to my clit, pressing hard. This time, my moan is loud, as my mouth is forced to stay open. I hang my head in shame, not believing Sam just put this thing on me and I actually moaned through it.

Sam goes back to sit down next to Rachel. I can see his feet disappearing and the sound of him sitting down, but I don't look up.

"Lik, I want to see her face," he orders.

The next second, Lik's hand is in my hair, pulling until I'm facing Sam and Rachel properly. Rachel's mouth is slightly open, and I can see her chest rising and falling rapidly. She must be so wet watching me like this, knowing she could play with her doll however she wants.

My shoulders are hurting from how much I've stupidly tried to pull at the cuffs, perfectly knowing it wouldn't change anything. So I make the conscious decision to stop fighting against my bonds and relax my arms. Sam immediately notices, smiling at me like he's won a prize.

"Rachel, love. Who do you think the ring gag fits best? Lik or Rose?"

"They tried it on me this week, princess. It was wonderful."

I grunt something he can't understand, not even sure what I mean myself. My tongue is so uncomfortable in my mouth.

"Rose," Rachel says in a voice that can barely translate the lust surging through her body.

She shifts on the sofa, turned-on by seeing me like this, and a certain pride builds in my chest from knowing she can't resist me. Even if I'm the one cuffed and gagged.

"You'll see," Lik rasps behind me. "When you start uncontrollably

drooling all over yourself, you begin to *really* let go. It feels amazing. I can promise you you've never experienced anything like it before."

Maybe I don't want to fucking let go, I want to tell him. Perhaps I like being stubborn and having too much pride to ever bow down to anyone.

Maybe that's why I love it when they force it on me.

"Make her feel good," Rachel says. "Show her how much she likes it, Lik. And tell us how wet she is."

My breathing accelerates before Lik even moves. I swallow Rachel's words like a prayer, letting them light up a divine fire in me.

Lik puts an arm across my waist and pops open my jeans' button. Quickly, he rids me of them, helping me step out and stabilize myself again. I'm not wearing a thong anymore since he ripped it earlier. He pulls my hips back so my ass is against him, and I'm slightly bent at the hips. His knuckles run against the seam of my lips, it's already soaking wet, and he notices right away.

"Princess," he huffs with pleasure. "Why would you fight something you love so much?" He addresses Sam and Rachel when he adds, "She is dripping."

With one hand, he uses two fingers to spread me open, and with the other, he inserts a finger in me.

There's no way to stop my moan from resonating loudly in the room. Rachel bites her bottom lip, wholly focused on Lik's finger coming in and out of me. When I'm squirming against him, and my hips start to chase his movement, he inserts another one. The sound of my wetness mixes with my moans, and my breathing accelerates at the same time as Lik's fingers.

I gargle something close to 'oh my god' but it's not like any of them can make out whatever the sound was.

"Don't forget her clit, Lik," Rachel murmurs, her voice barely audible under my hums of pleasure.

His thumb comes to caress my clit and my hips roll, chasing the lust. I'm already close to coming, ready to explode against his hand.

"Slow down," Rachel orders low, knowing exactly what I look like when I'm about to come.

"Rose," Sam's voice tears through the veil of my pleasure. Only I don't want to hear him, I want Lik to pick up the speed instead.

I try to nudge him with my hips, but he keeps a slow pace.

"Listen to me," Sam orders, forcing a whimper past my lips. "Do you

remember when Lik and I played with you? Do you remember how we edged you until you were desperate to come for us?”

I squeeze my eyes at the embarrassing memory, though I nod anyway.

“We’re going to do the opposite tonight. You’re going to come as many times as we wish. You’ll come until you’re crying and begging us to stop. And we’ll only stop once we’re satisfied that it’s been enough. Clear?”

I don’t think there’s such a thing as coming too much, but they can try if they want. I nod.

“Good girl,” Rachel praises, and I melt against Lik. “Now you can make her come, Lik.”

Lik picks up the pace again. He inserts another finger, and his thumb comes back to my clit. Rachel directs him with soft orders, teaching him how to pleasure a woman the same way I’m sure he’s capable of pleasing a man. With her voice and Lik’s fingers following her melody, it doesn’t take me long to scream as I explode against his hand, my cries of pleasure loud and unfiltered.

I can barely stand on my own when he pulls out of me. My muscles feel like jelly and my eyelids heavy. I try to force myself to keep my gaze on Rachel, but my thighs are trembling, and I must readjust myself constantly. I whimper around the gag, trying to get Lik to hold me so I can relax my body against him. He doesn’t, and I’m forced to push through the lethargy that is trying to overtake me.

“Now say thank you for your orgasm.” My brows furrow at Sam’s request. He perfectly knows I can’t say anything with this thing in my mouth. “Go on,” he insists in a reassuring tone.

I do. There are no words, just imperceptible vowels pushing past my tongue. His smile annoys me. The fucker is relishing in my humiliation.

“Good girl,” he praises. A rush of warmth spreads in my chest. “I think she deserves the use of her hands.” He nods at Lik.

A second later, the cuffs drop to the floor behind me. Lik steps away from me and goes to sit on the sofa next to Rachel, leaving her in the middle of them.

The first thing I do is lower my hoodie until it covers my pussy. It’s big enough to reach just below it and I’m thankful for that. Then I go for the gag.

“Don’t you dare,” Sam snaps, startling me. “Take that off before I allow you, and I promise I will shove my dick so far down your throat you’ll be mute for days.” Letting my hands fall back to my side is hard, but I know

what he said about ‘no warning’. I’m stubborn, not stupid.

“I want this to go well, doll,” Rachel says softly. “Please, I want to see where this could lead.”

What with your soon-to-be abusive husband and the four of us?

You’re not even attracted to men.

Viktor is going to come get me before we can even try to make this work.

I don’t say any of this. Not just because I can’t, but because I don’t want to break her heart yet again. If she wants to try, I’ll try. Just for her. I owe her that much after putting her through hell for years and only giving her bits of me.

“Will you be ours?” she asks, practically pleading. “Give us a chance just for tonight. If you like the dynamic, we’ll take it one step at a time.”

Her voice. It always stirs something in me. That softness that used to be so shy at school, around my friends and me. The quiet whispers in my ear so others wouldn’t hear the dirty thoughts that crowded her mind. The silvery notes that always completed my huskiness. The way it wobbled every time she accepted my need to take a break from us. And how stern it can turn, like when she guided Lik into making me come for them.

“Rose,” she hesitates, and I can see the difference between tonight and the last time when she had me fuck Lik. Because there was anger in her tone back then, revenge in her eyes. Tonight, she wants my permission. She wants me to give in completely.

And isn’t that the worst? Because I can deal with the three of them overpowering me and forcing me to do shameful things I know I will like anyway. But to want it? To agree? To give them the green light?

I shift on my feet, even as they all stay silent. Sam doesn’t use this moment to twist the knife either.

“Do you want this?” she asks, and I know it will be the last time she tries. So I jump. I let myself freefall into the madness.

And I nod.

Her smile lights up the room, and I watch her shoulders sag with relief. She turns to Sam, awaiting his lead.

“Take your hoodie off,” he tells me flatly.

I do so with an ease I didn’t expect. He nods his approval and spreads his thighs.

“Come here,” he says, indicating the floor and the space he just created between his legs.

The softly spoken words entice me. I take a step, but he lifts his hand, stopping me in my tracks. “Tsk, tsk. I seem to remember telling you you’d be *crawling* back to us.”

I understand what he wants, although I’m not sure I can. I turn to Rachel again. I need her comfort.

“Do you know what is powerful, doll?” My stomach twists. Surely not the position I’m in. I shake my head. “Surrender.” It’s hypnotic, the way her lips move to give me exactly what I need to hear. The way her voice travels to me like a guidance. The final approval to let go.

I fall to my knees for them. I put my hands on the warm parquet and crawl to them. The wooden floor turns into a comfortable rug, and I keep making my way to Sam.

I’m flushed, my face warm from the embarrassment when I settle between his legs. I kneel, sitting back on my heels, my face right in front of his crotch. Compared to Lik’s hard-on I felt against my back, there’s not much showing in his pants.

His hand comes to my hair, grabs the strands tightly, and pulls until I’m peering up at him. I hiss at the pain coursing through my scalp. It’s only when his thumb comes to wipe the corner of my mouth that I realize I have started to drool.

My cheeks grow hotter, and I squeeze my eyes shut before opening them again. His chin is high, exposing the tattoos on his neck while only his gaze is on me. Two fingers come to my mouth, pressing my tongue flat until my jaw is so stretched I let out a whimper. He tightens his hold on my hair until tears spring from the corner of my eyes. He pulls his fingers out and I see his cock hardening through his pants.

Hurting me is turning him on.

“Show me that pretty tongue of yours.” I push my tongue out until he gives me a curt nod of approval.

With his index finger and thumb, he pinches the tip, forcing a whimper out of my wide-open mouth. He stays like that so long I start to squirm, and a single tear rolls down. He lowers himself until he’s talking right into my face.

“Does it hurt?”

I try to nod as much as I can. I’m in a rush to make him understand how unbearable this is getting.

“Is it bad, Rose?” he murmurs, his voice penetrating every single cell of my body. And another whimper escapes me.

“Good,” he smiles.

He finally lets go. I’m panting, and my head falls slack. I never realized how much of a sadist Sam was until now, facing the massive hard-on pulling at his pants.

I never realized how much of a masochist I was until I realized how wet I am.

“Time for your next orgasm. Lie down with your back on Lik,” he orders.

It’s an awkward position, but I do it. Lik is now in the middle, so I lie with my back on his lap, my head resting on Sam’s, and my legs on Rachel’s. At least until she moves, readjusting herself so she’s on her knees on the sofa and between my legs.

“You’re doing so good,” she whispers before spreading my legs. One hooks on the back of the sofa, while Lik grabs the other, forcing me wide open.

“I want to be the one who makes you come the quickest,” she tells me just before lowering herself, her mouth right in between my legs.

My hips jump up the second her lips press against my clit. I’ve barely just stopped buzzing from Lik’s orgasm.

Her tongue slides into my pussy before returning to my clit, circling around until I’m writhing and moaning through the gag. Lik’s hand tightens around my leg, right behind my knee, and I feel his dick hard against my spine. Rachel adds two fingers into the wet mess she’s just created and curls them up, hitting my g-spot instantly. I scream, squeezing her fingers and feeling how much wetter I’m getting against her face.

Sam uses his thumb to spread the saliva that’s escaped my lips. He brings some back into my mouth, running his thumb against my tongue. With his other hand, he tweaks one of my nipples, and Lik follows, grabbing the other. I’m a whimpering mess, rubbing against Rachel’s face, squirming under Sam and Lik’s forceful fingers.

Sam pinches my nipple hard, and when I whimper, he presses harder. I cry out, but at the same time, Rachel forces an orgasm out of me. Electricity tightens my entire body, making me tremble as my legs try to shut close. Lik lets go of my nipple to press his hands against my inner thighs, ensuring they stay wide open.

“Another,” Sam tells Rachel softly.

I feel her lips spread into a smile against my pussy. I shake my head no. She looks up, back down, and licks me all the way from my entrance to my

clit, gathering as much of my wetness as possible.

She comes up and crawls over me until she's facing me.

"Tongue," Sam orders quickly.

In a daze, I pull out my tongue again, and a shiver courses through my entire body while I let her spit in my mouth. She tastes sweet, and I recognize my own taste too. She made me experience it too many times to forget.

The ring gag makes it practically impossible to swallow, and it hurts the back of my throat when I try.

I scream when her fingers start rubbing my clit, the sensation right after the last orgasm making me shake. The overstimulation makes me shift my hips, trying to escape her touch.

"Ssh, it'll feel good," Rachel promises me. She leaves my clit, and pushes two fingers inside me. With her other hand, she pushes down, just above my pubic bone as she curls her fingers.

My shrieks turn into loud moans despite how uncomfortable I'm turning, and the pleasure comes crashing. My body contracts, my back lifts off Lik's lap, and my head rolls to the side as I orgasm again, letting Rachel play me like a finely tuned musical instrument.

When she finally pulls away, I'm wheezing, barely able to breathe. The gag has become unbearable, and I bring my hands to my mouth, pleading Sam with my eyes.

"I will take it off, and then you'll thank Rachel for your orgasms." I nod, my eyelids so heavy I can barely keep them open.

Sam undoes the gag, and the first thing I do is stretch my jaw. I used both hands to massage it and finally swallow properly.

"Thank you, Rachel," I murmur, my throat dry and my mouth feeling like cotton.

Lik lets go of my legs, and I feel myself drift to sleep as Rachel traces patterns on my thighs with the tip of her fingers. Sam moves, but I can't force myself to open my eyes.

I feel heavy when he picks me up, one hand at my back and the other sliding behind my knees. He carries me, although I'm not sure where. Stairs. Light feet on a soft floor. And I hear the other ones following too, but I can't talk, and I can't move. I'm exhausted.

When I feel the soft mattress under me, I curl into a ball, then proceed to shift until I'm on my front, ready to shut out the entire world.

Fingers run up and down my back in a languid, reassuring gesture.

Someone sits down above my head, and I'm assuming Sam must have put me down in the middle of the bed, not close to the headboard. The person grabs my wrists, pulling them up until they're resting against the mattress, just above my head.

I groan a complaint, sleep still trying to pull me down. It's not Rachel holding my wrists, the hands are too big. It's not Sam, because there are rings around his fingers. I open my eyes, squinting up to find Lik sitting against the headboard, his legs spread, so they're on either side of me, and my hands resting between the top of my head and his crotch. He smiles at me with a softness only this man can have. So feminine, so reassuring. My heartbeat drops, and I'm lulled back to sleep, going deeper and deeper.

Until I feel someone spread my legs. I startle, letting out a grunt.

"Ssh," Lik tells me. "Relax, princess."

Fingers run against my pussy, small and lithe. Rachel. She rubs my clit and I tense.

"No more," I rasp. Still on my front, I hide my face in the mattress.

"You can take more," Lik whispers as he runs his fingers against my scalp, keeping me relaxed. I shake my head, no, but it's too quickly followed by a moan.

"Rachel and I went to do some shopping together," Lik continues, his voice like sweetened honey, appeasing my fears and forcing me to listen. "I think you'll like what we bought. You can try some stuff tonight, and some another day, I guess."

Rachel's fingers press against my pussy, they're cool and slick, covered in lube.

"Wait," I breathe in. Slowly, she spreads lube all over my entrance, and then inside.

Lik starts massaging my neck, and I'm not sure if it's to keep me in place or make me more pliable. Both subdue me, and I can't do anything when I feel the head of a large dildo push against me. I tense, closing my legs.

"Open." Sam's voice isn't nearly as sweet as Lik's.

He's right by Rachel, I can hear him. Although now, even if I wanted to look, I couldn't.

Lik is holding my head against the mattress, his fingers rougher than they were a second ago.

"Close your legs again, and I'll whip you," Sam warns me. There's no violence in his words, and I don't understand how he can make it sound so

threatening with such a calm tone.

I can't stop the whimper that makes its way up my throat as I spread my legs again. A hand runs against my lower back. Rachel's reassuring touch prevents me from shaking.

She pushes in slightly. "It's too big," I wince.

"You can take it," she reassures me. "I'm going to stretch you out really good."

There's more pressure, and I feel the way she slides into my wet pussy. The lube helps, slickness covering both the toy and me. She pulls back, then pushes back in. Again, this time, more of the toy glides inside me. She repeats the process until I feel so stretched out, so full of the dildo, that I start to relax around it.

"That's my perfect doll," she sighs, pride coating her words. "Look at you, oh my god, I've never seen you so stretched..."

I moan as she starts moving. I know she's put the dildo on a strap-on because I feel her hips as they get closer to my ass cheeks. She's managing to fill me up entirely and the way it hits against my cervix has me squirming with discomfort.

"It hurts," I hiss, still unable to move my head and arms. Lik is holding me tightly, but not roughly. It's still reassuring in a way, his thumb rubbing softly against my wrist. I know he can feel my scar there, but he doesn't say anything.

Rachel retreats slightly and pulls at my hips until someone, I'm assuming Sam, slides a pillow under me.

Rachel comes back in, and this time, her hips meet my body totally. "Aah," I scream in pain and pleasure. "Rach... I can't."

"How bad does it hurt?" Sam asks as his hand traces my spine.

"Bad," I whine.

Up and down, his hand goes, but Rachel doesn't stop. While her movements are not violent, I feel every single inch of the toy inside me.

"But you like it too," Sam insists at the same time Rachel rolls her hips.

"Yes..." I moan against the mattress. I've tried to move up so much I'm practically on Lik.

"You're taking it beautifully, baby," Sam tells me.

The praise kills the rebellion in me. I relax entirely against Rachel as she fucks me. I follow her movement with my hips and start meeting her thrusts. It hurts, in a good way.

In the best way.

“You’re going to come again,” Sam says. “Only with Lik’s dick in your mouth this time.”

I barely have time to register that Lik has unzipped his jeans. He releases my wrists, lifts my head, and I only have time to take a breath before he guides his hard dick to my mouth. I take him in, stretching my jaw as he pushes to the back of my mouth. I gag around him when Rachel relentlessly pushes into me.

Lik’s hips lift, keeping up with her pace. As soon as she accelerates, Lik follows, and I feel the spark of another orgasm light up in my lower stomach.

The noises I’m making around Lik should embarrass me, but I can’t focus on anything but Rachel’s large dildo inside me and Lik’s hard dick making its way down my throat. Rachel’s fingers come under me, and she starts pinching my clit.

I shriek just before realizing it’s not Rachel’s small fingers. No, they’re big, thick, merciless.

I shift, but there’s no way to move and nowhere to go. They’ve got me utterly surrounded and, as Sam’s fingers let go of my clit just to pinch it again, I become all too happy to surrender.

“Come for us, baby,” Sam says. And out of everything, I think it’s his soft order that breaks me down entirely.

I explode, not sure where the pleasure comes from anymore. Lik pulls his dick away before he finishes and searches for something on the bedside table. I look back as much as I can to Rachel, and she’s smiling at me, pride lighting up her baby-blue eyes. When I shift back to Lik, I only notice he’s resting against the headboard. His actions leave me confused. Why didn’t he come? Rachel pulls out of me and I sit up, wiping the spit that’s dripped down my chin from Lik’s face-fucking.

Lik hurries to grab me by the waist. He pulls and twists me around, so I’m facing away from him. Holding my tiny waist tightly, he lifts me up.

“What are you—” I gasp when I notice he’s just put a condom on. He sits me back down on his dick, impaling me without so much as a warning. I still feel stretched and open from the toy Rachel used, and his size doesn’t hurt.

But then Rachel crawls further up the bed. She’s changed the dildo into a smaller one, the kind we would usually use together.

“No, no, no,” I panic.

“You didn’t say thank you for your fourth orgasm, princess,” Lik slips in

my ear as he starts moving inside me.

“T-thank you,” I breathe out, his movement taking me by surprise. “Sunshine, what are you doing...” My question turns into a moan when Lik thrusts harshly.

“I can’t take both of you,” I whimper.

“But I’ve stretched you out so good,” Rachel smiles. “And it’s double-sided,” she insists, smearing lube all over her new dildo. “I want to come with you, doll.”

“I can’t come anymore,” I grunt. But Lik is still moving slowly inside me, rolling his hips and sending waves of warmth through my body. “I’m spent, Rach. I need a break.”

“Last one,” she promises. My gaze meets with Sam, and his black eyes hold a different promise.

“Please,” I beg him, tears springing in my eyes. “I can’t...”

His saccharine smile sends a shiver down my spine. “I said you’d come until you can’t take it anymore.”

Rachel is on me now, kissing my neck while Lik pants harshly behind me, working himself up to his own orgasm. Using my body for his pleasure. “It vibrates,” Rachel whispers in my ear, and it makes both Lik and I moan.

“I can’t...” I try to protest, but there’s no fight in it this time, especially not when Rachel pushes two fingers inside me. The gesture makes me hiss, but Lik grunts with pleasure behind me. They both move at the same rhythm, making sure I’m still stretched before Rachel switches her fingers for the dildo.

“Oh my—” My breath is cut short as she pushes in, and I feel both of them move inside me. My moans are loud and pained, but the pleasure is so intense I want to cry.

Then she turns it on. Her moans join mine, our legs are tangled, and I’m wholly crushed between her and Lik.

Lik whimpers with pleasure when the dildo starts vibrating against his dick.

“Fuck,” he pants. “This is too fucking good...I can’t...”

Rachel accelerates, kissing me and biting my lips. My hands come to rest on her naked boobs. I play with her nipples, rolling them between my fingertips and feeling her tremble beneath my touch. Her breathing accelerates, her pants warming my lips as she completely loses herself. Lik speeds up, rolls his hips, and it pushes Rachel’s toy against my g-spot.

“Shit!” I scream.

He does it again, and again until my screams turn wordless. Rachel wraps her arms around my neck. She pushes deeper and moans as the toy presses against her too. Her body trembles, moans stuttering, and she screams my name when she comes. Lik groans behind me, pushing against the toy again, and we come at the same time.

“Thank you,” I sigh. This time, no one had to tell me to say it.

Rachel pulls away, and gets rid of the strap-on, throwing it to the side. While she does that, Lik grabs my waist and lifts me so he can pull out. Rachel returns, falls back on me and places her hand between my legs, a gesture I recognize as her safety space after we have sex. She’s done it before and I know she only does it for comfort, not to try anything anymore. But a few seconds after she cups my pussy, she retreats, pulling away from me.

“Ew...” She wrinkles her nose. She accidentally touched Lik’s now soft dick. He still hasn’t gotten rid of the condom. “I don’t think I could get used to *that*.” She looks at her hand, and Lik and I explode in a laugh. It’s as if she’s touched a monster.

The endorphins, the exhaustion, and the fear of what will happen once we get out of our bubble all pushes the three of us into an unstoppable laughing fit.

She jumps off the bed and runs to the bathroom. I roll off Lik, curling into a ball on the messed sheets. That’s when I notice Sam standing against the wall. Arms crossed and his dark gaze on me.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I move to get off the bed. I was ready to fall asleep, but the way he’s looking at me kicks a sort of anxiety in me, and I want to escape the room. I need to clean myself anyway.

I knew I wouldn’t make it far. As soon as I walk past him to try and reach the door, he grabs my upper arm with a mighty hand.

I wince, turning to him and jutting my chin. “What do you want?” I snap.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” he taunts. “Did you come as many times as you could? You can’t take anymore?”

I gulp, a rock suddenly stuck in my throat. This is over. It’s *supposed* to be over...Except I’m not the one making the rules, am I?

I shake my head, silently telling him that, *no*, I cannot take anymore.

“No more?” he says quietly.

“No more,” I confirm.

Still keeping a firm hold of me, he runs his knuckles against his jaw with

his other hand and nods. “You all had your fun, right?”

I nod. A silence has fallen upon the room.

“But what about me?” he pouts, and my blood freezes.

I can’t. I’m so spent I could fall unconscious when I take my next step. I try to turn to look at Lik. Maybe he knows how to handle his dark side. Because I never had to before. Sam doesn’t let me, though.

“Eyes on me,” he snaps. And I look at him. “I told them they could do whatever they wanted, as long as I could too.”

“No one thought to ask my opinion by any chance,” I snap at him.

It only makes him smile. “Oh, no. That doesn’t matter.”

He drags me to a chair I hadn’t noticed earlier and pushes me down on it.

“I can’t do anything else,” I protest.

“That’s okay. All you have to do is sit tight.” I look to Lik, but he’s not on the bed anymore. He’s not even in the room.

“Where are the others?” My wobbly voice doesn’t help.

“They’ll be back, don’t worry.”

As if on cue, Lik walks into the room...holding the cop’s handcuffs.

“No,” I hiss. “Don’t you fucking dare.” But Sam holds me by the shoulders, making sure I don’t get up, while Lik pulls my arms behind the chair and cuffs my hands.

“Don’t you remember my words at the ball, Rose? I must say that is surprising from you.”

Of course I remember what he said. Who does he think he’s talking to?

“I said you would be punished when you returned to us. All you had to worry about was which of us would do it.”

“I know what you fucking said,” I rage.

“Good news.” His monotonous voice doubles my anger. “We decided it would be me.”

“What was all that then, if not a punishment,” I try to bargain as I twist my wrists in the cuffs for the second time tonight.

“You enjoyed all that way too much for it to be a punishment.”

“You had me crawling across the room, Sam,” I spit. “And I fucking did it for you guys. You’re asking too much of me.”

“Am I?” He grabs my chin, keeping me from twisting and turning. “I quite enjoyed watching you crawl, baby. Getting you on all fours just so you could get nice and wet for us. Part of the punishment is admitting that you enjoy being treated like the little slut you are.”

A smile tips at the corner of my mouth. “So you do admit earlier was part of the punishment?”

He cackles a laugh, not a bit ashamed that I’m just that tiny bit smarter than he is and that he still hasn’t managed to tame my sass. “I suppose you’re right,” he admits. “Time for the *rest* of the punishment, then.”

“Ugh, fuck you!” I manage to jut my chin out of his hold. Or maybe he lets me.

“That’s how I train my subs, Rose.” He runs his knuckles against my chin. “If you let a pet get away with too much from the get-go, you’ll never be able to domesticate them.”

My teeth grind when my jaw tightens. “Compare me to your pet once more and see what happens,” I growl low.

“Do you want a leash next time you crawl?” he smirks.

I have to physically bite my tongue to not get myself in more trouble than I already am. He’s done it again: put me in a weak position and make sure I can’t defend myself. Next step is making me admit I love it.

I don’t know when I stopped wriggling against my bonds, but it seems he managed to make me give up, yet again.

He lowers himself, squatting in front of me, and spreads my legs. “Still wet, I see,” he observes clinically. My cheeks heat up and I have to look away.

I see him pull something out of his pocket from the corner of my eyes. Thick, white zip-ties. Dread grips me, and my entire body starts to shake.

“No!” I scream at him. It’s much louder than the other times I tried to stop him.

It’s real.

He glances up at me, questions in his eyes.

“Not zip-ties,” I insist, shaking my head.

When he doesn’t respond, I don’t control my body. I kick him, both legs going for his chest. It doesn’t do much to him, but I almost tip the chair over.

He grabs the legs just before I fall back. “Rose,” he chastises me. “Enough.”

“Sam,” Lik’s sweet voice rises. The concern in it is whiskey mixing with honey.

Sam attempts to try and zip-tie my ankle to the chair, and I shriek, kicking again. “Don’t!”

A strong Russian accent. Even stronger hands. “Stop moving, girl. It is

going to hurt anyway.”

My breath cuts off for a few seconds before I can inhale again. Panting with fear.

“Sam.” This time it’s alarm that adds to the glorious cocktail that is Lik’s voice. “She’s having a panic attack.”

“She’s no—”

“Stop, stop!” My ears are ringing so loudly that I can barely hear my own voice. Am I shouting? Can they hear me?

Two pairs of hands now. One holds me down while the other ties the zip-ties around my wrists. Every time I fight, he tightens it. “You want more, girl?”

My stomach recoils, sickness causing me to feel dizzy. I sense my skin dampening and my head rolling back.

“Don’t, don’t...”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t...”

“Finally some begging,” someone laughs behind me.

“Please, don’t...”

The sound of my pants ripping makes me shriek. I’m going to be sick. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening. I pull at the zip-ties, again, and again...and again.

“You want them tighter, baby girl?” More cackling. There are more of them. Acid makes its way up my throat and I heave, close to vomiting on the dirty floor I’m on.

The zip-ties around my wrists tighten again.

“It hurts!”

“Princess, I’m not touching you...”

Blood drips down my wrists. It’s nothing compared to the deep ache from the hits, the slaps, the nosebleed. My lips hurt, I think they’ve busted open.

“Little girl trying to play with the big boys.” Aleksei’s voice is freezing cold. Russian winter, heavy snowflakes, thick ice. His hand pulls at my hair, and my neck is pulled back so far I can’t even swallow anymore. He speaks in my ear, heavy breath and spit chilling my skin.

“You’re about to die. Because while your body will live, your soul will be too shattered to ever be put back together. Maybe then you’ll start understanding how I feel now that you’ve killed my father.”

He pushes my face against the dirty floor.

“What are you waiting for, guys? Don’t be gentle.”

I try to crawl away. Even with my hands tied behind my back. Desperate. British Empire, Mongol Empire, Russian Empire...

A foot on my back, my chest crushed against the floor. Hands on my hips. Qing dynasty, Spanish Empire...

Pain. I scream, and blood spits out of my mouth. Stars dance in front of me. The ache is so deep, my stomach spasms.

Second French colonial empire, Abbasid Caliphate...

I try to focus on the pain in my wrists. They're bleeding, the zip-ties are so tight, digging far into my skin.

Blood...there's blood down there. I know. I can feel it. I can feel everything.

"Umayyad Caliphate, Yuan dynasty, Xiongnu Empire..."

"Rose, listen to me, baby. You're fine. Please, my love." Rachel is getting louder. She's trying to sound reassuring, but her voice is brittle.

I feel her hand in my hair, stroking me. I feel the other rubbing my chest. When did I lie down on the bed? When did I put my head on her lap?

"Come back to me. Please, baby, come back."

"I'm right here," I croak. Her lips come to my forehead. "I'm cold."

"Pass me that hoodie," she tells someone else. It takes half a second for her to help me sit up and for Lik to slip the hoodie over my head.

Grapefruit, patchouli, and cedar. Sam's sweater.

I inhale deeply, and my eyes go up, watching Sam...watching me. His arms are crossed, observing me from a position of power, although his eyes are soft when I hold the material close to me like a child's blankie.

My eyes lower, shame engulfing me at knowing they've all just seen me in my worst state. So weak, so vulnerable.

Rachel settles behind me and pulls me until my back is against her chest. She holds me tightly, whispering in my ear. I hear her snuffle, soft sobs accompanying her words. "You scared me. I love you. I love you so much."

"I'm sorry." My voice is raspier than usual, broken and desperate. "I'm sorry I scared you." I put my hand up and behind me, reaching for her cheek without looking. And I wipe her tears with my thumb.

Her head falls in the crook of my neck. "Whatever happened there," she sobs in my hair. "You're safe now. You're safe, okay?"

My eyes cross Sam's. There's no regret in his. And why would there be? Technically, it's not his fault. None of it is. Not his fault I shot Volkov's father. Not his fault Aleksei and his men spent who knows how long raping

and beating me. Not his fault I was sent back to that place by just *looking* at zip-ties.

No, there's no regret in his eyes, and I don't blame him. What there is, however, is a storm—brewing, growing bigger and bigger by the second. A God preparing for the chaos it's going to unfurl on the mere humans who touched me against my will. His eyes are not the black they usually are. I see the color, the unbreakable, obsidian black, but there's something else in them.

Death.

I glance away, too aware of the hatred even though I know it's not aimed at me. His silence is predictable, and I expect nothing else from him. Not until he's ready.

Rachel holds me tighter, if that's even possible, and I relax against her. The feeling of her soft touch mixed with the scent of Sam's oversized sweater is like I stole a corner of heaven. It feels wrong, because I don't belong there, yet I can't help to enjoy it.

I close my eyes and Lik's voice reaches me in a hushed request. "Do you need anything, princess?" I think it's becoming one of my favorite things in the universe. His soft, peaceful voice that makes you feel like you've trapped a ray of sunshine in a box and it only ever shines for you.

I shake my head until Sam's stiff words rise into the air. "She needs to hydrate."

Unlike Lik, it's like it killed Sam to push the sound past his throat. But he did it for me anyway, just to make sure I'm taken care of. I can't even feel that I'm thirsty, but I don't fight him.

"I'll get her a bottle of water," Lik says before I hear him step away.

When he comes back, Rachel helps me drink small sips. Sam watches, giving me a pointed look every time I attempt to put it to the side. He stays until I finish the whole bottle. Rachel is caressing my hair from behind, sometimes stopping to make small braids and sometimes dropping kisses on my neck.

Sam gives me a curt nod and leaves the room. I'm a little shocked but I don't say anything. Lik turns to me and gives me a small smile. "Can I join?" He shakes his head. "I mean...if that's okay with you, of course."

I blink slowly, a smile partially pinching the corner of my lips. "Only if I get to be the big spoon."

He chuckles, a certain relief relaxing his body when he realizes I haven't lost my smart mouth.

He settles in bed with us. I hold him from the back while Rachel cuddles me. I can feel her shift uncomfortably. She's still unsure about this whole situation, and so am I. But I'm attracted to all of them. My heart is desperately begging me to let it beat for the three of them.

I'm still trying to figure out how she feels but I know she isn't in love with them yet. Not like she is with me. I know she's not attracted to them sexually, and she would have never gone near Lik earlier if it wasn't for me being in the middle. I think she has feelings for Lik. A strong sense of friendship is developing between the two of them, but I don't know if she will ever be able to fall in love.

Me? I'm struggling more every day to not have them all in my life. So how the fuck am I meant to go back to Viktor now?

After a while, she settles down with one hand around my waist and the other one lost in my hair. Lik is already fast asleep, my arm dead from the way he's crushing it under him.

It's impossible for me to find sleep. Aleksei's voice never quite leaves my mind. His Russian accent always resonating at the back of my head. The phantom touch of his and his soldiers' hands on me never vanishes. The smell of the floor that my cheek and chest were rubbing on. The blood trickling down my wrists and my legs. The taste of it in my mouth. Their laughs.

And the pain.

It's always here, never quite gone.

After long minutes of listening to both Rachel's and Lik's steady breathing, I give up and sneak out of bed. Neither of them wakes up, and I'm glad. They don't need to know about the fresh demons in my soul that joined the old ones.

SAM



Please Notice - Christian Leave

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

I release the clip and put another round in the gun. I shoot. Again and again, and again, and again.

The loud noise temporarily impedes the flow of thoughts that crowd my mind. It helps keep me busy instead of letting the anxiety drown me.

I need to kill the Volkov brothers. I wanted to before. I now know for certain that my lungs will stop drawing in air if I don't put a bullet in both their skulls.

But I don't know where to find them.

It's every time this thought comes back that I feel a cloak of helplessness wrap around me. I've never had this problem before as an assassin. I have the connections, the knowledge, and the experience. I always find my contracts.

So where the fuck are the Wolves hiding?

My body and my mind want to achieve something, and they're incapable of it.

Killing the brothers has become a basic instinct, like using oxygen to live, getting one foot in front of another, and putting my hands in front of me if I fall. I'm afraid I might die if I don't fulfill that necessity.

One can go without their wants, but one can only go so long without their needs.

I feel Rose behind me before she makes herself known. I haven't survived this long as a hitman without being aware of my surroundings. I don't wonder how she found the small gun range I built in the basement. Despite what I tell her, she never ceases to surprise me, and today is just like any other.

From behind, she puts a soft hand on my shoulder, so I stop shooting. She steps beside me and then slides herself between my extended arms, her back to me. Her perfume sends serotonin to flood my veins and awakens the happiness I can only achieve when she's around.

But tonight, the chemical can't help much. Because when she had her panic attack and we all ultimately understood the pain she'd hidden from everyone, my heart started beating into a rhythm that shattered it into shards I'll never be able to put back together.

Broken pieces can be mended, but shards disappear into dust.

I let her wrap her small hands around mine. One comes to rest on mine under the gun, and the other wraps around my right hand. Her index finger settles on mine that is on the trigger.

"Your aim has gotten better," she says in that raspy voice of hers. It's always been like this, but sometimes I wonder if it got worse from all the times she screamed aimlessly for Bianco.

I sense her back tensing as she positions herself. She cracks her neck, forcing some strands of hair to slide to the side and against me.

Then she works her magic. Pressing her finger against mine and ultimately the trigger, she aims perfectly. Three holes in precisely the same spot.

When she's finished, she wipes just above her eyebrow with her wrist like she always does.

It's sad how well Bianco trained her. Another thing of his she will hold within her forever.

Sickness grips my stomach, anxiety riddling my chest. I always thought that if we tried hard enough, Rose would heal from the pain her foster dad had put her through.

I thought she hadn't suffered irreparably with the Volkov brothers. It had been so easy for her to push me away when I found her. She looked like she was doing well, like she was truly happy.

Now I know that no matter the array of colors we try to paint into her life, there will always be black areas that absorb the pigments just to feed her

demons.

She puts the gun down in front of us and turns around. She's wearing her glasses and probably ditched the contacts before falling asleep. Those round, golden-rimmed glasses that make her look so much younger and more innocent than she actually is.

Blocked between me and the counter behind her, she barely has any space to breathe. Something I'm never quite sure she wants to keep doing anyway.

Her forehead comes right to where my lips are, and it takes all of me not to drop a gentle kiss there.

"It's a nice range you got yourself." She's talking into my neck, raising goosebumps across my whole body. With these casual words, I feel like she's trying to reassure me that the world keeps spinning no matter what I learned tonight. She doesn't understand that my world is her, and that it can't spin as long as she's not okay.

I don't want to remain silent. I want to tell her how much I love her, how I will avenge her, and that I will protect her for as long as I live. But my throat is tight, and my brain is struggling to push vowels and consonants past my lips.

She brings a hand to my cheek, and I realize she's gazing up at me. I was looking ahead at the target, imagining Aleksei Volkov's bleeding body.

"You're beating yourself up over something you had no control of, Sam," she tells me. "What happened, happened." She smiles softly. A sad smile for such a beautiful woman. "If I can live with it, so can you."

"You're not living with it." It comes out as an accusation because I know she's lying to herself, though I regret my tone anyway. "You're attempting survival and very close to failing."

She sighs, knowing I'm right. Rose doesn't face problems. She shoves them deep, deep down so she can ignore them. Only they end up profound inside her, poisoning her soul and taking away her will to live so slowly she barely notices. She just wakes up some days, sick of living and ready to end it as indifferently as she lights up her cigarettes.

"You told the doctors you weren't raped," I accuse without meaning to.

"You looked into my files," she fights back calmly.

"You lied," I insist.

"I lie all the time, Sam. Don't pretend otherwise, that would only make you naïve."

She's right. She's always lied to protect herself. To bury her head in the

sand and pretend the things that hurt her didn't happen.

"It's hard," she admits, to my greatest surprise. "And I'm sad...and scared." My eyes lock with hers. "But it doesn't change the fact that it's my wounds to heal, no one else's."

My hands come to rest on her tiny waist. Acid burns the back of my throat thinking how the Wolves touched her, their filthy hands abusing her soft skin.

"Let me kill them."

"No," she replies coldly, her confidence back in full force. Her vulnerability never lasts too long, she doesn't like that look on her.

My hands tighten around her waist, and I am lifting her up on the counter before I can control my gesture.

"Let me avenge you, Rose," I let out in a strained voice. I bring my face closer to hers. "Let me put their dead bodies at your feet and let you rejoice in the blood flowing around you. Let me do it. Just...just help me find them, and you will never be scared again."

"Like when Nate put Bianco away and no one was meant to be in touch with him again? Like that? Because that was also a promise that I should have never been scared again," she says gravely, her accusing tone pinching my heart. "Traitor," she adds in a murmur.

"You—"

"Your excuses for what you did don't mean shit to me. You better not attempt to throw them my way again."

"You chose Viktor..."

"Because you chose Bianco," she hisses.

We both stand on different fences when it comes to this issue. We have parallel opinions that will never cross. We won't see eye to eye, and tonight is not the night to fight on it. Another time maybe I can try and explain to her yet again why I did what I did. Betrayed her as she said. What led her to turn her back on me when I finally found her.

I glance away.

"Why did you come downstairs? To tell me to just forget something you know I never will?"

"I couldn't sleep," she admits. Her eyes burn holes in the side of my face, so I turn back to her to watch something dark lingering in her eyes.

For once in my life, I truly don't get her. She wants something from me, and I don't understand what.

“I thought Rachel and Lik were with you.”

“They were,” she confirms. Her hands come to caress each of my arms. “But I couldn’t sleep because I don’t think it’s cuddling I need.”

“Rose,” I snort. “What are you talking ab—” I stop myself as soon as it hits me.

I feel my muscles hardening as my hands tighten around her waist. Possessive hands dying to own her for as long as they can.

She slides her arms around my waist and pulls me closer, until her lips can whisper into my ear, “Hurt me.”

It’s my turn to shake my head, the movement making me rub against the top of hers. “I can’t. Not after...tonight.”

“Please. I’m asking you. Hurt me and make it feel good. Help me forget.”

We pull away from each other. The room is silent, apart from the buzzing white neon above our heads. It bathes us in a clinical light, and the smell of gunpowder tickles my nostrils. My thoughts battle a titanic war in my head. How could I do this to her? I had sworn to myself I would never. I let her run away from Bianco so she wouldn’t be in danger from him, and me. I have sick needs that she should never see.

But how could I not do this to her?

She’s asking for it; she’s begging me to. She wants to forget, and I know how much pain can make one escape to a better place. A high like no other. It gave Lik something stronger than his addiction. It can provide Rose with a place for healing.

Lik and I used and abused her body when we found her with that guy. I had no problem doing it in my jealous fit. What’s stopping me now?

I take a step back. “Follow me.”

She doesn’t hesitate. Not one second, not even a shadow of a doubt in her eyes. She jumps off the counter. I take her hand, and I take her to the next door in the basement.

“When we enter this room,” I explain, pointing at the door behind me. “You will be stripped of your right to refuse me anything. Do you understand?”

She nods.

“I want to hear it.”

“I understand,” she says with a conviction that’s so specific to her.

“I will give you only one way out. The word ‘freedom’. If you really can’t take it, I want you to use it. It will be over, and we will never do this

again.”

“O-okay.”

“Do you have doubts? That maybe you can’t take the pain?”

“No,” she tells me firmly.

I smile. “You should.”

I push the door open and welcome the woman I’ve loved since she was a girl and I was a boy into my world of pain and pleasure.

SAM



like u - Rosenfeld

Her gasp brings blood rushing through my dick. She is more beautiful than ever with her wrists in leather cuffs and her naked body ready for me to use. The cuffs are attached to chains, and the chains to the ceiling. Her arms are stretched above her head, and she has to stand on her toes. Practically, she and Lik are close to the same height, so I didn't have to adjust anything.

With her arms up and restrained, she can't hide her beauty from me. Her boobs are taut, the position forcing them to be exposed. All the small tattoos on her stomach are stretched, and the big one on her shoulder and collarbone can't be seen entirely anymore. She attempted to cross her legs a second ago, to try and hide her bare pussy. I had to strike the inside of her thigh to put her back into position. That's what made her gasp.

And I'm already hard as fuck.

Her breathing accelerates slightly when I start circling her. She tries to follow me with her gaze but doesn't dare turn her head around when I stand right behind her.

I notice tiny, circular scars on her back, just below her left shoulder. Three of them. How did I not notice them before? She didn't have them before her stay with the Volkovs, that's for sure, although I have seen her naked since.

Maybe her hair was hiding it, maybe I didn't care enough, or maybe I was

too busy looking at the rest of her body. The tattoo of the six phases of the moon she now has under her left breast often grabs my attention. The Wolves symbol. It always brings anger out of me, but not tonight. Who's to say she had a choice in the matter?

I run my index finger on each of the circular scars.

“Are those cigarette burns?”

She shudders, but I don't get an answer. That's okay, I will soon, and I won't have to force anything out of her. She'll say it for her own healing process.

“How are you feeling?” I ask as I start warming up her skin with the palm of my hands. I run them along her back and then her ass cheeks, which startles her.

“Uncomfortable,” she confesses before shifting on the balls of her feet.

“Good.” I nod to myself. “You'll be relaxed soon enough. Don't worry.” I put down the crop I had used to force her legs open and grab a flogger—one with thick strips.

“This won't hurt,” I explain calmly. “It will just get you used to the feeling of being flogged. Contrary to beliefs, thick floggers don't really hurt. I also won't put too much strength into it.”

“But I want to hurt.”

“Each thing in its own time, Rose.”

She doesn't say anything, but I watch her head nod slightly. I take a step back, and I start slow. A rhythm to get her used to the sensation of the thick bands of leather striking her back. I do a figure of eight up and down her back, and then against her ass. Slowly, her head drops forward as she starts to relax. I keep the same movements, the infinity sign going up and down, up and down. Her breathing relaxes as her skin tinges pink.

I slow down and step away, putting down the thick flogger. I grab the one with thinner strips that I know will hurt. Coming back behind her, I run a hand against her ass cheeks as I ask, “More?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs back.

“Okay. I'm going to use another one now. Do you remember your safe word?”

“Freedom.”

“Good girl. Relax now.”

The same process starts again. A step back and then the same pattern, the same strength. Once she's completely relaxed and accustomed to the

repetition, without making any sound, I strike her hard on her left cheek.

She shrieks, her entire body tensing and her head coming up. Her breathing accelerates and she shifts.

“Stay still,” I order just before I strike again. Hard and in the exact same spot.

“Oh my god!” she gasps. “This is too hard.”

“I’m the one who gets to decide that. Be quiet. I’ll tell you when to start counting.”

“Counting?”

I strike again. Exact same place, making her wince. “I believe I just told you to be quiet.”

Another strike, this time on her other cheek. I repeat the process. Two on the right, two on the left. When stripes of red start to show and she struggles to keep her screams down, I stop.

She’s shaking now, her entire body traversed by spasms. She’s panting, her chin against her chest and her hair falling in front of her face. I run the palm of my hand against her shoulders and spine, feeling the sweat on her skin.

I put down the flogger and grab the crop again. This is one of my favorites. The end of it is a small shiny, red disc that makes the crop look like a long lollipop. I can bring perfectly round-shaped bruises on her skin if I put my mind to it. But that’s not exactly my aim tonight.

“You’ll count from now on.” She doesn’t respond, so I slide my free hand into her hair and pull gently until her neck and spine straighten. “I didn’t hear your ‘yes, Sir’.”

A pause. This is a defining moment in our long relationship—childhood friendship, protection, love, desire, hate, revenge. We went through it all. Tonight, I’m asking her to add a power exchange to it. I’m demanding that she relinquishes it all and hand it to me. And she will call me by the appropriate name if she wants to keep going.

“Yes, Sir.” A barely audible whisper, nevertheless it’s a step in the right direction. Soon, it’ll come naturally. Like Lik.

I let go of her and she keeps her head up. I give her ass cheeks gentle taps with the crop. And then I strike.

“One,” she gasps, shifting her hips and balancing on the ball of her feet.

“Be still, Rose. I won’t say it again.”

“Yes, Sir,” she answers. It falls from her lips as her head falls back down.

I wait for her to settle again, and I strike her.

“Two.” I see the instinct to move and the moment she stops herself.

“Good girl. Very good.” She winces when I run a hand against the redness of her cheeks. She has welts from the previous flogger, and now red circles are starting to show. Her skin is hot, and goosebumps rise when I take my hand away. I give her a few more strikes with less strength.

“Three, four, five...” she counts, and I sense when she relaxes entirely. Slowly I watch her fall into subspace. Her muscles slack until she’s completely hanging from the chains.

My strikes slow down yet I harden them, putting more strength into them. She keeps counting.

“Six, Sev-aah...seven, Ei-eight ...” Her ass comes to meet the crop now, reaching for the high. I let it go just because she’s so into it.

“Are those cigarette burns on your shoulder, Rose?”

“Yes, Sir.” I don’t even think she realizes she answered. I keep striking. “Nine...”

Slowing down my pace, I talk to her while her head hangs and minor bruises start to form.

“Who?”

I strike.

“Ten. Aleksei and his men.” She takes a deep satisfying breath, now comfortable with the rhythm of being hit by the crop. I strike her again. “Eleven.” The numbers come out automatically. So do the answers. She’s lost in her own relaxing, safe space and the words spill from her lips.

“It felt like hours,” she tells me. I wait, not touching her while she opens herself up to me. “Three, maybe four of them. I don’t know the exact number. I couldn’t see all of them. Maybe some of them went twice. That’s why I’m not sure.”

She pauses, shifting as if waiting for another hit from the crop. I don’t want to break her perfect rhythm, so I hit, desperately trying to hold back the strength that comes with the anger rising from hearing what happened to her.

Striking her helps me. Dominating is just as powerful as submitting. You need to take control of yourself before taking control of someone else. You must get in a safe space inside your own head. When one has had control taken away from them in their lives, it’s therapeutic to be able to hold it back. Endorphins flood my brain when I manage to control myself and hit her the same way I was previously, when I reel back the anger.

“Twelve.” Another deep breath. I rub her ass cheeks, making sure the blood still flows. Her breathing is even despite the rush from the hits. “I passed out. Should hav’been a good thing ‘cause at least I wouldn’t feel anything.” Her voice is sluggish, the rasp drawling as she talks.

My throat tightens, but I keep giving her what she needs. I strike.

“Thirteen. They woke me up with a cigarette against my skin. Every time I passed out, that’s how they brought me back. Just to make sure I’d feel it all.”

Three times. She passed out three times. And three times, they burnt her with a cigarette to bring her back to consciousness.

I want to scream. I want to die and come back to life just to kill the fuckers, since I would never rest in peace knowing they still breathe.

I strike. I feel myself going harder, even as I see how well she takes it. She screams when I get to twenty. Panting and writhing. She’s lost count, but I don’t say anything. She’s given me more than I could have hoped for.

“Viktor saved me,” she admits out of nowhere. It forces me away, making me take a step back. There is something beautiful in her voice when she pronounces his name. Jealousy mixes with fury, along with a refusal to understand.

“The fourth time I passed out, I woke up in a bed, being taken care of by their nurse.”

She pauses to breathe, her lungs drawing in air and pushing it back out at a rhythm I can’t keep up with.

“Aleksi wanted to keep me for himself. He said he didn’t want to sell me because he wanted to be there and watch me suffer every day. Viktor forbade him to.”

I walk around her body, settling in front of her. I gently grab her chin and force her head up until she looks at me. Tears are running down her face. Not of sadness but of complete release.

“Why,” I rasp, my voice tight and my mouth dry.

“Because he had a better use for me,” she tells me without hesitation. “He needed my brain.” A laugh escapes her lips. “He’s a good man. Most of all, he’s a very smart man.”

My brows furrow as I attempt to ignore the burning jealousy. “What did you do for him?”

“Remembered.”

“Remembered what, Rose?”

“Everything.”

I swallow the rock stuck in my throat, and my eyes dart away before settling on her glassy stare again. “Did he touch you?”

She nods, her head moving in my hold. “Rarely. Except sometimes, he gave in. Only when I begged hard enough.”

My heart stops, and an invisible force wrenches me back as I let go of her chin.

I feel sick. I feel like I’m choking on my own breath. One brother violated her, and she fell for the other one. The crop drops to the floor, and I only realize seconds later that I’m the one who let it go.

For the first time since my mother’s death, I want to cry. Pressure builds at the back of my eyes and tears threaten to fall. I run my forearm against my eyes, wiping the drops of pain away from my face before they get to breach my eyelids. While she’s still in subspace, I’m on a comedown from domspace.

With a wobbly voice, I ask, “Do you miss him?” Fear twists my stomach, already loathing her for the response.

She nods.

My nostrils flare as another set of tears builds in my eyes. They took her away from me. They broke her. And I will never get the woman I love back. It doesn’t matter that she’s here with me, right now. Her mind will forever be with Viktor Volkov, no matter where she is.

“I did.” I hear her deep breathing once more. “But I don’t think I do anymore,” she adds in a rasp.

Only when I look up at her, do I notice I was staring at the floor.

“What?” I ask. She’s in no capacity to read the questions on my face. Her eyes search for me, yet her mind is somewhere else.

“What you, Rachel, and Lik bring me...nothing compares to that. Nothing compares to your love...Sir.”

I practically teleport next to her again. “Do you mean that?” I ask as I palm her face on each side. “Rose, do you mean it?” An explosion of feelings is forcing my heart to race.

“Yeah...” I feel her head getting heavier and understand how deep she is in subspace. She looks and sounds so high right now. “Don’t let Viktor take me,” she whispers. “When he comes back for me.”

“He won’t come back for you,” I explain softly. “He’s too scared I’ll kill him.”

She shifts, rubbing her thighs against the other. “Fuck me,” she whines. “The pain turns me on, Sir.”

My eyes drop to her pussy. Her inner thighs are glistening, and I hadn’t even noticed. One of my hands drops between her legs. Her head falls into my other one, rubbing herself against it like a cat begging for pets.

I feel her wetness on my fingers when I cup her pussy, but I don’t do anything.

“Not now,” I tell her, my voice strong again.

Freedom has taken over my entire body, and I’m at a complete loss. How can I feel so much relief and such pure, unhindered happiness when she told me she didn’t miss Viktor anymore? Only months ago, she was choosing him over me. Now she tells me nothing compares to the three of us. I can’t help the hope that flourishes in my chest. It’s warm, light, comfortable, and all I want to do is bask in the feeling.

Nothing compares to your love, Sir.

She’s shone a light on the purity of my feelings for her, and I want to keep this moment close to my heart forever.

Who cares about the contract? Who cares about killing the Volkov brothers if Rose loves me as much as I do her? Who cares about life, responsibilities, reality? When Rose wants to hand herself over to us. Nothing matters when Rose loves you. Nothing counts, not even time. Not even the revenge I wanted to deliver her.

I watch her sigh with pleasure when I shift my hand between her legs. I won’t fuck her. She opened herself up, and she told me what happened to her. She brought herself to the most vulnerable form of her being. I can’t do that now.

I pull my hand away.

“No,” she whimpers. “Please...I need it. Why won’t you fuck me?”

“A BDSM scene is not always about sex,” I whisper in her ear. “We both got what we needed out of this session, and I won’t push you any harder.”

“But...” she sobs. More tears come. I watch them get stuck in her long, black eyelashes before they fall down her cheeks. Subdrop. She needs aftercare now, and so do I. “Was I bad?”

I shake my head, grabbing her face between my palms again. My skin is in a hurry to be against hers. “No, baby. You were perfect.” My forehead falls on hers. “You are such a good girl.”

I feel her nodding against me. “Thank me for the session,” I tell her,

mixing our breaths.

My eyes close when her small, hoarse voice reaches my ears in a perfect harmony. “Thank you, Sir.”

“That’s my good girl,” I whisper against her lips.

I try to grasp the remnant of my control, but it slips through my fingers, and I happily watch it fade away. My lips come to meet hers in a feather-light kiss.

But her reaction is fire. She lights up, kissing me back, possessing my lips like the devil does his worshippers.

A moan escapes me as I open my mouth to slide my tongue against hers. She grabs it for herself, moaning back against my lips. Our tongues entangle, and our teeth clash. Grabbing the back of her thighs, I pull until she wraps her legs around my waist. She bucks her hips against me and it raises my t-shirt, making me feel her wet cunt against my lower stomach. She rubs herself against me, and I let her, knowing she won’t be able to get off. Knowing that’s not her aim anymore.

No, everything is in our kiss. The movement of her hips is an unconscious act because her entire being is drowning her in the second kiss we’ve ever exchanged.

The first one, on the day she got kidnapped, I was telling her goodbye. I wanted to leave with the knowledge I had a piece of her coming with me. It was wrong; I was with Lik...but it never *felt* wrong. I never regretted it. Because her lips had touched mine and she had belonged to me wholly for a short minute. It was ephemeral, and while she didn’t know, I was completely aware that it was nothing but a kiss.

A simple goodbye kiss.

Unlike this one.

This kiss...It’s the reunification of our souls after so long being apart. It’s two pieces of a puzzle finally slotting into each other.

When we were kids, she bought those heart necklaces for us. The kind that breaks in the middle and we both get a piece.

This is what this kiss is. Two halves of the same broken heart finally being mended.

It feels like it’s been an eternity when our lips separate. Her cheeks are damp from the tears that spilled and her lips are swollen from our kiss.

I pull away, and her eyes...

I know with a deadly certainty that millennia ago, the twelve Olympian

gods poured diamonds into the sky and turned them into stars just so they could steal them back and place them in Rose's eyes tonight.

With a blink of her starry eyes, she lights up my heart and pushes it to beat to the rhythm of love. She's overtaken my mind, invaded every single cell in my body, and taken my love hostage.

With her legs still wrapped around my hips, I undo her cuffs. She falls into my arms, and I carry her back upstairs.

I don't want to wake Lik and Rachel. And, selfishly, I want Rose to myself for whatever few hours are left of the night.

I walk to the guest bedroom and then to the en-suite. I keep her in my arms, her long legs tight against me, as I run a bath.

We both end up in it with no will whatsoever for our skins to stop touching. She winces when her ass cheeks hit the warm water, but I've added oils that I know will soothe her very soon.

We relax, her body in between my legs and her back against my stomach. Her head is resting on my collarbone, and I can't stop dropping kisses on her cheek, her jaw, and the corner of her mouth.

My hands run along her body in languishing, loving gestures. Every time I stop on a scar, she tells me where it's from, and I've never felt closer to her.

My thumb brushes the one on her right thigh, still pink from the months prior.

"Yelena's bodyguard shot me. That was the night I escaped. Aaron Williams is the one who drove me to the hospital."

"Yelena...as in—"

"Yeah. Viktor's wife."

"She's dead," I say, perfectly aware she knows.

"She would hit me whenever she could. And she was the reason I finally decided to leave. I mean...she had me shot, you know. That kind of thing brings you back to your senses," she chuckles. "Her jealousy ran deep because of Viktor's fascination for me. And from time to time, I fucked her husband. So I guess she had reasons to hate me." A hint of jealousy shows its ugly head, but I know that if she mentions it, it's because she feels nothing for him anymore. Not even the need to go back to him.

"She hit you?"

"Oh, yeah. Every time Viktor was out of sight, she was on me." I feel her nodding against my shoulder. "Don't worry, you know I got her back whenever I could."

I smile, my lips against her cheeks. “Of course you did.”

“Viktor told her if she ever touched me again...he’d kill her.”

And he did. That’s how much he wanted Rose. Since she can read my exact thoughts, she adds, “I don’t think loved me, Sam. He needed me alive because his entire organization relies on my brain.”

“Explain that to me,” I coax her, before dropping my lips to the corner of her mouth.

“I will. When I’m not so tired.”

A lie. She’s not ready yet, and I won’t force her.

My hand runs up, stopping at the tattoo on her right hip. A small heart, the size of a coin, with an S in it. It matches my one, the only difference being that it has an R.

“My favorite tattoo,” she tells me softly. Her head turns toward mine and she drops a light kiss on my lips.

Our gazes lock. “I can tattoo you some more if you wish,” I tell her.

“Sure,” she says as she drops her head on my collarbone again.

“Cover this one, maybe,” I say as I run the pads of my fingers below her left breast. The six phases of the moon.

She stays silent, forcing me to ask a question I didn’t want to. “Did you want it?”

“No.”

Why do I feel relieved? She was forced to get a mark she never wanted, and my sick, possessive brain is finally reassured that she didn’t wish for the Wolves’ tattoo.

Next, I run my fingers along her collarbone, her left shoulder. That big tattoo of a snake going through roses.

“I wanted something to take away the pain from the cigarette burns.” She yawns, her head becoming heavier. I look down at her and watch her close her eyes. “Big tattoos hurt for a while. I’m the one who came up with the design. I just wanted to feel something else, and Viktor said yes.”

I keep quiet and drag my fingers to her wrist. The thin line around her right wrist matches the left one.

“Zip ties.” My thoughts spill out before I remember this could possibly trigger her.

“Yeah, god forbid I tried to defend myself against a group of men trying to rape me.” She’s falling asleep, her voice quiet and low. A hoarse whisper that cuts off on certain vowels.

Still, I wince at the word. Fuck I hate the harsh reality of that word. Going back to her boobs, I trace a thin scar just above her left nipple.

“Rachel. She can play dirty with that knife of hers.”

My hand runs down to her stomach, and I let my palm rest against a group of short, dark lines that scar her golden skin.

“Those were Bianco.” I can barely even hear her this time, her mind completely disappearing to the sound of Hypnos’ lullaby.

I know, I don’t tell her. I remember too well the day I healed her wounds after a particularly intense hour in his office.

She awakes when I carry her out of the bath and dry her, but she stays silent, too tired to speak or do much else than stare at me with that sparkling gaze of hers.

I lie her down in bed and settle next to her before drawing the covers over us. She relaxes against me naturally. Flipping on her front and putting her head on my chest, she then wraps a long leg around my thighs.

“You’re warm,” she says happily. And she’s cold. Always. I love that she goes back to how she sought warmth from me.

She nudges me with the top of her head, and I smile at the fact that I know exactly what she wants. I slide my hand to her head and start rubbing her scalp, loving the way she relaxes against me.

I’m falling into the most peaceful sleep in a while, when I hear her voice again.

“I love you.” Such simple words, and yet, it took her fourteen years to say them to me. “And you’re in love with me,” she murmurs. “Still.”

“Forever,” I whisper back at her. “Forever, I will love you, Rose.”

She shifts, looking up as much as she can in her position, her expression unclear in the room only lit by the moonlight. “And more?”

I smile at her need for comfort and reassurance. She rarely expresses it in a soft way, usually going for being rude and defensive rather than vulnerable.

I bring my other hand to her cheek, and my thumb comes to pull at her lower lip. “When forever ends and the world stops spinning. When the mountains move and the oceans rise. When time stops and our souls leave our mortal bodies. Well, then? I will still love you.”

One last kiss and a thousand loving thoughts later, I fall asleep, hardly believing that after all this time, Rose is in my arms when I do so.

ROSE



Back To You - Selena Gomez

55 days until Viktor...

The rain battering against the window wakes me up. The sun is barely starting to show on the horizon, and it must not even be seven a.m. I think I only slept two hours. I shift in bed, readjusting myself against Sam, and wince at the pain shooting from my ass cheeks. I probably have bruises from yesterday, and it's going to be painful to sit down.

But I feel cleansed.

Sam did something to me yesterday. He allowed me to vanquish some of the demons, to clear my mind, and rediscover myself as a whole person. I'm not healed from what Aleksei did to me, and I'm not a new person. But I feel like, for the first time in forever, I've had a break from the deadly storm that constantly threatens to take over my mind.

Although something worries me. Because I now *know* I can't go back to Viktor. My freedom tastes too sweet, my new life finally smiling at me and welcoming me with open arms.

I need to figure out a way to stay here before it's too late.

I feel Sam's warmth against me, and fears of the future dissipate. I guess everything can wait until I've enjoyed him a little more.

I pull away from him, propping myself on my elbow to watch him sleep.

He's got a tattooed arm under his head and the other resting on his

stomach. His lips are slightly parted and, for once, his hair is a mess around his face. His longer strands cover the shaven sides and the scalp tattoos that accompany them. Some have fallen over his eyes, hiding his lashes.

My eyes trail down his tattooed neck and chest. My belly tingles when I stop at his pierced nipples. Unlike Lik, who is thin and defined, Sam is thick, robust, and his abs are outlined perfectly. His massive muscles look like they're bulging no matter how relaxed he is. His body is entirely covered in tattoos, his pale skin barely showing anywhere.

It looks like someone drew a V out of clay on his lower stomach, and when my eyes reach the covers hiding his dick, I notice the morning wood tenting them.

My stomach does a backflip, and I lick my lips. I discreetly draw back the covers, exposing his huge dick. How did he ever fit that in my throat?

Lowering myself by his side, I lick the tip then wait to see if he reacts. Nothing. I keep going, licking the length with the end of my tongue and back to his tip. He shifts slightly, and a soft moan escapes his lips when I finally take him into my mouth. I readjust myself and take him all in. He's too big to fit, so I bring a hand to the base of his dick to accompany the sucking.

Bobbing my head up and down, I feel him slowly waking up. His muscles tighten, his breath accelerates, and another moan spills from his lips. Louder this time.

His hand comes to my hair, gripping and helping me move.

"Rose," his groggy voice is barely a whisper. "Fuck..."

I stop before he can come and pull away. I pull the covers off completely and straddle him, rubbing his length against my entrance and clit.

His hands come to my waist, and he stops me. "Wait."

My heart accelerates to the rhythm of fear. Rejection thickens his voice, and I'm suddenly terrified everything from yesterday was just to get information out of me.

He wouldn't trick me like that...would he?

I wonder what face I'm making, because he instantly tries to reassure me, although with the wrong words. "I just...not now."

"Why?" I insist, rolling my hips and making him groan. "You clearly want it."

"I do," he hisses. "But—"

"Sam...out of the three of you, you're the only one who still hasn't fucked me. I want it. What do *you* want? For me to beg? Cause I can't say

I'm above it."

He runs a hand across his face, and then, he rubs his knuckles against his jaw. "It's not that. I just..."

"Why won't you fuck me?" He hesitates some more, and I roll my hips. "Sam..."

"Because that's not how I imagined it."

"What?" I still, confused. I press my hands to his tattooed chest. "How did you imagine it?"

His eyes dart away, a light pink tinting his cheeks. It brings a smile to my face.

"I always thought I'd be your first," he finally admits. His hands tighten slightly around my waist. "I...I thought I'd be the first guy to make love to you, to pleasure you. I used to imagine the gentle way I'd lay you on your bed. How I'd kiss you when I'd first push in. It's...fuck, it's stupid 'cause I know you've slept with a lot of people now. And I've slept with a few too. And I'm not saying I wanted to take your virginity, that's a stupid thing to think. But...your first. Yeah, I wanted that."

My heart is beating too fast for me to take an adequate breath. Butterflies are dancing in my stomach, and tears of happiness and regret are threatening to spill. How I wish it had been that way too. My first time was with my best friend Luke because we were drunk and wanted to experiment.

"Do it," I voice my desire weakly, forcing air out of my lungs. "Show me how it would have been."

His eyes look up, a million stars now lighting up the black orbs.

Softly, he flips us around. He gently lays me down in his place and spreads my legs with his own as he settles on top of me. I'm a tall woman, I take space, but I suddenly feel ridiculously tiny under the strong man keeping me between him and the mattress.

Tenderly, he drops kisses on my lips, my jaw, and my neck. He keeps going down until he's lovingly kissing my nipples. He takes one after the other in his mouth, licking and sucking lightly. I start to writhe under him, the contrast between the loving acts and the pain from my ass cheeks making me dizzy. He keeps going down my stomach, kissing tattoos and scars, licking his way down until his tongue starts to play with my clit.

It's soft taps, long licks, and care. It's slow and beautiful, teasing me until I'm panting and moving against his mouth. When he deems me wet enough, he pushes up and grabs something from the side table. Lube.

“I don’t need—”

“Ssh.” He puts a finger against my mouth. “You wanted to see how I would have done it. This is how.”

First, he puts lube on his fingers before working them into me one by one. He caresses me with his other hand at the same time. He makes sure I’m completely prepared for him before he puts lube on his dick. I observe him stroke himself while he watches me, taking in my entire body. He lines his dick to my entrance, and his lips fall onto mine just before he enters me. He kisses me deeply, and at the same time as his tongue comes to stroke mine, he gently pushes in. I moan against his mouth, his girth stretching me way more than his fingers did.

I whimper when he tries to push in more, and he brings a hand to my cheek.

“Relax, Lovebug. Take a deep breath for me.”

The nickname he used to use for me could have been long forgotten, yet it sounds so familiar. I’m thrown back to all the moments we had together. All the loving gestures, all the times he took care of me, held me in his arms to protect me from others and myself.

I think of the notes I would leave in his jacket before he left our house, how I would breathe in his smell on it in secret. I remember his soft skin against mine when he gave me my first tattoo. The first one I’d wanted consensually. I’d asked him to add something else to my skin because I didn’t only want the mark of the Bianco family that my foster dad had tattooed on all of us.

He pushes in, rolling his hips gently.

I think of how much I missed him when I escaped Bianco. The number of times I looked out my window from the Murrays’ and secretly hoped he would find us. Find *me*. How I wished he would move mountains for me just because he loved me that much.

And I remember the relief when he did find us in senior year. When he showed up outside our school and how it broke my heart to pretend I didn’t want him there. I remember the time we spent together, the conflicting feelings of knowing he was blackmailing me just so we would be close, because our relationship allowed nothing else but fake hate and stolen moments.

When he gets in a rhythm of thrusts, kisses, and caresses, I feel the warmth in my chest and my heart drops to my stomach. I feel the way my

orgasm builds languidly from the love he is passing on to me.

For however long this lasts, Bianco never existed. I grew up with loving parents. My brothers both loved me and each other. I was never adopted by a man who was the leader of a criminal organization. I was never kidnapped for something I should have never been involved with in the first place.

For however long this lasts, I met Sam in high school, and we fell in love with each other. He took me on dates and drove me around in his car. He took me back to my house before curfew and snuck in through my window when my parents went to bed.

I close my eyes as the burning fire of climax takes over me and my moans fill the room. Sam's mouth swallows them before pulling away.

“Open your eyes. I want you to look at me when you come on my dick.”

I do. He accelerates, building up a rhythm that not only carries me through the wave of my orgasm but also brings him to his.

He falls on me, grabbing me into a tight embrace as he slowly softens inside me. I feel his cum leaking out of me. His warmth makes me forget everything again, his strong arms keeping me tightly against him, and his head comes to rest in the crook of my neck.

“Lovebug.” His voice finally raises after minutes of silence. I don't know how I'll ever get used to this nickname again. It feels too good, like I don't deserve this kind of happiness. “Are you on any contraception?”

“Right. Now is the perfect moment to ask, Sam. After you came inside me. The same thing your boyfriend did last weekend.”

He pulls up, holding himself right above me with his palms on the mattress on either side of my head. “Fuck. I...it's been so long since I slept with a girl. It didn't even cross my mind.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “And Lik had never slept with a girl before. Except you're not stupid, are you? You know what it could imply.”

“Just answer the question,” he growls back.

“I am,” I finally tell him. “Viktor was kind enough to let me get an implant.” I show him the inside of my left upper arm. “Right there.” I point to where it is. “But that doesn't protect any of us from STDs, you idiot.”

“Lik and I got tested. We're STD-free.” He lets himself fall back on me. “We're all fine.”

I roll my eyes. “There are four of us who've been sleeping together. We're not fine.” It's a strange thing to say, yet I'm oddly getting used to talking about four people when it comes to our relationship. Relationships?

It's a strange dynamic, but I like it. Especially now that we're starting to love each other just a tiny bit more than we hate each other.

"Alright," he mutters against my collarbone. "I'll take us all to get tested today. Yeah?"

"Yeah." My hand comes to massage his scalp, relishing in the feeling of his soft, messy hair against my fingertips.

It's around eight when we both come out of the guest bedroom, showered and satiated. I borrowed a long sweater of his, and he found some sweatpants, leaving his upper body naked to my pleasure. I feel strange walking back to his master bedroom, knowing I left Lik and Rachel alone in there. When we approach the door, their loud voices reach us easily.

"You fucking perv!" Rachel shrieks.

"It's not for you!" he fights back. "I'm not attracted to you. Not like that." His beautiful voice is still hoarse from sleep.

"Really? Hard to believe when I woke up with your hard dick against my ass! Ew. Ew, men are disgusting."

"Oh my god, get over yourself. It's only natural!"

I push the door open, Sam following. He stops so close behind me I can feel his heat through my sweater.

"What's going on?" I ask innocently.

Rachel is standing, holding the covers close to herself, while Lik is sitting naked on the bed and a pillow covering his lap. I bite my lip for two reasons. The first being seeing two people I love to fuck makes me hot. The second... this situation is hilarious.

"Where were you?" She swings around to me. "You were meant to be in the middle of us, not leave me to wake up with Lik's hard-on rubbing against me!"

My lips twitch as I try to force myself not to burst out laughing.

"Oh, my god." Lik rolls his eyes. "*Wallah*, I wasn't rubbing," he promises in Arabic. "I'm trying to explain to Rachel the concept of morning wood. That's what men get in the morning, *habibti*."

"Stop talking to me like lesbians are stupid. It infuriates me."

"Not lesbians," he chuckles. "Just you."

The death stare those words get him almost makes him stutter. "Okay, I'm sorry! Look, I'm sorry to bring it up, but surely you've experienced it

with your fiancé?”

She shakes her head, disgust still covering her features. Her cheeks are red, like all the times someone makes her feel dumb, so I hug her from behind.

She's not stupid, though she never took the time to study or educate herself beyond what she's been told, and sometimes she lacks knowledge. I used to insist she takes extra classes, but she's been told too many times by her parents that she's just a brainless girl who is only good for marriage. So she believed it. Truth is, she's anything but.

I tighten my arms around her waist and drop a kiss to the top of her head. “Not all men get morning wood,” I tell Lik to defend Rach.

“Yeah, you'd know with the amount you've slept with.”

This time, a laugh escapes my lips. Leaving Rach, I walk to him and sit up on the pillow, straddling him. “What's wrong, baby? Are you a little jealous, maybe?”

He grabs my hips and flips me around until my back hits the bed. The pillow falls off as he settles between my legs. “Yes. Make it up to me.”

“Not now,” Sam's voice cuts through our one-on-one. “Get dressed, everyone. We're getting tested today.”

Lik gets off me and turns to his boyfriend. “What about breakfast?”

“We'll grab breakfast right after. Then we'll drop Rachel at her house.”

My heart drops to my stomach. “But—”

“Where's Conor?” Sam asks Rachel, ignoring me.

Rachel goes to the leather skirt she'd discarded yesterday and grabs her phone from the pocket.

“Do you track him or something?” I say jokingly.

“Yeah,” she answers like it's nothing. “Sam showed me how to install a tracking app he wouldn't find.” She scrolls through her phone and nods to herself. “Still with his side girl,” she confirms. “Didn't come home last night.” There's such neutrality in her voice when she says that. There's no doubt she couldn't care less if he slept with the entire world behind her back.

“Do you know who she is?” I question, wondering if I could kill both of them in one go.

“It's Beth.”

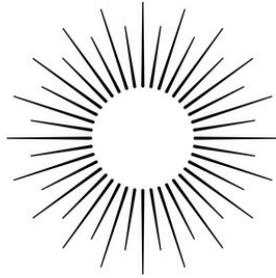
I choke on the air coming into my lungs. “Beth? As in, Beth Lam from school?”

This girl and I used to hate each other.

“Yep.” She makes the ‘p’ pop and shrugs her shoulders. “I guess testing and breakfast are on the table for me then. My phone will ping when he’s on the move. Let’s just not go too far from Stoneview.”

We all nod, but I’m shocked at the independence she’s finding outside of her abusive relationship. Shocked and relieved. Sam really is handling the situation, and I know we’ll get her out of there soon. My plan of simply killing him and getting rid of his body seems to be to no one’s taste. So I guess I’ll stick to their plan.

RACHEL



This is what falling in love feels like - JVKE

“Can I have the nachos, please?” I ask the waitress as I close the laminated menu in front of me. She grabs it, nodding with a smile.

“Nachos,” she repeats. She turns to Lik, waiting for his order.

We’ve all settled into a booth at Silvers’, about halfway between Silver Falls and Stoneview. Apparently, the results of our tests will be back next week. We were all absolutely terrified of the lady who gave us a big scolding for having unprotected sex. She had nothing to say about the fact that we were four people telling her we all had sex together.

But, boy, she had something to say about protection. Rightly so. I’d never been like this before, and I don’t plan on doing that ever again. I’m now being eaten away by a fear in my stomach. A little voice in my head keeps repeating how stupid I am.

“What kind of weirdo has nachos for breakfast?” Lik asks, his nose wrinkling like I’ve come to notice he often does. His lips tip on one side, and he can barely hide his dimple from under the five o’clock shadow he sports as always. I’m getting used to his jabs, and I know he loves our back and forth.

It’s a strange relationship we’re building, both obsessed with the same girl yet not attracted to each other beyond friendship.

I did some research on my phone while we were in the waiting room at

the clinic. Apparently, it's a thing in polyamory relationships. I've been thinking about all the terms I read. ENM, CNM, quad, vee, metamours. It was all too confusing for me to remember all of them. What I do remember, is that it happens that two couples, like Rose and me and Sam and Lik, start mixing their relationships. It also happens that two people are into the same person yet not into each other and that they stay friends throughout the relationship.

So, I guess we're normal. Right? Other people do it.

I cock an eyebrow at Lik. "This weirdo. I was told they were the best. I want to try them."

"Who told you that?" he chortles.

"Jamie Williams, Jake's girlfriend. You don't know her," I snap.

His tipped lips turn into a bright smile, like he knows something I don't. "Oh, I know Jamie. Very well."

"Sure." I roll my eyes and play with the menu in front of me, bending the corners and digging the plastic under my nails.

"I promise. I spent a great night with her and Jake. It involved ropes, a blindfold, and a magic wand. Something we should definitely try with this princess here." His eyes dart to Rose, and mine follow.

She's typing on her phone, not really bothered about us. I catch bits of her text conversation. Jake is asking where she disappeared to yesterday, and I watch her type a half-lie, saying she was with me and not mentioning Sam and Lik.

"You don't even know Jake," I answer, jutting my chin. He's making this story up just to irritate me. "'Cause if you did, you'd know he's not the kind to share his girl."

"Unlike us?" It feels weird to see he considers Rose our girl, although she doesn't approve nor disagree, and when I look at Sam, he's just following our conversation silently.

"Stop bullshitting me."

"I'm not," Lik laughs. "Jake and I were good friends in senior year. He came to our school for the second half of it. Trust me, I jumped on that right away." He winks at me. "He and Jamie weren't on good terms then. He asked if I wanted to play. How could I say no to him?"

A laugh explodes from my throat when I understand. "Oh my god, you're into Jake!"

"Damn right I am. Have you ever met him?"

“So you only fuck Rose because she’s the closest thing you have to Jake,” I taunt.

Catching at least that bit of conversation, Rose lets out a disgusted, “Ew.”

A scratch of a throat takes us out of our bubble. The waitress is still waiting at the end of our booth, red covering her cheeks.

“I am so sorry,” I mumble, shame overtaking me for the conversation we were having in front of her. All just because Lik made a comment about me ordering nachos. “You just *had* to criticize the nachos, didn’t you?”

Lik orders a mountain of pancakes with all the add-ons he can find, and Sam some scrambled eggs and an English breakfast tea. Not very surprising for them.

When the waitress turns to Rose, she doesn’t even lift her eyes from her phone. An annoyed sound bubbles from Sam, like a dad embarrassed by his teenager’s behavior.

“Rose,” he calls her. “What do you want to eat?”

“Not hungry,” she mumbles back, still exchanging lies with her brother.

I watch Lik bite his bottom lip, trying to suppress a smile at the excitement of Sam getting angry at Rose. I kick him under the table.

“Don’t look so thrilled,” I whisper to him. He only winks back.

The next second, Sam snaps Rose’s phone away from her hands. She looks up, pausing from the shock while she takes in what he’s just done, and he puts the phone in the back pocket of his jeans.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Give me my phone.”

“Order something.” The lack of emotion in his voice tells her she shouldn’t push. And, of course, she does.

“I told you I’m not hungry.”

“And I told you to order something.”

“I can come back,” the waitress interjects shyly.

“No need,” he tells her politely. Sitting opposite Rose, he interlocks his fingers as he puts his hands on the table, then smiles at her. “You’ll eat, Lovebug. Do you want to do it the easy way or the hard way?”

Rose has always hated people telling her to eat, but I have a feeling Sam has been doing it forever and that he knows why she doesn’t like doing so.

He raises an eyebrow, urging her on, except her stubbornness kicks in. Finally, she turns to the waitress with a polite smile on her face. “I won’t order anything, thank you.”

As soon as she leaves, Rose extends her hand toward Sam. “My phone.”

“No.” He readjusts himself on his seat and wraps an arm around Lik’s shoulders.

Rose makes a show of huffing and shaking her head. She taps my thigh and turns to me. “Excuse me, Sunshine. I need to use the bathroom.”

I slide out of the booth to let her out. She gives me a brief kiss on the lips and escapes to the back of the diner.

“Well, now you have to do something,” Lik says playfully. “Can’t let her get away with this.”

That makes Sam smile, and, weirdly, it makes me want not to let her get away with it, either.

“Alright, I’ll make sure to punish her, then. Excuse me.” It’s Lik’s turn to slide out so Sam can get up. “Come, Rachel. I’m going to need your help.”

“What about me?” Lik pouts.

“You just wait for your turn.”

My stomach bubbles with excitement as we make our way to the women’s bathroom. I feel like the crazy woman in a horror movie. A spring in her step as she makes her way to commit a bloody massacre.

Stopping right outside the door, Sam speaks quietly to me. “Are you alright with following my lead? I’ve got something nice planned, though I’m happy to listen to your ideas too.”

I like how Sam talks to me. Always putting us on the same level and always asking for my opinion. Never making me feel like I’m an idiot. That’s what forces me to have such strong feelings for him. I don’t know if I’m falling in love, and I don’t want to have sex with him, but I like that we’re a team, and I’m getting addicted to that. His presence is something I need more and more every day. Not only because of who he is, but because of who I am around him.

“I do have an idea, actually,” I tell him, a bright smile spreading on my cheeks. I go on the balls of my feet to whisper something in his ear. When I step away again, there’s a glint of excitement in his eyes.

He bends, lifts up his jeans and grabs a pocket knife that he keeps around his ankle.

“Your idea, it is,” he says as he hands me the knife.

He’s the one who pushes the door open. “Lovebug,” he singsongs.

Rose is washing her hands when I close the door behind me. “What the fuck, Sam. This is the women’s bathroom.” When she spots me, she turns off the tap. “You two are up to no good, and I’m not here for it. We’re in a public

place.”

Sam doesn't look at her when he replies. He's pushing the doors to every single cubicle to make sure that no one is in here with us. And luckily, no one is. “If only you'd ordered some food.”

“Seriously,” Rose huffs. “Do you want to be my boyfriend or my dad?”

“We both got daddy issues, Lovebug, don't tempt me by making you call me daddy.”

He walks behind her and puts both his hands on her shoulders. “Are you ready to take your punishment?”

“You can't punish me for not being hungry,” she hisses.

The fire inside her makes things so much better. My fingertips tingle from wanting to touch her and turn her into putty in my hands. She becomes so malleable when we play with her. I hope she never stops fighting us.

“I can punish you for ignoring your hunger just because you hate eating.”

She pauses, her eyes glaring daggers through the mirror as they fold into two slits. “You just love showing how much you know me, don't you?”

“Can't say I hate it.” Without adding anything else, he slides his arms under her shoulders and steps back, pulling her with him. When she's away from the sink and facing me, he grabs her wrists and holds them at the small of her back.

“Rachel wants to make you feel good,” he tells me. “You can't really refuse that, can you?”

“We're in a public restroom, of course, I can fucking refuse,” she growls at both of us.

“Tough,” he concludes.

I'm on her in a couple of seconds. Undoing her jeans and making her step out of them. I kneel in front of her and peer up.

“Sunshine,” she tells me. “If you think I don't know what you plan to do, you're very wrong. Edging me just to make me regret my choice works both ways. Wait until the next time I've got my tongue in you—Aah...” I didn't let her finish her sentence. With her thong in my hand and my thumb against her clit, I begin making her regret her words.

“Shit,” she hisses through her pleasure. My finger caresses her clit slowly, appreciating the way her breath starts staggering and her legs trembling.

In my skirt, the floor hurts my knees, but it's worth it just to play with Rose. I pull away slightly and blow a breath on her swollen clit when I talk.

“Little doll has been bad,” I whisper. I show her the sharp blade Sam gave me just before bringing it to her inner thigh.

“Rach, be careful,” she tries to plead, only it quickly turns into a moan as I bring my thumb to her clit again. She pushes against it, and at the same time, I trace a line with the blade right where the back of her leg meets her ass cheek. I press until I break the skin and feel her twisting in Sam’s hold as she winces.

“This is going to hurt when you sit back down at the table to eat your breakfast,” he chuckles in her ear.

I grab behind her knee and push her leg up, pulling at the cut I just made. Sam takes over, gripping the exact same spot, and she ends up standing on one leg while the other is pulled to the side. She’s spread open for me, and I can see the thin line of blood leaving from just below her cheek and rolling down.

“Beautiful,” I say before pressing my thumb against her again. She moans loudly and rubs against me. Pleasure twists inside me the same way I’m sure it does inside her. She starts to shake on her standing leg, panting with need, and I pull away.

“Fuck!” she hisses. “Come on...”

Bringing the knife to her entrance, I look up at her. “You love it when I fuck you with the handle, remember?” I’ve done it to her before, and she was crazy about it.

“Y-yeah,” she pants.

Slowly, I push the handle in, knowing full well I haven’t even prepared her with a finger. She pulls away slightly, only to bring herself tighter against Sam. He’s like a wall behind her, standing solid and unmoving. I push until it’s all in, my fingers holding the very base of it. I can feel her wetness against my knuckles. I stay like this for a moment until she gets the message and starts moving. Her hips hit against Sam and roll forward again, moans spilling out of her mouth like nectar from the gods.

“That’s it, baby. How does it feel?” I press against her lower belly, and she chokes on a long moan. “Tell me, doll. How does it feel to fuck yourself on a knife like the desperate little whore you are?”

“G-good...”

“Yeah, it looks like it,” I chuckle. Softly, I pull the knife away and let Sam take over. I don’t even need to say anything, and Rose is too far gone already to realize what he’s doing.

He drags her to the sink and bends her over. Only releasing her hands so she can stop herself from smacking against the counter harshly. She barely has time to glance up that he's already taken his hard dick out and is pushing inside her.

She hisses at the intrusion, but it quickly turns into a moan. I don't think she cares about anyone coming in or even hearing her anymore. I point this out to Sam, who smiles, looking at me through the mirror.

"Let her embarrass herself. Let everyone know we own her." With that, he thrusts hard inside her, and she screams in pleasure. He's relentless, not giving her any chance to take a new breath, pounding inside her like he's teaching her a lesson.

Rose doesn't come before he does, and he releases himself inside her. Before she can come back to her senses, I take off my skirt and grab Rose's jeans to put them on. They're tight for me, my hips much wider than hers, yet I still manage to zip them up. I give my skirt to Sam and leave the bathroom, making sure to take Rose's underwear with me.

It takes long minutes before Sam and her join Lik and me at the table again. Her cheeks are bright red and her eyes are glaring at me, but she's wearing my skirt. A small giggle leaves me, and I check Lik just to see him smile brightly at her. I let her slide back into the booth to sit right in front of a small plate of pancakes.

"I ordered you breakfast, princess," Lik smiles. The mockery in his tone is not lost on me. Rose glares at him, and he says, "Don't worry. It's from the kids' menu since you insisted on acting like a spoiled little girl."

Her nostrils flare and her jaw tightens, but she doesn't say anything.

"Let me know how it is," Sam says. He takes a sip of his drink and gives her a bright smile. "Maybe next time you can eat breakfast without cum running down your legs."

She mumbles a low 'fuck you' we can barely hear.

"What was that?" he teases her.

"Nothin'." Her gaze is on the pancakes now, and she swallows them in less than five huge bites.

I'm halfway through my nachos when she addresses me in a small voice. "Okay, I'm done. Let's go." She nudges my shoulder, but I don't move.

"I'm not finished," I taunt her, unable to stop my lips from tipping up.

"Come on," she pleads. Her gaze flips from me to Lik, Sam, then back to me. "I'm not wearing any underwear, and he didn't let me...wipe."

“I know that,” I tell her. “It was my idea.”

Her mouth drops open, her eyes shining with a certain pride. It quickly turns into a glare. “Sunshine...everyone is going to see. Please, let’s go.”

“We’ll go when I’m done eating,” I tell her sternly. I want to giggle at how good it feels to order her around. “Better keep those legs tightly shut.”

The excitement coursing through my body when she silently settles back against her seat and crosses her arms in the only act of rebellion she can do right now, is addictive. I could get used to this.

My gaze crosses Sam, and we smile discreetly at each other. This could really work...this whole thing.

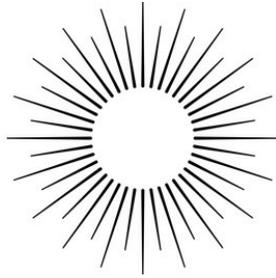
My phone beeps loudly, and I recognize the specific alarm I set up. My eyes widen as fear grips my stomach. I grab my phone and open the tracking and screen mirroring app I use to keep an eye on my fiancé.

“Conor’s on the move,” I panic. “I need to leave.”

It’s terribly sudden how our bubble of happiness and kinkiness pops before I can do anything about it.

“We’ll drop you off at home,” Sam says before putting his cup back on the table. His demeanor is calm, no urgency hurrying him. But he knows. He drops a few bills on the table and looks at me. “Let’s go.”

RACHEL



She Thinks of Me - Landon Tewers

It's too quick; how fast we get to my house. How they drop me off. How I turn around, and they're all gone. Rose was positively fuming and refusing to let me go back. So I had to be honest with her. Tell her that this has been going on for much longer than she knows, and the fact that she doesn't like it won't change anything. I will be taking this at my own pace.

I force myself through my front door, run the steps two at a time, and shower.

I'm on the sofa in a robe when he comes home. He walks into the living room wearing the same suit as yesterday, and the aura of violence permeates the air, seeping into my skin. It's ten a.m., and yesterday was our engagement party. He honestly doesn't care whether I know he's cheating on me or not.

"Hi, baby," he says, stepping up behind the sofa and dropping a kiss on the top of my head. My heart skips a beat. Not because of him, but because I keep thinking I'm going to get caught.

What if I still smell like sex?

What if I have hickeys or other marks Rose could have left on me without me realizing it?

What if he saw me?

He would kill me.

"What have you been up to?" His hands come to massage my shoulders,

making me tense in the process.

“Not much, just chilling.” I realize the TV is off and I’m not even near a book. “Woke up not too long ago. What about you? You didn’t come home last night.”

I never know if it’s better to pretend I care or simply ignore the fact that he’s fucking Beth behind my back.

I’m always scared it’s a trap. That if I don’t pretend and ask where he’s been, he’ll know I genuinely don’t give a shit about him or that I’m seeing Rose.

“I would have come home with you had you not left so early.”

“I was exhausted,” I lie rather than say I wanted to lose him and meet the girl I love in secret. “And you were drunk. I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Right,” he scoffs. “Well, I spent the night at a friend’s house. I was too drunk to come home, and my wife doesn’t like me drunk,” he repeats bitterly. *Fiancée!* I shout in my head.

His excuse makes no sense. We have a driver, and he’s never cared about being drunk in front of me before. So I ignore it.

“Anyway, I got something for you.” Something lands on the sofa next to me, and my stomach churns.

A pregnancy test.

“I-I’m not pregnant.” All the courage and strength I’d found with Sam, Rose, and Lik drains out of my body.

The fears of real life come chasing me. Conor wants me to get pregnant and I keep hiding that I still take the pill.

“How would you know?”

“I had my period two weeks ago.” That’s not even a lie.

“Rachel,” he huffs, his hands getting tighter around my shoulders. “I know you’re not the sharpest tool in the box, but please, will you just try and use your brain sometimes? So many women still get their periods in the first weeks of pregnancy. Just stop acting silly and do the test, will you.”

“But why?” I hate my voice when I speak to him.

“We’re having dinner with your parents tonight. Wouldn’t it be nice to announce great news to your dad?” From behind, he gives me a light slap to the cheek. It doesn’t hurt in the slightest, though the gesture means everything.

“O-okay.” I swallow and grab the box.

I know I’m not pregnant. What would be the chances? I’m on the pill, and

I always stall him as much as I can. We don't have sex that often; it's actually rare. If we can call it having sex.

Still, the longest three minutes of my life begin when I settle the test next to the bathroom sink after peeing on it.

I watch the liquid reach the testing window, showing that it works when one line shows across it. My eyes keep darting from my phone, counting down the minutes to the results.

Every single woman in their life who has not wanted to be pregnant has been through this. The heaviness in my stomach, the hand on my belly while the other is getting bitten by my mouth. The scenarios. You already imagine texting your closest friend or your mom, *we have a problem. Or I need your help, but you can't tell anyone.*

But when you're being abused? It's a different type of fear. More profound, with a grasp on you as cold as the reaper himself. It's a death sentence. Not only knowing you will be stuck—a life growing inside you that you never wanted in the first place—but also knowing that you would bring someone into this world to the same abuser that has turned your life to hell.

I feel so sick, I'm starting to believe I'm pregnant, that this could be morning sickness. I am so terrified that my knees shake and my head spins.

He will have a hold on me forever. He will make me suffer until I'm dead, and there will be no way out for me.

The three hellish minutes end with the beep of my phone. I startle, not daring to look at the test. Then I do because I have to eventually.

Nothing. It's negative. Of course, it's negative.

Just in case, I wait another two minutes. Nothing shows. I'm not pregnant. I throw the test in the bin and do my best to wipe off the smile from my face. Time to face the demon.

Opening the bathroom door that leads into our bedroom, I find him watching me. Still in the suit from yesterday.

I shake my head. "Negative." The anger that crosses his features does nothing to the fear that was gripping me only seconds ago. "I'm sorry," I add, hoping it will calm him down.

"For heaven's sake," he growls. "Why do you have to be so fucking useless."

"I'm sorry," I repeat, so meek I want to shoot myself in the face.

"Just drop the robe and get on the bed."

No.

My heart drops harshly in my stomach, nausea pushing up.

“N-now?”

He rolls his eyes and undoes his tie. “Have something better to do?”

“No.” I hurry toward him. “Of course not.” I help him get rid of his tie and drop a kiss on his cheek. I need to appease him, to change his mind. “Just I was thinking of cooking you a nice breakfast. Pancakes, some eggs. Maybe with some fresh fruits.”

I don’t miss the fact that I’m describing Lik’s exact breakfast as I unbutton the first buttons of his shirt.

“And then I thought we could go shopping, maybe? I’m still looking for the shoes to go with the dress.”

I run a hand on his chest, softly playing with the hair there.

“Mm, that sounds like an amazing day,” he nods, closing his eyes.

And we do exactly that.

Right after he raped me to try and impregnate me.

Right after I cried in the shower. Not because of what he did, or at least not entirely. No, I cried at my stupidity. For thinking I could escape him, that a couple of times meeting Sam and him teaching me to be in command, or that a few times controlling Rose, was making me a stronger person.

I cried because had I just shut up and taken it instead of playing smart, he would have just done it and left me alone. Instead, I had a whole day with him and an evening with him and my parents.

I felt alone, at the bottom of a pit I would never get out of. And the despair was choking me.

After dinner with my parents, Conor and I are driven home by our chauffeur. We have nothing to say to each other, so we stay silent. The dinner was awful—three hours of bullying from my mother and Conor. The only good news was that he’s off to New York for a two-week placement and I’m going to be all alone.

The silence in the car is heavy. The window that separates us from our driver is up, and I can’t relax, knowing he could attack me at any time.

“We’ll try again when we get home,” he says without even looking at me.

A sigh of despair leaves my lungs before I can stop it. “Maybe...”

Thousands of thoughts flit through my mind, scanning excuses I've used and ones I haven't mentioned in a while. "Maybe we should do it less and with more efficiency. Start tracking when I'm ovulating and—"

His cold laugh cuts me off. "Rachel, do you think I'm blind? That I don't see the stupid excuses and the stalling? Unlike you, I have a fully functioning brain and am not completely stupid."

"Stop always saying I'm stupid," I hiss without being able to stop myself. He raises an eyebrow and I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just...I'm just tired. I—"

His slap is so solid it snaps my head to the side. A whimper accompanies the taste of blood in my mouth.

"Brainless, *stupid* girl." His words are slow, cold, and a dare to answer back. I don't. All I try to do is choke back a sob, barely managing. "Never talk to me that way again."

"I'm sorry," I squeak. My hand comes up to my cheek. It's burning with shame and the hit.

"Shut up."

And the irony in all that? He asks our chauffeur to stop by the 24/7 convenience store just outside Stoneview. So we can buy an ovulation tracking kit.

Conor has just tapped his card on the machine when I hear a few laughs behind us that I recognize all too well. I turn around to watch Rose and her two best friends, Luke and Chris, enter the store.

Great, this night couldn't have gone worse. Luke is the first one to notice us.

"Rachel!" he exclaims, coming our way. I look down at myself. The floral knee-length dress I'm wearing is a far stretch from the Rolling Stones t-shirt and leather skirt I was wearing yesterday. But I don't get to pick my clothes with Conor.

Rose's eyes are on me in a split second, and I'm suddenly filled with shame.

I don't know why because she saw me in worse states in high school. She saw me at my most vulnerable and always put me back together when I was at my worst.

Yet, lately, I've been the one running our relationship. I've been the one

taking control and leading us. The fact that she's now seeing me standing so meek next to Conor is embarrassing.

They all walk toward us, and I know that Rose must have shared that Conor is a number one asshole—even if she didn't say why—because the two guys are annihilating my fiancé with their stares. They all say hi to me, and no one even addresses him, which brings a small smile to my face.

The best thing is the way Conor loses composure in front of them. Despite being older than all of them, Rose and her friends' reputations always preceded them. It means nothing outside of Stoneview, or when we're all going on with our now adult lives. But facing them? It's different. They were the kings of Stoneview Prep, the popular kids who ruled us all and were constantly the center of everyone's attention.

"Hey," Conor hesitates. "Luke, bro, we didn't get to talk to you yesterday. So many people at the engagement party. You know how it is. How's LA?"

A mocking snort escapes Rose when Luke doesn't acknowledge Conor and turns to me instead. "How have you been?"

I nod, and my gaze crosses Rose. "Very good." Always when she's around. "When are you flying back," I continue.

"Tomorrow. I wish I could stay longer but work calls. Bakers' cafés wait for no one."

"Of course," I agree with a smile.

Rose gets slightly closer to me, observing me, and my stomach drops. She can see it, the red mark on my cheek that probably still has the shape of fingers. I just *know* she can see it.

Conor must see how close she's getting to me because he grabs my hand. "Anyway, let's go. Nice to see you guys," he lies.

While Luke and Chris are glaring at him with all the hate they can muster, I widen my eyes at Rose and shake my head slightly. Does she think I don't know very well when she's about to do something stupid?

'Don't', I mime soundlessly.

Conor takes one step away, but Rose's hand is on my arm before I can follow, clutching me just above my elbow.

"What happened to your cheek," she murmurs low.

Conor flips around, not bothering with the pretend niceties as he did with the guys.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he rages at her. Too much

rage for someone who should pretend innocence. It makes her smile.

“Talking to my friend,” she replies lightly. “But please, tell me.” Her voice turns a thousand shades darker. An infinite amount that leaves no doubt of how dangerous she can be. “What do *you* think you’re doing?”

There’s a moment of cold silence, showing how destabilized Conor is. He collects himself again and pulls at my wrist. “I’m taking my fiancée home. Because that’s what she is, remember? She chose me.”

I wonder what my life would have been like if I’d opened my mouth at this moment and shouted at Conor that I never chose him. That it was all forced on me and that tonight was the last night he would ever put a hand on me. I would have left with Rose, knowing they’d all protect me. We’d have joined Lik and Sam and probably gotten away with it.

Only the fear...the fear is indescribable.

And I keep quiet.

Which only encourages Conor. “Don’t you wish you were fucking her, Rose? God, she feels so fucking good.” His words make me cringe. Disgusting. Embarrassing for both of us.

She lets go of my arm, taking a step back, running a hand across her face and cracking her neck. Her volatile personality is showing its ugly side. Her natural jealousy is getting her furious. I’m not the only one who sees it, because Chris intervenes.

“On those lovely words, we should go,” he tells everyone. “Come on, Rose.”

Taking a deep breath, she nods and steps away from us. She’s about to leave when Conor tells me, “Get your ass in the car, baby.”

I don’t even think it’s the way he talked to me that bothered her. No, I think it’s the ‘baby’ that did it. Maybe both.

Rose chuckles, shaking her head before turning around and coming face to face with Conor. “You were a second choice because I was gone, Conor. Get off that pedestal you put yourself on right fucking now.”

Chris and Luke come back to stand behind Rose. “Rose, let’s go,” Chris insists, putting a hand on her shoulder, but she just shrugs him off.

Conor is seething now, and he’s the one who keeps going. “Never forget one of us was always called ‘the friend’ when she slept over. One of us met her parents and is going to marry her.”

She laughs loudly in his face, getting even closer. I relish in the fact that she’s taller than him. “Can you imagine her parents and me in the same

room? She wouldn't know who to call Daddy anymore.”

Conor's mouth drops open, and I have to bring a hand to my mouth to hide the excitement and smile her words brought out of me. His hands turn into fists, and we all notice. Especially Chris. He raises an eyebrow at my fiancé, daring him to make a move. Conor would never. He's too much of a coward. Chris has a soft heart, and he is the nicest person I've ever met, but his size compares to Sam's, and it would be a terrible idea to threaten the girl who was his foster sister for three years.

“You should go home,” Chris says calmly.

Conor nods to himself and takes a step back. “Yeah, I'm going home.” He pulls me with him, but he must make one more comment before we leave.

“Don't worry, Rose, I'll think of you when I fuck her.”

“Yeah?” she snorts. “That'll make two of you, then.”

It's a physical impossibility to stop the small laugh that escapes my lips. Luke explodes in a peal of loud laughter, and I hope it hid mine.

That's about as much humiliation Conor can take in one evening. He pulls me away roughly, though I still manage one look back at Rose. She winks at me, her beautiful, smug smile brightening her face. My heart explodes in a million butterflies that swarm my stomach and make me feel light-hearted.

It doesn't last long.

“Did that make you laugh?” Conor snaps at me.

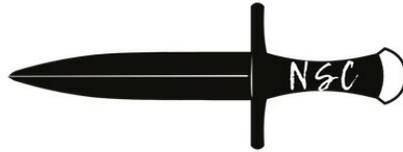
“No, of course not,” I lie. “She's always been so rude.”

He opens the door to our car himself and pushes me inside. “Get the fuck in,” he growls.

And just like that, the butterflies set on fire, disappearing into ashes of dread.

Because no matter how good this altercation felt, it comes with consequences.

LIK



Rise – SAINT PHNX

47 days until Viktor...

A hand running against my ass brings me out of my slumberous sleep. Sam's voice is against my ear as I feel both his hands on my hips.

"Wake up, baby," he whispers.

I attempt to curl into a ball and finish my night, but he pulls my hips back. "Tsk, tsk, get on all fours."

He helps me on my hands and knees and then his hands leave me. I whimper a complaint, my head in between my arms and no strength to use my neck. He drops kisses along my spine, and I hear the tell-tale sound of him pumping lube onto his hands. A shiver crosses my body and a slight smile pulls at my lips. My dick is already hard from the wet dream I was having. It included Rose in between him and me. Rachel was watching us, and her soft voice was controlling the scene.

One of Sam's hands rubs my hard-on while the other traces my crack. He took time to warm up the lube and I release a sigh of pleasure when it touches my skin.

"You're so beautiful when you've just woken up," he slips in my ear. "I watched you sleep for twenty minutes, Lik. You looked so peaceful."

I moan when his thumb starts tracing the outline of my asshole. He circles over and over again, driving me insane with need. My muscles are still

asleep, and my chest falls back on the bed. I can't hold myself up with the pleasure mingling with the sleep sluggishness.

He pushes his thick thumb inside and stretches my hole, making my dick twitch in the process.

“Will you be mine forever, baby? Will you let me use you and love you until we grow old and tired?”

A long moan escapes me when he pushes further in. It's been a while since Sam has woken me up like this. Since he got that contract for the Volkovs, he's been angry and constantly in a mood. He was like the brooding man I'd met two and a half years ago who was difficult to get through. I only realize now how long I spent without his sweet words and morning praises.

Sam is a harsh Dom, but that makes his praises all the more gratifying.

He must have taken all my moaning as positive answers to his question because he now inserts two fingers in me. He's probably about halfway through his finger length when he starts pushing down toward my bladder, from the inside.

A whimper escapes me when I'm forced to feel how much I need to pee. The movement pushes on my prostate and the pleasure overcomes the need to stop this and run to the bathroom.

“Fuck,” I sigh, and he pulls away, then pushes again. “Sam...”

“Just enjoy,” he rasps. His own voice is overtaken by pleasure. He repeats the gesture, rubbing the tip of his fingers against my prostate, pushing until I feel close to coming.

“Shit...shit...I'm gonna come,” I moan against the mattress. He pulls away, and I hear him pump more lube before the head of his cock presses against me.

“Take a deep breath for me,” he orders softly. I know from experience that it's needed. He pushes in as I inhale deeply and runs a hand on my lower back. He pauses mid-way and grabs my cock, making sure to give me friction before he keeps going in.

He pulls out slightly and comes back in, going in deeper. I feel him tremble, his breath picking up and my stomach tightening with pleasure. Slowly, he pushes all the way in. I can barely breathe, feeling full and tight. I cry out when he starts moving again.

“Ssh, baby.” He tightens his grip around my dick and presses a hand at the back of my head, pushing me further against the mattress. “Take it like a good boy.”

His thrusts accelerate, and the pleasure kicks in tenfold. I come before he does, in a blend of cries and moans. I explode all over his hand just before he grabs both my hips and slams harder inside me. I can feel the cum I spilled all over his hand now against my skin. Despite the relaxing state from coming, the pleasure is still overwhelming, feeling him rub against all the right places inside of me.

His grunts get deeper, his breaths barely making it out of his lungs before he finally releases inside me. He falls on top of my body, pushing both of us flat against the bed. He's still panting against my neck, bringing goosebumps down my back. When he's finally caught his breath, he drops kisses on the back of my neck. Slowly, his dick softens, and he pulls out, cum dripping out. He falls beside me, and I turn around to drop a kiss on his lips.

"I love you," I whisper as I nestle against his neck.

"I love you too." He hugs me tightly, and I only realize I've drifted back to sleep when his voice startles me. "Let's shower. I have a big day ahead of me of looking for the brothers."

He does. Even more than he can imagine. I'll mention that after our shower.

When we walk down, Rose is already in the kitchen, drinking a glass of orange juice.

"Morning, lovebirds," she smiles knowingly.

Rose is not meant to be living with us. Sam gives her the penthouse totally free. Yet, she showed up here at three a.m. because, and I quote, 'you made me addicted to you, so you deal with it now.'

Isn't that the best thing to hear from Rose's mouth?

"Get that smug smile off your face," I mumble at her. I hate losing sleep, and she has now pissed me off for showing up, being her irresistible self, keeping me awake, and yet not giving me anything I needed from her.

We didn't have one minute of sex, kissing, or affection. No, we spent hours listening to her rant about how her idea of killing Conor was better than ours of helping Rachel leave in a slower yet safer process. We're trying to help her get the independence and courage she needs to give her closure, by initiating the process herself.

And she has. Most of her stuff is already here. We helped her open a bank account separate from Conor's, so he couldn't control her expenses anymore.

Sam got her a car he keeps in a garage within walking distance to her house and gave her the keys, should she need to leave rapidly. And we bought her cameras he can't find, hidden them all in the house for when she takes him to court for the horrors he put her through. We're going to get him fair and square, and he will regret the day he ever put a hand on her. All she has left is the most arduous task: telling him she's leaving.

"Sam," Rose cuts through my thoughts. "Do you have issues satisfying your boyfriend?" she questions as she turns to Sam. "Because he's in a much better mood when I fuck him." His back is to her, making us both coffee, and he decides to ignore her.

I don't.

"First of all, you don't fuck me. I fuck you." I walk to her and cage her in between my arms from behind. Putting both hands on our wooden table on either side of her, I bend down to talk right into her ear. "I fuck you real deep in that tight pussy of yours. Or have you forgotten already? I can fix that."

She hits me in the chest with the back of her head. It doesn't hurt, though I enjoy that I made her uncomfortable. I pull away and keep going. "Secondly, who said we were having sex."

"Sounded like more than a prostate check-up if you ask me," she tells me, a hint of mockery in her voice.

"Did you spy on us to hear me moan, princess? You should have joined. I could have fucked you while he fucked me."

"That'll have to be an offer for another day," Sam cuts us off. "You guys have classes, and I have work to do."

He puts a small bowl at his feet and taps it with a spoon. The sound is followed by a long mewl as Bella makes her way to her food. She rubs against Sam's legs and purrs when he strokes her behind her ears.

"Eat," he tells her before returning to the counter.

"Is that your cat?" Rose asks, watching her eat.

"Does your brain shut down in the morning? Who else's?" I tell her. She didn't ask me, but Sam won't bother answering her anyway.

"What's her name?"

"Bella."

"Who chose her?"

"Sam did. Enough with the questions. It's early."

She takes a deep breath, watching her in silence. "Okay, can no one see what I'm seeing?"

Sam and I both exchange a look then turn to Bella. She's a beautiful kitty with shiny, deep black fur and night-blue eyes. She was such a stubborn kitten. It took Sam months to get her to do anything he wanted. She was driving him crazy—

“Oh my god,” I murmur to myself, not believing it. “I see it.”

Sam's eyebrows draw together, and he shakes his head. “You two are weird.”

“How could I have been so blind.” I run a hand against my face before pointing at Bella. “Why did you buy Rose's version of a cat?!”

“What? I didn't,” he defends quietly, not even bothering as he starts busying himself with the rest of breakfast.

Rose laughs at him and goes to play with our cat. “Does she like scratches as much as I do?” she asks, squatting next to her and scratching her neck. “Apparently so.”

Sam leaves the counter for the table and puts a bowl of cereal right where Rose is sitting. “Eat.”

There's a long silence as everyone in this room realizes he used the exact same tone for Rose as he did for Bella. His gaze falls on our girl's ink-black hair and dark blue eyes before they go to Bella.

“Okay, I see it now,” Sam finally admits.

“What the fuck,” I huff, my head falling into my hands.

“I'm sorry?” he hesitates. “I promise it was subconscious.”

None of us answer him, and he attempts to get Rose to eat with a different tone. “Lovebug, please come have breakfast with us?” The fake pleasant voice and politeness don't suit him very well.

“Ugh,” she huffs, her head falling back as she stands up. She sits back down opposite the both of us. Sam's now put two plates of scrambled eggs for us.

“Come on. It's your favorite one.”

There's a sudden rush of anticipation inside me, and I look at the counter behind me. I have this need to know what her favorite cereal is. There's a red box of Krave and I imprint it on my mind. Every detail about her seems so essential to me.

“I have stomach cramps,” she complains, pushing the bowl away with disgust.

“Never heard that one before.” He shakes his head, unimpressed, and pushes the bowl back to her.

“It’s true. I’m on my period. It hurts.” The pout she makes melts my heart. Her plump lips are pressed together, head tilting to the side, and her cheeks blowing slightly.

“Is there anything else you can eat?” I ask.

“Don’t fall for that,” Sam huffs. “Rose, eat. I swear the punishment I gave you at the restaurant will be nothing compared to what I’ll do if you don’t start eating right now.”

“But—”

“Lik, you should tell her what it’s like to crawl on all fours all day. To have to follow me on a leash around the house and ask every time you have to use the bathroom.”

Rose’s eyes widen, and I watch her struggle to swallow her next sip of orange juice. She grabs the bowl of cereal so quickly that some of the milk spills over.

“And clean that before I make you lick it.”

“Like Bella?” I mock.

“Stop,” she whines, grabbing some paper towels on the table and wiping the milk.

He chuckles as he watches her and shakes his head. I recognize that shake. He’s happy.

I know it’s my moment to say what I’ve been dying to since we learned what Aleksei and his men did to Rose. It will undoubtedly ruin the mood, but it’s better to do it now than when he’s already broody.

“Sam,” I attempt. I need to take a sip of coffee before I can continue. “I have something to tell you.”

He looks at me, waiting without possibly being able to imagine what I have to say.

“You know how...Viktor found out it was us sending back the tracker to him, and we weren’t able to find him that way.”

His eyebrows draw together, and he nods.

“Well,” I hesitate, “I had another one. One I attached to Aaron Williams’ jacket when we saw him.”

The long silence that follows tightens my stomach. My face twists with regret when I see how the happiness from a few seconds ago vanishes and is replaced by a hardness in his eyes.

“Are you telling me we’ve had another tracker in Volkov’s compound for weeks, and you didn’t think to mention it to me?”

“I—”

“Are you out of your mind, Malik?!” His voice reverberates against the walls of the kitchen, making me and Rose jump.

It’s not often that Sam shouts at someone. Being on the receiving end makes me want to crawl into a hole and never come out.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to say anything because it’s been useless. I...” Shame engulfs me in knowing he is going to be so disappointed in me. “I forgot to turn it on.”

He literally facepalms himself before his hand drops to his mouth. He bites his fist, clearly trying to stop himself from saying something he’ll regret later.

“How, Lik. How could you forget?”

My gaze snaps to Rose before I look at Sam again. “I was distracted,” I admit. How could someone not be if they had Rose wrapped in leather at the end of a leash? Making herself come against your...*That’s not the point.*

“Look. I didn’t want to tell you because I knew you would be mad at me for not turning it on. The tracker has been useless, and there was no point in letting you know about it. But then...” I don’t have to say what made me change my mind, he understands from my look. “I had a new incentive to kill Volkov. This is personal now. If only we could find a way to turn the tracker on remotely—”

Not many people can cut someone off by remaining completely silent. Yet I know this is my cue to stop talking.

He stays quiet for a minute or so, and we both let him.

“I still need a new I.T. guy,” he finally explains, seemingly calmed down. “I haven’t found anyone I can trust yet.”

“I can help with that.” Rose’s voice seems foreign to me right now. It can’t be her who just offered to help find the brothers.

“You don’t have to,” Sam answers, surprising me even more.

“You were quite desperate for it not too long ago,” she fights back. She’s stopped eating, wholly focused on a conversation I should have started when she’d left. Unfortunately, I couldn’t wait any longer.

“That was...before,” Sam justifies. He runs his knuckles against his jaw, clearly cooking up a new plan.

“Before what?” Rose insists. “Before I told you Aleksei raped me? What, am I a victim now? You don’t want my help anymore?”

Both Sam and I wince at the word. It will never get easier to hear.

Sam takes a deep breath, trying to control a boiling rage. “Before I realized I was still completely and undeniably in love with you and decided I wanted you by my side rather than buried six feet deep.”

Her mouth drops open, rendered speechless for long seconds.

“Makes sense,” I come for help.

She pushes her bowl away and lays an arm across the table, reaching for Sam. “I changed my mind too. And I want to find the compound. I’ll help you, on one condition.”

Sam raises an eyebrow at her.

“If we find the Volkov brothers, I want you to spare Viktor.”

It’s my turn to fall silent from shock. Sam, however, explodes laughing.

“Have you gone completely insane? Both the brothers are on my contract.”

“I don’t give a shit about your contract,” she seethes. “I will only help you if you kill Aleksei and spare Viktor,” she repeats.

“Absolutely out of the question,” he snaps.

“Then find them yourself,” she growls back.

She gets up and attempts to storm out, but he grabs her as soon as she walks past him. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulls her until she’s sitting on his lap, her back to him. His nose buries in her hair, inhaling her scent.

“How can you expect me to agree to this,” he hisses against her head. “They took you away from me. They hurt you—”

“*Aleksei* hurt me. Viktor never, ever, raised a hand to me. I promise you.”

“It doesn’t mean he gets to keep his life. They’re both dead men walking.”

“I have no doubt Jake is more than capable of turning on a tracker remotely. But you have one tiny problem; he loathes you.” She chuckles to herself. “Sam, he can’t stand the sight of you. Can you imagine going to him and asking for help without me?”

I watch Sam’s hands tighten around Rose’s waist as he comes to grips with how much we need her.

He pulls away slightly and glimpses at me.

“You get to kill one Volkov brother, or zero. Your choice,” she insists. Her stubbornness has no limit, and the exasperation and hesitation covering Sam’s features are palpable.

So, I help him. I nod, encouraging him to agree. Because once we know

where they are, Rose won't get to tell us who we can kill or not.

"I don't understand how you can do this to me, Rose. How you can ask such a thing of me." Sam shakes his head. "But if that's the only way to find them, then fine."

He grabs her jaw and turns her around to drop a kiss on her lips. "You win. Happy?"

She leans into his kiss and makes a show of her triumphant smile. "There's something else."

"You're pushing it, princess," I snap. "We're trying our best to make this work."

"I want to come with you when we find them."

"No," I cut her off before she can think of anything else. "You're not coming with us. It's too dangerous."

"No one is coming," Sam insists. "Not you, not Lik. This is a kill, not a bloody trip to Disneyland."

She looks at me, Sam, and then straight ahead of her. "There are girls. Five of them in the compound."

"Girls?" I repeat while Sam waits for her to continue.

She nods. "Aleksei keeps them. They're his prizes of honor, the ones he doesn't want to sell or send to brothels. They were sold to him, or the Wolves kidnapped them for trafficking."

"Fucking hell," I murmur, disgust wrapping around my heart.

"I want us to free them. I want him to watch them get free from him before he dies."

"Were you with them?" Sam asks.

She nods. "He kept us in some sort of basement. It's hidden in some part of the compound. You won't have time to look for it, but I know I'll find it once we're there."

"You're killing me here, Rose," Sam grits through clenched teeth. "This is too dangerous."

"One of them is called Juliette," she continues. "She's nine years old, Sam." She turns around to dig her gaze into his. "*Nine*. And she's been through the same stuff I have."

He runs a hand across his face. "Alright," he finally says. "Lik will come too, then. I can't have you without supervision there."

She softly smiles, appreciating his understanding. "When do you want to see Jake?"

“Today,” he growls.

She gets up and stretches. “Road trip it is. Conor is still away. I’m calling Rach so she can come with us.”

“I want both of you to catch up on today’s classes as soon as we come back.”

“Sure thing, Daddy,” I chuckle before dropping a gentle kiss on his lips, then Rose’s.

It all feels so perfectly natural.

SAM



Let Me Explain - pierre XO, ian KEL

I huff for the tenth time in a row.

We're almost there.

Lik is sitting in the front passenger seat and the girls are in the back, but it's the three of them who are shouting the lyrics to 'Bad Decisions' by RedHook. We listened to this song five times in a three-hour drive.

"Rose, did you tell Jake we're almost there?" I try to ask over the music.

She's too focused on screaming lyrics, one hand in Rachel's and the other banging against my seat. They're shouting the song in each other's faces. Three people, and not one manages to get all the lyrics or melody right.

I cut off the music and repeat my question after the protests.

"Did you tell Jake we're almost there?"

"I haven't told him we're coming."

I try to refrain from rolling my eyes and scolding her. "Call him right now."

"But he could say no. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, Sam. Don't you know that yet?"

I can't even say anything because she's too right.

"Doesn't that sound exactly like you, princess," Lik chuckles. She gives him the middle finger, and he laughs harder. "No, Rach." He slaps Rachel's hand when she goes for the chewing gum in the center console. "This is Lik's

gum.”

“I just want one,” she complains.

“That’s one too many.”

She huffs and sits back against the back seat.

Twenty minutes later, we’re parking in front of an apartment complex.

We make our way up the outside stairs and balcony, walking alongside all the doors until we find Jake’s.

“You should go first,” Lik says as he pushes Rose in front of apartment twenty-three.

She rings the doorbell, and nothing happens for a while.

“They’re probably in class,” Rachel explains.

“Yes, that’s why people tend to call before they show up,” I growl. I press the doorbell again.

Nothing.

I decide to bang harshly on the door a few times. Some movement is heard inside, and a loud bark makes us all take a step back, apart from Rose.

“Maggie! Auntie’s here!” she cheers.

The door opens in a sudden movement to a shirtless Jake, holding sheets around his waist.

“What the fuck are you doing here…” he tells Rose before the door is even fully open, having recognized her voice right away.

He squints, probably not wearing his contacts. “What the fuck are *you* doing here?” he spits at me. He notices the rest of our little group and shakes his head. “Ozy…”

“I can explain,” she smiles. “You might want to get dressed,” she adds as she shoves forward.

We all follow silently.

When Jake comes back to us, he’s got on some gray sweatpants and is missing a t-shirt. Of all the years I’ve seen him when he was living with Bianco, I have never seen him wear a t-shirt in the morning. He walks past us and goes straight for the kitchen, filling up a cup of water.

“I’ll be back,” he says, walking back to the room he just exited.

I catch Lik ogling him, practically drooling, and I have to put a possessive hand at the back of his neck to bring him back to reality. Once I feel he’s left whatever fantasy he was in, I sit down on a small sofa facing the chair Lik is sitting in, and I tap my upper arm with one finger. He knows what it means: strike one.

The small apartment consists of a kitchen/living room and two doors that must lead to a bedroom and a bathroom. It's small, but I'm sure it's plenty enough space for a couple. Probably not for the giant German Shepherd Rose is currently playing with. She's rolling herself on the floor with Maggie, trying to teach her how to play dead. I catch myself smiling just because she's happy.

Rachel sits next to me on the sofa and drops her head on my shoulder. My heart kicks up, loving the tender gesture. I'd never met someone I feel so close to loving on a deeper level, yet not feel anything toward them sexually. I think Rachel feels the same way about me, and every single moment of soft loving that we give to each other feels like a precious gift.

I wrap an arm around her waist, and I don't need to look at her to know we're both watching Rose.

"Okay, what the hell is this about," Jake snaps as soon as he walks back into the living room.

"We need you," Rose vaguely throws his way. "Bang! Bang, Maggie!" She tries her best to roll the dog on the floor to no avail.

"She doesn't do tricks. Leave her the fuck alone."

I bet I could get her to do tricks. I'm good at training.

"Boring," Rose answers as she gets up and dusts herself off. She sits on Lik's lap, and I watch Jake starting to put two and two together.

"Ozy," he huffs as he runs a hand through his hair. "Don't tell me—"

"Can you turn a tracker on remotely?" she cuts him off.

I see it, the way he goes to say 'yes' but stops himself. "Why?"

"'Cause I need you to. Stop being annoying."

He takes a moment to stare at all of us. Lik's hand on Rose's waist. Rachel's head on my shoulder.

"Are you all like...a thing?" he attempts.

"This is not the topic of the conversation. Stop asking questions you don't want the answer to," she tells him off.

"How can you do this to Rachel," Jake scolds her.

"I'm sorry, do you see anyone complaining here but yourself?" she fights back. The door to the bedroom opens, and Jamie comes out.

She clearly attempted to brush her messy hair with her fingers, but it didn't help much. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are glassy. She looks utterly lost in her own apartment. She's rubbing her wrist against the palm of her hand, and I notice the reddened skin. Someone is subdropping hard.

“Angel,” Jake sighs softly. “I told you to stay in bed. Did you drink all your water?”

“I heard shouting,” she tells him as he wraps her in his arms from behind.

“We aren’t shouting, simply debating. That tends to happen when my stupid twin opens her mouth. You know how it is.”

Jamie chuckles as her eyes go to Rose.

“Your dog is boring,” my girl simply says.

“She’s shy,” Jamie defends. “Maganda, come.” She taps her small thigh and the dog hurries to her, hiding between her legs.

“I could swear these dogs are meant to defend you? Not be defended by a small girl,” Lik chuckles.

Jamie rolls her eyes at him but doesn’t say anything. No, instead, her face turns bright red, which makes Lik laugh. “You never got over that night. Did you, Jamie?”

“Oh my god,” Rachel whispers in my ear. “He wasn’t lying about it, was he?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Okay, enough,” Jake jumps in. “I’m tired, and I’ve got classes this afternoon. What the fuck do you want?”

“I told you,” Rose jumps back in. “I need you to turn on a tracker remotely.”

“That’s easy enough for you,” Jamie says casually.

“Perfect!” Rachel exclaims. “You’re a lifesaver, Jake.”

“I’m not doing anything until you tell me why I’m doing it.”

“To find the Wolves’ compound,” Rose shrugs.

Jake freezes. His jaw tightens, and so does his grip on Jamie. It takes him a few seconds to release his girlfriend and walk toward his sister.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” And there it is. The Whites’ lovely temper. This conversation is going to go nowhere. I’ve known these two long enough to know it will lead to a stupid sibling fight.

“You show up here with a guy you know I can’t fucking stand just to ask me to help you find the people who took you away? Are you out of your mind, Ozy?!”

“To kill him!” Rose explains as if that helps in the slightest. She gets up and closes the gap that separates her and Jake. “You told me to come to you if I needed anything. You told me you’d be there for me. This is what I need.”

“What you need is to see a therapist, not attempt revenge.”

“Rich coming from you,” she mocks him.

“You deal with your trauma however you fucking want, okay? We all do. Wanna fall in love with three people and be in a four-way relationship, be my fucking guest. But if you think I will ever help you return to Volkov, you must have forgotten who I am. I know you by heart, Ozy. You can fool them, but you won’t fool me.”

There’s a long silence. He managed to shut her up, and none of us truly understands why.

“You’re all so in love with her you don’t even see what she’s doing,” he says to the three of us. The rest of his thoughts are for me only. “Don’t you see how deep into Stockholm syndrome she is?” My heart squeezes, promising me Jake is lying to me. “She’s not helping you find him to kill him, Sam. She’s just trying to go back to him.”

I shake my head. She wouldn’t, right? She told me she didn’t need him anymore, that we were enough for her. Even if *I* wasn’t, with Lik and Rachel, we’re enough.

Nothing compares to your love, she said.

It had to be true.

But then, why did she beg me to spare Viktor?

Her reaction tells me everything I need to know. She pushes Jake, her hands on his chest, repeating the gesture a few times.

“Fuck you!” she rages. “You have no idea what the fuck is going on. You’ve been here living your best life. I’ve asked nothing from you, but this one favor, and you think you know what the hell has been going on in my life?!”

When Rose has nothing to hide, she is calm, collected, often mocking someone’s assumption of her.

When she’s guilty? She gets defensive. Violent, rude, bitchy.

I close my eyes, shaking my head and feeling stupid. She played me. She played all of us to go back to Volkov.

“It’s easy to fool everyone when they’re all dying to fuck you, isn’t it?” Jake mocks her. He gives her one push back, making her stumble backward.

“We’re leaving,” I say as I get up. I grab the car keys from my pocket and give them to Lik. “Come on, get out of here.”

He doesn’t hesitate one second, just as disappointed as me. Rachel stays quiet, a certain sadness taking over her being.

Rose is glaring at her twin, her fists tight. “You said you’d help me.”

“Get better. Not go back to him.”

“Rose, go to the car,” I snap at her.

She struggles to break the staring contest with Jake, but she moves before I repeat myself.

“You’re a dick, Jake,” she throws before leaving his apartment. She doesn’t even acknowledge Jamie.

“Can I talk to you?” I ask, throwing a glance toward his girlfriend. “In private.”

She hurries away. “I’m going to buy some breakfast,” she says as she leaves.

Jake shakes his head, not wanting to have a one-on-one conversation with me. “What do you want?”

“I need that tracker turned on.”

“Come on,” he laughs. “Are you deaf or stupid?”

“I won’t tell Rose. The Volkov brothers are on my hit list, but I want them dead for what they did. She doesn’t need to know.”

“You know what I’ve always wondered?” he tells me, disgust coating his words. “How my sister only ever loved and trusted the people who did her wrong. She always falls back into her nasty habits of needing those who hurt her the most.”

“I might have done her wrong, but I never intended to hurt her. Everything I do is because I love her. Everything is to try and give her the life she deserves.”

“Sure,” he nods. “And why not help yourself in the process.”

I take a deep breath, not wanting to get into it and yet knowing it’s the only thing that will get me his help. “Do you know what they did to her?”

He takes a small step back. “Do you?”

I nod. “Partly. And I don’t think her brother should ever know.”

His knees wobble and give up, forcing him to drop onto the sofa. He rubs his face with both hands and glances up at me. “How bad?”

I know the battle he’s fighting right now. Desperate to know and yet not wanting to. His heart is probably beating fury and desperation into his veins. His head must be spinning from something he presumed yet never wanted to find out was true.

“Worse than Bianco.” I keep details out of my answer. He doesn’t need to have precise images in his head. There’s no need to break him further than he

already is. Although, he must know that they took the step Bianco never had. Pushed on her the fate she had escaped when she ran away from her foster dad.

His features twist with pain, and his head falls into his hands. “No...” he mumbles to himself. “That’s not fair...that’s not...she’d already been through too much.”

“I need the Volkov brothers dead, Jake. And so do you. You won’t have to worry about anything. It’s my job to kill people. No one ever needs to know any of us were involved.”

He stays silent but nods. I don’t have to add anything else. I know I’ve got him on my side.

Even though he hates me, I know we can be allies to save the girl we both love.

When I’m about to pass the front door, he calls out, “I need the model and serial number.”

I grab a pen on his kitchen table and scribble the number of one of my encrypted phones.

“Get yourself a burner phone and contact me on this number. I’ll let you know the details.”

Lik is on his laptop at a desk while Rach is on a single bed, on her front with her feet in the air, reading the first book of the *Iliad*. I recommended it to her so I wouldn’t be the only one obsessed with Greek mythology anymore. We stopped at a hotel on the way back. I told them I was tired and wanted to rest. But honestly, I don’t want to go back home after what Jake said. Not before we get the truth out of Rose.

Rose is outside smoking a cigarette, and I use the opportunity to share my thoughts. I sit on the bed next to Rachel and put a hand on her lower back, grabbing her attention. She looks up from her book and to me.

“Rose admitted to me that she had feelings for Viktor Volkov.” This also gets Lik’s attention, and he turns in his chair to face us.

“Yes,” Rachel says. “I believe she more or less wanted me to know this too. I went to her house to apologize, and she mentioned something like that.”

“Does this mean Jake is right?” Lik asks. “Is she using us to go back to him?”

I stay silent while we all stare at each other.

“She told me that since us, things have changed. That we were...enough.” It’s ever so difficult to find words and express myself in a situation where I want to keep to my safe silence.

I rub Rachel’s lower back and ask her, “Was she lying?”

We met Rose at different stages of her life, and while I knew the little girl from her dark past, she knows the woman she grew into. Right now, I need her insight.

“Rose always lies,” she answers me.

“And you just accept it?” Lik wonders out loud.

Rachel shrugs and puts her book to the side before sitting up. “How can you love someone if you don’t love them wholly? She has her qualities and her flaws, just like we all do. I know she tries not to lie for me, but it’s hard when it’s the one thing that always got her out of trouble.”

“What about now?” I insist. “Is she lying to us?”

“Two truths and a lie. We just have to figure out what is what. If she is lying, it’s not to hurt us, I’m sure of it. It’s because she’s stuck and doesn’t know how to solve whatever problem she’s encountered.”

My knuckles come to rub against my jaw.

“If she’s protecting Viktor,” I sigh. “We—”

“We’ll help her,” she cuts me off. “Because you can’t put the blame on the victim.”

I nod.

“Sam,” she insists, piercing her baby-blue eyes into mine. “She was a victim in all this. She is a survivor. *Promise me* that you won’t blame her.”

“I promise,” I mumble reluctantly.

But the anger and jealousy simmering in my veins beg for a different outcome.

ROSE



Backfired - Layto

I walk into the hotel room to find them all sitting on a single bed, facing the door, and so facing me.

“Let’s talk,” Lik says softly.

I chuckle to myself and take my leather jacket off.

“Tell me you don’t believe what Jake said. It’s bullshit.”

“We wouldn’t need to believe anyone else if we knew that you’re capable of telling the truth,” Sam tells me with an ominous calmness.

“I’m telling you that I didn’t ask you to find Volkov so I could go back to him. I don’t have Stockholm syndrome. Can’t you hear how ridiculous that sounds?”

How can I explain to him that I don’t need to go back to Viktor, he’s already found me.

I add, “Jake doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I don’t want to go back to him. I never loved him. That isn’t the sort of relationship we had.”

This might be a lie. I wasn’t in love with him, but I admired him so much that it sometimes felt like love. And I told him he could come get me.

I told him two months.

But if I tell them this now, they’ll just see it as a betrayal. I need to bide my time until I can convince Viktor to let me go. Only, my problem has always been the same: I have no way of contacting him. If we find him

before my two months are up, I can tell him I'm not coming back. I can give him what he needs, find the girls, and leave for good.

Sam explodes in a laugh, like he could hear my hesitant thoughts.

"You're so full of shit," he spits at me with all the revulsion he can muster. "You're so fucking broken, Rose." Regret crosses his eyes before he even says his next words. "I don't think even *I* can save you anymore."

My heart drops to my stomach, making me realize that is exactly what I wanted from him. To save me from myself. To promise he would always be there for me.

I take a step back, feeling the stab right in my chest.

"Sam," Lik intervenes. "We just said we would take this easy."

"She can keep lying to herself if she wants. I'm done listening to her bullshit."

In my hurt, I fall back into everything I hate about Sam as a desperate chortle escapes me.

"You're such a hypocrite," I tell him. "You know what? I might be confused. Yeah," I nod. "Maybe it's been difficult to come back to real life and not have Viktor's presence with me every day."

Tell him. Tell him that Viktor found you. That he's coming back soon. Sam will help you. He'll save you for good this time.

But they're all looking at me like I've grown a second head, and I'm not the one talking.

After what I've been through, it's about time to confess that it did damage me. Viktor saved me from the man who completely broke me, from his own brother. He protected me from him. Of course, I would develop some sort of feelings for him. He's the only person who kept every single promise he ever made to me.

"I admit that it was hard to be away from him at first," I tell them. "But I didn't lie to you when I told you I didn't miss him anymore. It was the truth. When I told you that your love, all of you, had put me back together. That nothing compared to it. I *fucking* meant it," I push through gritted teeth. "I didn't betray you, Sam. Unlike *you*."

"Not this again," he hisses.

"Why not?" I insist, taking a step toward him. "You want to lay all the cards on the table. Tell them, then. Or are you too ashamed of what you did?"

"What did you do?" Rachel intervenes.

"What?" He turns to her, almost like he had forgotten she was there.

“She wants to know what you did that was so bad,” I push.

His jaw tightens just before he starts combing his hair back, avoiding answering. I can see he won’t say it. He still can’t admit it out loud. So after keeping his secret to myself for long enough, I finally share it with them.

“He tried to free Bianco from prison.”

“What?” Lik chokes. “No, he didn’t.”

“Oh yes, he did,” I insist.

Sam’s silence tells everyone the truth.

“My brother Nate almost lost his life to put our foster dad in prison. And as soon as Sam lost his main source of income, he did his best to get him out.”

“That’s not why I did it,” he defends himself, admitting he did try to get him out.

“For years, he watched Bianco put me through hell.” My voice wobbles when I try to talk again. “He watched me suffer because of him. Then he tried to get him out of prison.”

“It was the only way...” Sam shakes his head, his words getting lost in silence. Like every time he’s overwhelmed, they don’t come out.

“And then he wonders why I chose Viktor over him,” I spit at last. “Why I didn’t want to come back when he found me. Why I felt safer hidden away.”

“And were you happy with that decision? Choosing him? How stupid did you feel when Bianco *wasn’t released*, and you still agreed to have me killed.”

“They didn’t kill you. You fucking escaped!” I’m losing my patience and my sanity, and I’m the one who raises my voice first.

“And Bianco never got out!” he raises his voice back.

“Okay, okay. Let’s calm down,” Rachel says softly, but she’s too late.

I take a step back and shake my head, anger blinding me and stopping me from seeing reason.

“No. I’m not calming down,” I snap at her. “You’re all always looking down on me, thinking I’m so broken and fucked up. Yeah, I am, but look at yourselves!”

I point at Lik. “You’re an ex-addict who used me to get back at his boyfriend.”

I look at Rachel. “You’re obsessed with hurting and making people bleed, and you use my need for pain to feed the sick side of you!” I jut my chin

toward Sam. “You betrayed me. You cheated on Lik with me. Fuck, you only love Rachel because you couldn’t save your mother.”

It’s terrifyingly hard to catch my breath. “And look at me, so messed up that I’m falling in love with all of you. I don’t know what I want anymore or who I can trust. So fucked up that I’m willing to be in a relationship with *three. Fucking. People.* Who are just as mad as I am!”

“You need help, I swear to god,” Sam seethes.

I cackle a laugh like the crazy woman he’s accusing me of being, only it quickly turns into sobs I can’t control. “Of course I need help! Don’t you realize what I’ve been through?”

“Then ask for it instead of ruining all of our fucking lives!”

I take another step back, hurt more by these words than anything else he’s said so far.

Lik’s eyes dart to the door behind me and back to me. He shakes his head, silently pleading for me to stay.

“You’re pushing her away,” he scolds Sam. “This isn’t about your pride. We’re trying to solve this as a team, not make it worse.” He gets up and puts himself between me and the door, like he knows I was about to storm out and never come back.

I’m panting from the panic and anxiety of bringing up everything that made me the broken being I am. I feel myself losing balance, and Lik is the one who catches me, putting an arm around my waist and a hand on my arm from behind me. “Calm down,” he whispers in his magical voice.

“You know why I don’t ask for help, Sam?” I rasp quietly. Lik’s voice has managed to slow down my heartbeat, and his arms have helped to stabilize me. “Because no one comes when I do. I called for help once. You never came.”

I know he heard me that day when they took me. His window was open, and my screams tore apart the silence of his street.

“I did come. I promise you I came,” he whispers. “But I was—”

“Too late.”

Had he not pushed me away that day. Had he not kissed me just to satisfy his own need knowing perfectly it wouldn’t lead anywhere, I know I would have escaped Volkov’s men.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to hope for help to come, and slowly realizing it never will?”

I can’t be mistaken. I swear those are tears I see in his eyes. He gets up

and walks to me.

“I’m sorry.” It’s a breath, barely a formed sentence. “I failed you,” he murmurs to himself. “All I’ve ever wanted to do was protect you, and I failed. I’m sorry. For everything.”

I shake my head, his apology bringing too much guilt and regret to my chest.

“It’s my fault,” I state.

Because for as long as I can remember, I expected Sam to save me. I appointed him the superhero of my entire life and never asked for his opinion about it. He was there when Bianco broke me. I was just a child, and I expected him to put the pieces back together as if I had no other option, never counting on myself until much later.

Save me, love me, keep me safe. Make me happy, make me laugh, and bring joy to a being that’s been dead for years on the inside. That’s all I’ve ever done to him.

“I’m sorry for putting that burden on you. You deserved better,” I tell him, sure that no truer words have ever passed my lips.

With a hand on my damp cheek, he adds, “Could you ever be truly happy? Far from me? Because I promise you, Rose, I tried. And nothing feels the same without you.”

My head falls back against Lik’s chest when Sam lets go. “No,” I admit. “I couldn’t.”

It’s the strangest thing I’ve experienced, admitting this, knowing well enough that Rachel can hear every word. Having Sam acknowledge such a truth in front of the man he loves—and I have no doubt that he truly, deeply loves him—means something. A new step, a new milestone.

Because there is no more running away from Rachel’s love and no more pretending I could be whole without Sam. Lik completes me in a way I never thought possible. Lik and I are not only on the same page. We’re the same word in the same line.

Maybe I’m that broken that I can’t feel enough until multiple people give me their love and entire being. Or maybe they all give me different things.

Lik’s arms hold me tighter, a reassurance I didn’t know I needed. My feelings seem to fall back into place, pieces of a puzzle showing me a bigger picture. Loving all of them in their own ways, giving them what I need, and owning their hearts in return. I can do that.

Going back to Viktor?

I can't. Not anymore.

SAM



Be My Queen - Seafret

Rose looks confused when she wakes up. She peers around, noticing I'm the only one in bed with her. Her eyes are puffy from crying after our argument and sleeping for so long. I put a hand on her cheek.

The conversation we had yesterday was cleansing. I knew after what Jake said that I wouldn't be able to go back home with her before we laid everything out on the table. Lately, we have let lust and love take over. We both knew it wasn't enough. There were deeper feelings getting in the way of our love. She thought I betrayed her, and I thought exactly the same. We both did and didn't. We both had explaining to do, and it's a matter of being able to forgive.

I think I can. If it means keeping her and her love...I can. As long as I get to kill the fuckers who hurt her.

"You slept the whole night," I explain softly.

She nods and nestles against my side. "Where are the others?"

"They went for breakfast." She looks up, rubs her eyes, and squints at me. "Did I take my contacts out?"

"In the middle of the night," I nod. "Woke up, walked to the bathroom, and got rid of them."

She chuckles. "I don't even remember. Are you not hungry?"

"Thought I'd wait for you to wake up."

She rolls onto her back and sighs. “Fuck, I don’t think I’ve got my glasses.”

“I brought them.”

She slowly sits up and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Of course you did. You’re such a great dad.”

Our age difference is minimal, though I’m also aware of how I’ve always acted toward her, and her joke piques an interest I didn’t think I’d ever want to try. I decide to poke her with it.

“Rose, I *will* make you call me daddy if you keep going with the dad jokes.”

Her laugh only encourages me. I grab her jaw tightly with one hand and cup her pussy with the other. “Do you want to start now, baby girl? Why don’t you take daddy’s cock in your mouth for breakfast?”

Pushing my hand away, she laughs again. “I can’t do it. It’s Chris’s thing.”

“Your friend...Chris Murray? He’s so prim and proper.”

“Yeah, well, he’s got a big...daddy kink. Or whatever you want to call it.”

“DDlg?” I ask.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Daddy Dom, little girl. Another form of power exchange. Different from the one we practice.”

“I don’t think he’s into it enough to know what to call it,” she explains. “And for your information, we don’t *practice* anything,” she adds, mumbling.

“Really?” I raise an eyebrow, loving how I can rile her up a little bit. “I think we play a simple Dom and sub exchange for now that will lead to more. We’ve done impact play and bondage, which made you a very, very wet girl. I think you love it, but it’s difficult to accept because you are such a strong woman and still believe one cancels the other.”

She nods, pretending to agree with me. “See, I think what happens is I indulge in your little games because I love you,” my heart skips a beat at the three words she lets out so naturally, “and I can retract that anytime. So I’d be very nice to me if I were you.”

A small chuckle escapes my lips. I don’t know if she genuinely believes this or is just that clueless.

“Rachel and I are sadists, Lovebug. And you’re a masochist. There are so many things we can explore with that alone. On top of that, you’re a stubborn

brat, and Lik and I love taming brats. Believe me, we can have a *lot* of fun with that. You can pretend-fight me as much as you want. I will enjoy putting you back in your place and indulging in that game of yours.”

She stays silent for a moment, eyes wide and blinking at me.

“That’s...not true,” she finally says, knowing that she doesn’t sound convincing in the slightest.

I explode into a laugh. “You know you like pain, Lovebug.”

“I do, but I’m not a...*masochist*. That’s a big word.”

Set on undoing the frown that’s formed between her brows, I explain, “Look, there’s nothing wrong with being a masochist. If that’s what turns you on. And you can explore anything else you like with us, as long as it falls within everyone’s hard limits.” She raises her eyebrows, and I continue, “Sometimes I forget you’re still discovering yourself. I look at this confident, beautiful genius, and I have to remind myself that there are still things I can teach you.”

She opens her mouth to fight back, but I grab the back of her head and slam my lips on hers. I follow with a long kiss and don’t pull away until she moans into my mouth.

“Like learning when to shut up. I could definitely teach you that.”

She gives me a playful slap to the chest and shakes her head. “Don’t make me regret being nice to you.”

A peaceful silence falls on us and I let her settle with her head on my chest before I bring up a difficult topic.

“I’ve been thinking while you were asleep,” I tell her, slipping my fingers through her hair and massaging her scalp like I know she loves. An image of my cat Bella flashes before my eyes, and I pinch my lips. Lik really ruined this for me.

Rose makes an approving sound, and I keep going. “We’re not far from where Nate is.” She tenses as soon as her older brother’s name passes my lips. They haven’t had the easiest relationship over the years, but I know she loves him. “Do you want to see him?” I ask.

I don’t think she knows much about what happened to him. Jake doesn’t visit him, too angry still, and Rose probably wouldn’t know where to go.

“How far?” she asks.

“About an hour's drive.”

She sits up, looking at me, and nods without hesitation. “Yeah...yeah, of course, I want to see him.”

“Okay. Shower, I’ll drive you right after. We’ll get you some breakfast on the way. You skipped lunch and dinner.”

She rolls her eyes, making me desperate to teach her a lesson before we leave.

I hate prisons. The sound of the buzzer when doors open and close. The clinging metal of the bars. The guards who look at the visitors like we’re just as guilty as the people inside. It’s always so much busier and noisier than I remember. I *hate* busy places.

I like peace and quiet, and I instantly miss my peaceful cabin and my cat.

It’s also a significant reminder of where I could end up if I’m careless and lose focus. So I guess the guards are right to look at me like I’m as guilty as the people on the inside. In fact, I’m probably guiltier than some of them.

Rose and I sit at the visitors’ table, waiting. Her hands hold her thighs tightly, just above her knees. She presses for long seconds and releases. I know her tell-tale of anxiety a little too much. It’s quickly followed by the lists she murmurs to herself. Today it seems she chose something to do with the states and some dates.

“Delaware 1787, Pennsylvania 1787, New Jersey 1787, Georgia 1788, Connecticut 1788...” Her lips are moving, but the sound is barely audible. I don’t think she knows it’s not just going on in her head.

“What is it?” I cut her off to keep her mind busy with something else.

I can understand the apprehension at seeing Nate after so long. Their relationship was fragile at best. She *did* shoot him.

They repaired their relationship when Nate put Bianco in prison. The same one we’re at right now. It hits me, then. She’s not anxious about seeing Nate. She’s anxious Bianco could see her.

“He’s in an isolated facility,” I reassure her. “You don’t have to worry about him. Head of crime families are rarely put with other inmates, and he’s nowhere around here.”

She nods to herself, then adds to answer my question, “The year each state joined the union.”

I raise an eyebrow. There’s no need to lie, I have the bare minimum education. My dad took me out of high school in my freshman year and did not give a single fuck about whether I could rub two brain cells together as long as I could kill.

“You know how we became the United States by adopting the U.S. Constitution?”

I shrug my shoulders. “What was it before that?”

“Colonies.” Rose is smart, but she’s not a big fan of explaining things to people. She doesn’t care about educating others. In fact, she would rather not and cuts the conversation by adding, “Just google it.”

“I know you remember all the shit you see, but sometimes I wonder where the hell you found that stuff in the first place.”

She nods to herself. “Good question. History class?”

“Shouldn’t you remember?”

That makes her laugh. “You know I don’t actually remember everything, right? Just...a lot.”

I know, but somehow, I like to think she has a sort of superpower. It adds to the Goddess-like image I have of her.

“Yeah, you forgot my birthday.”

“No, I didn’t,” she throws back like I’ve just insulted her. “I would never. May 10th.”

“Huh.” I rub my jaw as if I’m thinking deeply. “Funny, ‘cause I haven’t received a card in years.”

She punches me in the arm as she cackles loudly, finally relaxing and forgetting that her old abuser is in the same vicinity as her. “You’re such an idiot.”

I grab the back of her neck, bringing her closer to me and dropping a kiss on the top of her head. I inhale her perfect smell deeply, letting the endorphins take over. How can it always have the same effect? Relaxing me into loving her so deeply I forget where I am.

“Aren’t you the luckiest fucker alive that I’m behind bars?” Nate’s voice startles us slightly.

Nothing that would show, but I still separate from Rose quicker than I care to admit.

I even move my chair away slightly.

He sits down on the plastic chair on the other side of the table and puts his hands on the table. His knuckles are busted, crusty blood covering every single one of them. He must have beaten up someone quite severely. He, however, doesn’t sport any visible injury that would show he took a hit. I’m not surprised in the slightest. Nate might look skinnier than most of the guys here, but he has a hidden strength no one can compare to. He’s a lethal man,

built like an MMA fighter with twice the skills. His main weapon, though, is more straightforward than that.

He is a complete psychopath.

“What happened?” I ask him, jutting my chin toward his hands. I need to take his attention away from the fact that I was touching his precious little sister a second ago.

Nate is more than my best friend. I would sacrifice everything I have for him. We grew up in the same fucked up conditions. We both carried each other’s traumas when one of us wanted to give up. Only there’s one thing we will never agree on. One single topic that brings him and his brother Jake to agree.

My love for Rose.

Said girl is looking at her older brother with an indescribable face. I guess he’s barely recognizable with his sandy blond hair cut short. He used to have it to his shoulders, up in a tight bun most of the time. He also used to wear suits on a daily basis, drink expensive whiskey, and help rule one of the most influential families in the Cosa Nostra.

He put Bianco away, killed the men who didn’t want him in power and got his rightful place as the head of the Bianco family. But Nate is a megalomaniac, and it’s one of his worst flaws. He took a page out of Icarus’ book and flew too close to the sun.

Now he’s here.

“I like the buzzcut,” Rose finally says.

While I’m sitting upright in my chair, trying my best to act like I didn’t just sign my death warrant by touching Rose in front of him, she slumps in her seat, talking to him like she saw him last week. “Orange isn’t your color, though.”

Nate chuckles. He twitches, and I know it’s because he’s dying to take Rose in his arms. He didn’t know we were coming. He didn’t even know she was back.

Rose looks around, seeing some people hugging, and she turns back to him. He can read her mind as much as I can.

“I’m not the most exemplary inmate, Ozy,” he tells her, using the nickname only Jake and him do. “I don’t get to hug my visitors. They’re too scared I’m going to bring something in.”

“Shocker,” she only replies.

He nods. “How did you escape?”

Rose shrugs, and her eyes dart to the side, a certain embarrassment in her behavior. “I know everyone expects a crazy story about how brave and strong I was when you ask me this question. But prepare for disappointment because I did absolutely nothing honorable.”

“Unlike when you escaped Bianco?”

She shakes her head and only smiles when she notices a dimple appearing on her brother’s cheek. “Yeah, like that. I was braver at thirteen years old than eighteen.”

“I’m glad I’m so special to you,” Nate chuckles. “The only one who ever got to experience your aim to their heart. So how?”

“I made friends with Aaron Williams during my stay with the Volkovs.”

“As in Jamie’s brother?” he checks.

“That’s him. Yelena Volkov had her dog of a guard try to kill me. He beat me up and shot me in the leg. Aaron thought it was time for me to cut the stay short and risked his life to get me out of there.”

She explains it all with such a factual tone, I’m worried she won’t ever be able to honestly deal with what happened.

“The guard followed us, and we got in a car accident. When I woke up, I was in Silver Falls’ hospital and Aaron had returned to the Wolves already.”

He turns to me. His eyes are identical to Rose’s, without the life in them. “I’m assuming the Volkov brothers have been taken care of.”

Bringing my knuckles to my jaw, I take my time to think of the words I want to say, or if I want to say any at all.

“Address yourself to me when you talk about revenge on the men who took *me*, Nate,” Rose snaps. Her attitude makes her brother smile, and I know he’s happy she didn’t lose her spark.

“Are you planning on killing them?” Nate asks her.

“Why don’t you worry about how you’re going to get out of here. The outside world keeps spinning with or without you, so sort yourself out before you intrude on my life.”

“Noted, Ozy,” he lies. “What are you doing now? Can you still go to Duke?”

“Of course not. I was on a lacrosse scholarship, idiot. Do you really think I can play at the collegiate level after being shot in the leg? I can barely jog for ten minutes.”

“You could get in anywhere with your brains,” he insists.

She waves a hand away, indicating to drop it. “You shouldn’t be in here,

Nate. Why has no one gotten you out yet?”

He chuckles to himself. “Well, if you went to Duke and law school, maybe you could work on that yourself.”

Her lack of response and show of exasperation makes him continue. “A witness at the scene testified that I was the one who killed Vladimir Volkov,” he explains. “My fingerprints were on the weapon, and I’m associated with organized crime. What do you want me to do? Even Garcia-Diaz couldn’t get me out. I might as well make this my new home.”

“Ah, yes,” Rose nods. “You really did yourself a favor having the attorney who defends literally every single criminal in and around Stoneview.”

She takes a deep breath and readjusts herself to lean toward her brother, both hands on the table. “We both know you’re not the one who killed Volkov Sr. You think I can just let you rot in here instead of m—”

“Shut your mouth,” I snap. “And sit back before the guards think you’re smuggling something in.” I grab the back of her shirt at the same time, pulling until her back hits her chair again.

Rose glares at me, yet she does as I say. She must have clocked you don’t admit to a crime in a prison visiting room. I couldn’t help myself but order her strictly, and I couldn’t help but touch her.

Nate raises an eyebrow at me. “How’s Lik?” he asks conspicuously, making sure to bring everyone’s attention to the fact that I’m taken and meant to be in a monogamous relationship with the man I love.

I don’t even grant him an answer.

“Who was it?” Rose brings the conversation back. Despite that, my heart is beating mercilessly against my chest. How will I ever tell Nate what happened between Rose and me? How will I ever explain this to him without getting a bullet between the eyes?

I’m not scared of him per-se, but I would be downright stupid to ignore his unpredictability and tendency to murder people he can’t be bothered to deal with.

“The witness?” Rose insists. “Cause all the people present that night would never testify against you, and they know the truth.” She pauses. “It wasn’t Jake, was it?”

Nate rolls his eyes at her. “Jake doesn’t want anything to do with me, not even putting me in prison.”

“Then who?”

“Enough questions, Ozy,” he tells her sternly, the scolding reinstating who the older sibling is. “Have you got any cash?”

She nods, confused. “Go grab me a Reese’s bar from the vending machine.”

She huffs. “You’re lucky I feel bad for you.”

She gets up and makes her way to the other side of the room. We both watch her walk, patiently waiting for her to be out of earshot. Nate’s running a finger behind his ear, proof that he will have something to say very soon. When she surely can’t hear us anymore, he turns his lethal gaze to me.

“I swear to God, Sam. If you touch my sister, you know you’ll be the first person I kill when I get out of here.”

With my tattooed knuckles grazing my jawline, I stare at him emotionlessly. I could answer this in many ways.

I already did. What are you going to do about it?

You’ve always known I was in love with her, you can’t put yourself between us.

I touch her and she loves it, not that it’s any of your business.

Hopefully, you’ll never get out because I’ve already made her come many times with the help of my boyfriend.

I settle on something that won’t make him jump me and get himself in trouble. “It would be a pity to send yourself right back in.”

Technically, my words don’t confirm nor deny his accusations. But he understands.

His breathing slows and for a second, I wonder if I should step away. But Nate has a control that puts Tibetan monks to shame when it comes to his temper. He can keep calm in the most triggering situations. No clear-thinking human being wants to be near when he snaps, though.

He smiles at me. It’s chilling and forces me into thinking he should be put in the psych ward rather than the general prison.

“Okay,” he finally says. “Enjoy yourself while you can.”

I ignore the acceleration of my pulse, keeping control over the threat. “Nate, you know I would never hurt her.” One lie added to my list. “I only ever want to give her anything and everything she needs. If that includes my love, then I will give her that too.”

His jaw tightens, and he brings his hands to his lap.

“If you’ve got some sort of prison-made-up weapon in your jumpsuit, I’d suggest not getting yourself in trouble,” I tell him calmly. At the end of the

day, I could always take Nate, even with a weapon. I'm just not entirely sure who would win.

"Don't worry," he answers with the calm of a sea before the storm. "I can be patient."

Crazily, I decide to tell him the truth in return. "To be completely honest, I'm not worried. You'll change your mind."

He shakes his head, clearly disappointed in me. "You're playing a dangerous, stupid game, Sam. And with my sister, nonetheless. If she knew what's really happening with that Volkov contract, who *really* hired you, she would never forgive you. I hope you know that."

I do, except I don't get a chance to respond. After everything we talked about yesterday, I still didn't get to tell her the truth about my contract. I know I will at some point, but I don't want to break our bubble. My gaze goes to Rose walking back to us and he understands this conversation is over.

"You have shit taste," she huffs as she falls back into her chair and pushes the Reese's bar across the table.

"Funny coming from you," he replies with his eyes on me. I don't miss the real meaning of his words.

He pushes the candy back to her. "Do that memory thing I like."

"Ugh, come on," she groans. "Being in jail doesn't give you the right to make me do shit I hate."

"Please," he smiles. "I miss it."

Rolling her eyes at him, she reluctantly grabs the Reese's and takes her time reading the ingredients.

"Okay," she says after a minute, throwing the bar at him. "Ready?"

He takes the bar and looks at the ingredients.

Rose takes a short breath and starts. "Sugar, Palm Kernel Oil, Whey Powder, Whey Protein Concentrate, Calcium Caseinate, Salt..."

The list goes on until she's finished with everything that composes the candy.

Nate smiles, nostalgia softening his traits and pinching my heart.

"It's my favorite." I'm not sure if he means the Reese's or Rose's game.

We don't get to find out.

A voice comes through the speakers, announcing the end of visiting hour. Everyone around us starts hugging, and as soon as we all get up, Rose takes a step toward Nate.

"Can't," he mutters. He runs the back of his hand across his nose and

looks away, clearly not happy about this.

She stops herself, disappointment and sadness covering her features. “Be a better inmate,” she tells him harshly. “I want to fucking hug you next time I come.”

“Sure. Get out of here now.”

“Not this fucking song again,” I growl as Rose tries to take over the radio. “Change.”

She laughs to herself and grabs my phone to access Spotify. “Alright, so should I put on classical music?”

“It’s the best, but as long as it’s anything other than this song, it’s fine with me.”

She goes silent while she scrolls down my phone, putting a random song on.

“Can I ask you something?” she says, still looking at the phone.

I don’t reply, but my heart accelerates. It’s not every day that Rose wants to have a heart-to-heart. I’m not sure if I should be reassured or not.

“You know...,” she hesitates. “You know how you and Lik have this kinky shit going on.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” I chuckle. She’s serious, which simmers down my giddiness right away. I give her a look to tell her I’m listening. “Yes, I know. We talked about it this morning.”

“Yeah, we did...were you for real? When you said there’s more we can do with it?”

I wonder if she can sense how much I want to say yes to that question. How much I’m dying to drag her into my world of kink. She would love it, I know that. She’s already proven it many times. But if she doesn’t want to go willingly, it’s not my place to force her. I will love her either way.

I nod slowly, still trying to think of the right answer. “I meant it, absolutely. But ultimately, it’s your choice.”

“I just don’t know if it’s for me.”

I want to give her a knowing look. Something that would tell her how wet she gets when she submits. I decide not to and to go for an honest conversation instead. “What makes you say that?”

“I just...I like being strong. I like being a decision-maker and a leader. I don’t have a submissive personality.”

“You are strong, Lovebug. You’re hard as fuck. You’re a war leader. Nothing stops you from dropping the arms and letting yourself get taken care of from time to time, though.”

“I don’t like being told what to do,” she fights back.

“And don’t we know it.” I turn to her just to show her the smile she put on my face. “That’s what makes it so fun for Lik, Rach, and me.”

“You guys like it because I change for you.”

“You make us feel special,” I admit. “It’s the best feeling in the world coming from you. Do you have any idea what it feels like to be able to dominate a strong woman like you in bed, Rose? The world is at the tip of my fingers when I do so. Especially when I see how much you love it.”

She doesn’t deny it, even as I can sense her conflicting feelings.

“Power exchange is an intimate and fragile thing,” I explain. “You have to know that at the end of the day, you’re the one in control. You get to stop it whenever you want, and we’ll keep doing anything to satisfy you.”

She falls silent again, and I’m the one who does all the talking for once. I feel a need to express my feelings. “I want to do wicked things to you,” I admit. “I want to do them with Lik and Rachel. I want to go much further than what we’ve started. But I can promise you one thing. I’m here to support you no matter what you want out of this relationship. I will put you first. Always.”

She looks out the window, her mind probably fighting stubborn battles in her head. She lets out a soft chuckle before she talks. “You know, for such a long time, that’s all I wanted. To be loved so much by someone that they would make me their queen. That they would own me entirely.”

To think that’s all I’ve ever wanted to give to her. I’m not even the only one.

“But I’ve told you before. I rule all of this. Myself mainly. I don’t want you to ever forget it.”

I go to defend my point, telling her that we love her enough that she can let her guard down and give us her heart safely. But I stop myself short.

This is not about letting her guard down. This is who she wholeheartedly is. She is the strongest woman I have ever had the pleasure to have in my life, and who are we to try and bring her down from exactly where she belongs? A goddess should never have to leave heaven for the sake of mortals. A king should never have to leave his throne for love. No, we should be the ones kneeling at her feet for letting us be part of her life.

When she understands I've stopped contradicting her, my mouth still agape from cutting myself off, she puts a hand at the back of my neck, massaging the tension there. I glance at her, recognizing the winning smile that suits her so well.

"I'm glad you see it, too," she tells me softly. "The three of you do. And for that, I can make the decision to give each of you a piece of my heart. We all know who is truly in charge, so I feel safe giving myself to all of you behind closed doors." She takes a deep breath. "Power exchange. I like the sound of that."

It's a hard thing to describe the feeling that crosses my entire body when I understand she is giving me the green light to push our BDSM adventures further. Physically, it's a warmth that spreads through my whole body. It tingles in my belly, lightens my chest, and accelerates my heartbeat.

Mentally, it's a liberation like I've never felt before. Rose White is giving me the right to dominate her. Offering me, Lik, and Rachel her submission. Nothing will ever feel like this again in my life, and I cherish the moment with all I have.

Of course, she has to ruin it.

"I didn't know we were going camping," she tells me mockingly.

"What?" I snap out of my bubble of happiness.

"It must be the only explanation for the tent in your pants."

I hadn't realized I'd gotten hard from this entire conversation. Rose's empowerment will do that to you. My dick is tenting my jeans profusely, and she giggles at the face I'm making.

I pinch my lips, trying to avoid smiling when she's openly making fun of me.

"You're unbearable," I huff. "There's something wrong with you Whites. Can't keep a serious conversation going for more than two minutes."

"You're so weak for us, Sam," she derides.

"I'd stop making fun of me if I were you," I tell her seriously.

She shrugs and keeps massaging the back of my neck. "Why don't you make me?"

My body lights up at her words. I don't think she even understands those are my favorite words. She said them lightly without caring about the consequences.

Silently, I slow down the car until I stop on the side of the road. We were driving on the edge of the forest, and she's lucky we weren't on a busy road

because that wouldn't have stopped me.

"What are you doing?" she asks warily, letting go of my neck and straightening up in her seat.

I open my door and take my time to walk around to her side. When I open her door, she asks again. "Sam, what the fuck are you doing?"

I smile at her, putting a hand on the top of the car and crossing over her body to unfasten her seatbelt. I turn my face toward hers, whispering against her lips. "I'm making you."

As soon as her seatbelt is off, I grab her by the arm and drag her out of the car. I open the back door and bend her over, ensuring she lands face-first on the back seat.

She groans an insult as she attempts to push herself back up. I put a flat hand on her back, keeping her down, and I undo her jeans with the other. I pull them down with her thin thong, leaving them around her knees to restrict her movements.

Rose has the personality of a gigantic god who holds every single human's life in his hand. That's why it's always a surprise to be reminded how tiny and malleable she is when I put the minimum strength into controlling her body.

"Stay still, baby. You're about to see what happens when you say 'make me' to someone with my dick size." I slap her ass hard, inciting a surprised shriek past her lips.

"Anyone could drive past and see us!"

"Make sure to give them a little wave."

I run my fingers through her slit, entirely unsurprised that she's already wet. It's a gift that she gets so turned-on by being sexually controlled.

"Take a deep breath," I tell her. "This is going to hurt."

I barely let her open her mouth, knowing full well she's about to snap something back. I enter her in one full thrust, relishing in the way she tightens around me.

"Fuck," she whimpers breathlessly. "Fuck..." She drags in a breath and lets out a long huff.

I pull out, letting her take another breath before I force myself back in. "Painful?"

Her "yes" is barely worded. A pained moan accompanies the wetness doubling around my cock.

"Say that again, baby. Your body didn't hear." I thrust into her

mercilessly. Her moans, combined with her tightness and the way she still tries to fight me back, is a taste of heaven I'm not entirely sure I deserve.

I keep a hand on her lower back, rubbing to ease the harshness of my hips pushing against her and the strength I'm putting into it. I pound violently, holding her hip with my other hand. I watch her nails dig into the seat and listen to her breathing getting more ragged by the minute. One of her cheeks is against the leather and I can see her twisted features, pain and pleasure mixing into beautiful lust. Eyes are closed, her teeth are biting into her blood-red bottom lip. Her brows are furrowed, cheeks flushed as I thrust again and again, as she slips against the leather and attempts to keep herself steady. Sweat covers her hairline, and I almost come when her teeth release her lower lip, her mouth falling open to let out a long moan.

I wrap her long hair around my fist and pull until her head lifts. "You want to say 'make me' again?"

I push hard, feeling the way she stretches out to accommodate me. She screams when I hit her cervix, so I pull back slightly and start rolling my hips, hitting her magic spot.

"No," she moans. The sound of a car coming our way reaches us and she starts to wiggle and attempt to escape me. "They're gonna see us," she panics.

"Better make me come then."

She pushes back against me, thrusting her hips into me and making herself tremble with pleasure.

"Fuck...Sam," she moans as her orgasm builds. I feel it in how she tightens while the rest of her muscles shake and struggle to hold her body. Her knees buckle and I thrust harder.

Just as the car passes us, she explodes in a loud moan, and I curse as I come inside her. My entire body tenses and shudders, warmth spreading up my spine and wrapping around my chest.

"You fucker," she groans against the seat. My hand is still in her hair, but I've relaxed and am not pulling at it anymore.

I watch my cum leak out of her and rub my fingers in it before pushing it back in. Now that we're sure we're all STD-free, I've been enjoying with more pleasure, watching my cum leak out of her.

"This is staying in there until we get home." I finger her longer than I had planned to, rubbing my knuckles inside and enjoying the way she falls back into pleasure before pulling out.

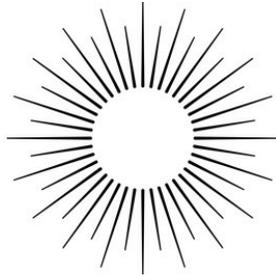
“Do you have any idea how uncomfortable that is?” she complains.

“I do. I love watching you squirm uncomfortably, Lovebug. It’s a reminder that you get punished when you don’t obey.”

“I don’t think I can ever obey,” she admits quietly. She becomes so much more pliable post-orgasm. Her breath is relaxed, her eyelids heavy as she tries to keep her eyes open.

“And we love you so much for it,” I smile as I pull her underwear and jeans back up.

RACHEL



you should see me in a crown - Billie Eilish

29 days until Volkov...

The screech coming from the TV startles Rose next to me. She used to like horror movies and would always watch them with me. Since she's been back, she seems more squeamish than she used to be.

Sound effects accompany the moment the masked man cuts one of the side characters' throats. The slash of a knife, the uncomfortable wet, gory sound of flesh opening and blood pouring out. And the screams.

"Of course, she was going to die," Lik barks at the TV through a mouth full of popcorn. "Who picks a lamp to defend themselves? Stupid woman."

It turns out that Lik and I both love horror movies. Yet another thing that brings us closer in our platonic relationship. Except he watches them because he finds them funny and stupid and loves shouting at the TV. I watch them because they make me feel good. The blood tames the hungry demon in me. Like when I get to cut Rose, it also satiates my demon.

I grab Rose's hand and put it on my lap. In their cabin, Sam and Lik have a TV room equipped with a giant screen and a huge sofa that could fit about ten people. The kind large enough that we can all practically lie down on it.

Rose cuddles herself against me, nuzzling her head in my neck as another moment of suspenseful music reaches us while the murderer looks for the other girls in the house.

“Something scary is coming, I know it,” she says, coming closer to me. Next to her, Lik wraps an arm around her waist.

“Why are you so scared,” he tells her. “They’re all going to die anyway.”

“Shut up,” Rose groans against my neck. Does she even realize something so small as her breath against my skin creates a wave of goosebumps that kick my heart into an unsteady rhythm?

Probably not.

Next to Lik, Sam is on his phone, not following the film in the slightest. He’s got a hand wrapped at the back of Lik’s neck and keeps massaging him, using him as a stress ball.

He’s probably talking to Jake, asking for updates about the tracker. It’s been almost three weeks, and we’ve heard nothing from him. Sam’s hope dies a little more every day, making him more desperate, angrier, and reckless in his actions to try and find the Volkov brothers.

He’s been killing informants who came back empty-handed, instilling terror in the people who work for and with him. He’s been around town torturing any of the Wolves he finds to get information, knowing perfectly that they have no idea where the brothers hide. I think he’s trying to lure them out, but we’ve heard nothing from them.

He and Lik have also been trying to catch Aaron Williams, but they’re no longer allowed inside Vue Club.

Something makes Rose jump again, and she crushes my fingers in her hand. I don’t say anything, too content that we’re watching this all together.

Almost three weeks. Has it really been that long since the three of us keep meeting here, getting into a habit of spending evenings together? Fucking Rose like our lives depend on it and cherishing her like the goddess she is? One month that I sneak out of my house every time I see Conor is at Beth’s, every time he’s on a business trip, at his parents, working with his dad or mine.

Rose and Lik go to classes during the day. During that time, Sam either teaches me how to fist fight or use weapons—naturally, blades are my favorite. I’ve started helping him in his search for the brothers. Only things that wouldn’t be too risky for me. He said I could do more when I’m ready, but he doesn’t want to put me in danger for now, whether it be getting hurt or arrested.

In the evenings I can be with them, I cook for them like I love to. Sam shows me more of his secrets to BDSM and teaches me about being a

Domme. And our favorite toy to train on is always delighted to be used. Rose is so beautiful when she surrenders, there is no other way to describe it.

I can hardly believe it's all real. Happiness makes time go too quickly. I know it because distress stops time altogether. That's how I feel when I'm with Conor.

Since Sam taught me how to defend myself, I've been feeling a more confident side of me come out. Conor has stopped trying to impregnate me if I'm not ovulating, and since I take the combined contraceptive pill, I'm never ovulating. Every time he makes me take the test, it comes back negative, and he leaves the room fuming, mumbling that these things don't work.

"Fuck!" Rose shrieks as another one of the girls dies at the hands of the masked murderer. She's so close to me we're practically one. Her face is now between the sofa cushion and me, pushing into me. She certainly can't see the screen anymore.

"This is bullshit," she groans against the cushion. Her voice is swallowed by the padded sofa. "Why are we watching a dude going on a killing rampage of women? Don't we have enough of that in real life?"

I tilt my head slightly as I think of her words and how true they are. But that's not why I'm watching. I need the bloodbath. She is right, in any case. Next time I'll watch men getting killed, I get a lot more satisfaction imagining all of them being Conor.

One of her hands comes to rest on my breast, kneading it as if to reassure herself. An idea comes to my mind.

"Come here," I say, shifting and pulling her out of her hiding place. She glares at me, not liking that she can now see the screen.

"Are you really scared?" I chuckle.

"I don't like horror movies anymore," she mumbles, scowling with a cuteness I can't resist. "That's how much I love you."

"Well," I smile. "Why don't we keep you busy while we finish it?"

Lik shifts next to us, probably already loving the idea. "I'm listening," he tells us.

I put a hand on Rose's cheek and kiss her before talking clearly, just like Sam taught me. "Get on your knees for us."

She's hesitant, even as excitement shines in her beautiful eyes. They've got that almond shape that makes her look feline: elegant and feral. But when they soften for me? It shuts the whole world out. Lately, she's only had eyes for the three of us. I used to wonder how I would ever survive sharing her

with the world. How I could possibly let her leave me for other people whenever she needed. Now? I can hardly not share the excitement with Lik and Sam. Rose might need more than one person to make her feel whole, but we're all just too happy to give her whatever she wants.

I spread my legs, pull my skirt up slightly, and bring my panties down. No one can see my nakedness, but I've come to not mind it at all with these men. I'm not sexually attracted to them, but the love and trust we all share for each other eliminates any shyness I would feel.

The moment my underwear hits the floor, Rose moves. She slides off the sofa and kneels on the floor. Her excitement turns into lust when she gets a view of my naked pussy.

Sitting up, I slither my fingers through her untamed hair and gently guide her down. "That way, you won't have to look at the screen," I murmur. Her tongue darting to lick her lower lip makes me shiver.

How can she look so powerful on her knees? What sort of magic does she practice to make me so weak to her when she is the one bowing to me?

I pull her closer, but I should be doing the opposite. I should slow her down because she is so eager to touch me. She's already burying herself between my legs. Her lips make contact with me, peppering gentle kisses at the seam. She uses one hand to spread me and drops more pecks on my clit. She teases me like this long enough that my clit swells from the touch of her lips against it. I feel myself getting wetter and wetter, and my hips push forward.

"Keep teasing me, doll," I breathe out. "See what happens next time I've got you tied to the bed."

She stills, and I watch her shift her hips, probably remembering how much she loved the last time Lik, Sam, and I had her tied and at our mercy.

"Now eat my pussy like a good slut."

Her tongue comes to meet my clit, and my breath hitches, my head falling back. A shudder of pleasure crosses my body. She does it again, this time from my entrance to my clit. My wetness mixes with her spit, my love with her hunger. I bring my head back up and look at the screen again. No one is being murdered. It's the simple image of a knife dripping with blood. Drip... drip...

"Fuck," I moan when Rose pushes into me, her tongue forceful. She brings it back to my clit and accelerates her movements. My hips buck against her, rolling and shifting. We join our actions in a matrimonial

ceremony of lust.

My eyes don't leave the screen as the camera zooms in on the blood on the floor. I bite my lip, trying not to scream my moans. One small cut on Rose's beautiful, soft skin and she would bleed for me. I could leave a stunning mark, a scar that would turn white against her golden skin.

I feel Lik shifting next to me, but I can't take my eyes off the screen. My fingers tighten in her hair, my toes curl, and butterflies warm up my lower belly. She has me undone in the next few strokes of her tongue. I explode in a loud moan, not caring that Lik and Sam are right here, not caring that it took her such a short amount of time. She keeps licking me slowly as I come back down. As the wave of relaxation hits me and my entire body slackens.

"Good girl," I whisper, out of breath. She comes up, her face glistening with my wetness, her eyes shining with pride at the praise. "Come here," I order softly.

She comes until her face is inches away from mine. Still on her knees, I look down at her and relish her eagerness for whatever comes next.

I rub my thumb against her chin, the corner of her mouth, and bring it to her lips, pushing in. She takes me in, licking away under my approving stare. I repeat the movement, until I've made her swallow as much of me as possible. Shifting again, she rubs her thighs together.

"Need anything?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow.

"Can I touch myself?" she murmurs, still ashamed that she has to ask us. We've established some rules in the last few weeks, and this is one of them. She fought all she had against it, and it was pure ecstasy to watch her lose said fight.

I smile down at her. "I don't think so, Doll. I think you have to take care of these two first."

We both turn to Sam and Lik. Their hungry eyes are on Rose, hunters of defenseless prey.

It's fascinating to see how she has changed since the first time we all demanded something from her in group activities. Her eyes used to widen, her spine used to straighten, her body used to stiffen. She would say words like 'I can't take this', 'I need a break'. Now she gets excited, begging for more, letting us use her until she's spent and each of us is fully satisfied. Sam was right, it was easy to train her, to make her submit. In the bedroom, of course. Because as soon as we're in a non-sexual situation, her power and stubbornness become overwhelming again. She truly is unstoppable.

Lik is the first to unzip his jeans and take his dick out. It's throbbing, precum already leaking out. I'm the one who guides Rose to him. With my hand still in her hair, I push her until she's just above the tip and let him guide himself in.

I'm glad we found something that got Sam to stop his angry typing and put the phone away. He's quick to bring his cock out and start stroking himself to the rhythm of Rose's head bobbing up and down Lik's dick. I keep guiding her, only breaking to move to the floor behind her and get a better grip on her head.

She gags when I push too far, and Lik hisses with pleasure. "Shit, Princess." His eyes lock with mine. "Do that again."

Rose attempts to push back against me, but I don't let her. "Be good," I tell her sternly. "Take all of him." I push her back down, sensing the way she chokes, so full of him.

I pull her back up, barely letting her take a deep breath before I push her down, on Sam this time. He's much bigger than Lik, but she takes him remarkably well. She brings her hands to their knees. One on Sam's, one on Lik's. They're sitting tightly against each other. Sam wraps a hand around Lik's dick and starts stroking him. The latter lets his head fall back as he moans, not focused one bit on the movie anymore. None of us are.

I can see Rose's nails digging into their jeans, their thighs. She keeps sucking Sam until he loses all sense of control and starts pushing his hips upwards. I pull her back and bring her back to Lik, spit leaking out of her mouth and spreading in between all of them. The sounds of her sucking grow louder, and so do Lik and Sam's sounds of pleasure. When I put her back on Sam, Lik lets out a soft whimper and Sam brings his hand back.

"Swallow me down, baby," Sam orders her. He pushes up and puts a hand on mine, forcing her down.

Sam accelerates his movements on Lik's dick, tightening his grip until Lik is out of breath, pushing weak words past his lips. "I'm gonna come..."

In a sudden movement, Sam pulls Rose away and comes all over her face. She gasps at the shock, her throat clogged with thick saliva. A second later, Lik is exploding all over her open mouth, controlled by Sam's hand.

Sam pushes his cum into her mouth, mixing it with Lik's. He makes sure she sucks on his thumb and licks it all.

"You're such a good girl," he rasps before collapsing back onto the sofa.

Everyone is trying to catch their breath when a scream startles all of us.

The last girl is dying on the screen.

“Shit movie,” Rose tells all of us. “And I’m horny as fuck now.”

“Well,” Lik grabs her by the shoulders and brings her back on the sofa, her back against his chest. “We do owe you now, don’t we?” He slides a hand under her oversized gray t-shirt, and I know the exact moment he starts playing with one of her nipples because she lets out a husky moan.

I stand up and undo her jeans, sliding them off and throwing them behind the sofa, followed by her underwear. I spread her legs gently and kiss my way from her knee to the apex of her thigh. She trembles, bringing a hand to my hair. “What do you want, Doll?”

“You,” she answers without hesitation.

“Tell her exactly what you want, Rose,” Sam corrects her. “We want to hear what you’re so desperate for.”

Lik’s hand moves under her top, grabbing her other breast. He brings the hem of her t-shirt all the way up so we can see how he’s rolling her nipple between his thumb and index finger.

“I…” My kiss just above her clit makes her stutter. “I want Rachel to pleasure me.”

“And I want something more specific.” Sam’s voice turns stern as he orders Rose to use her words.

Part of the submission and humiliation is to ask exactly what she’s so eager for.

“And don’t forget your manners,” Sam adds.

“Please,” she breathes. “Please, Rachel, lick my pussy.”

The moment it crosses her lips, my mouth is on her clit. I graze my teeth against it and love the feeling of her body stiffening with need. With the hand that’s not on her boobs, Lik grabs the back of her leg and pulls until her knee practically touches her chest. Sam does the same with the other leg, exposing her completely to me.

I feel Sam shifting some more until he taps my shoulder and presents me with the famous switchblade he always keeps around his ankle. Rose’s fear is palpable as soon as her eyes land on the blade.

She fights Lik’s hold only for a moment, knowing perfectly she’s not going anywhere. I push the knife open and press it against her lower belly.

“Careful,” she hisses before I even touch her. I watch her tuck her taut stomach in. I relish the way her heart beats in her skin, how it moves against the sharp object.

“Relax, Doll. A bit of pain for a lot of pleasure. I promise.”

I cut her like I always do—only a tiny, superficial cut, barely bigger than a papercut. I don’t need more for the blood to flow. I become restlessly enthusiastic as I press my thumb against the cut and lower myself between her legs. The first stroke of my tongue has her following the movement. I keep going until she’s writhing and moaning. I know the exact moment Lik pinches her nipple sharply because she hisses in pain before letting it turn into a moan. I bring two fingers to her soaking cunt and slide them in easily.

“Oh god,” she whimpers.

I pull away from her clit, pushing into her in slow but harsh movements.

When she’s close to coming, I bring the knife just above the previous wound. I cut in as she starts tightening around my fingers.

“Rach,” she cries out with blissful pain.

Rose *loves* pain. There is nothing that makes her wetter. Nothing can make her come harder. And as I puncture her skin a third time and curl my fingers inside her, she explodes into an orgasm that makes her lose all sense of sanity.

The way she came to be addicted to pain is a terrible story. But we’ve managed to turn it around, to all find something for ourselves in it. Especially her. That’s how she fights back her traumatic past. She used it and made it her own.

“It’s honestly ridiculous!” Rose snaps at me as I dry myself.

We’ve just finished showering in the upstairs bathroom while the guys clear the table downstairs. I made everyone beef ragu tagliatelle for lunch, and everything was going absolutely fine until I said I had to go home. That’s when Rose started sulking.

She tried to convince me to stay while we were taking a shower together. My refusal brought the bitch out of her. And when she saw I had brought shower gel and shampoo from my house so I wouldn’t smell differently than usual to Conor, the ugly jealousy came out.

“Rose, I’m not even listening to you. Save your breath,” I fight back as I grab clean underwear out of my bag.

“Sunshine,” she growls. “*Leave. Him.*” I ignore her, getting into what I

call my housewife dress. The kind Conor approves of.

“What are you doing tonight?” I deflect. It reminds me to check the time.
6:30 p.m.

“Luke, Chris, and Jake are all in Stoneview. We’re having a sleepover, and you should join.”

Barely listening, I check my app. Conor is still at Beth’s. He usually comes back from her house around 9:30 p.m. on Fridays. I welcome him in the kitchen with a half-assed meal, and he tells me he ate at his friend’s house before poker. I love Fridays because he’s fucked Beth enough times, he doesn’t even try to touch me.

She puts one of Sam’s sweatshirts on, and I don’t miss how she pushes it against her face and inhales his scent before turning to me again.

“So that’s a yes?” she asks.

“What?”

“You’re coming with me to Chris’s house?”

“No, absolutely not. What the hell are you on about?”

“I’ll come with you to yours,” she insists. “And I’ll tell Sam and Lik to come too. And you can leave him without fearing his reaction.”

Anger boils in me. She always thinks she has the best ideas, doesn’t she? She doesn’t understand it’s not just him. Mainly, yes. But then there are my parents to deal with. The way they’ll push me back to him. Whatever dealings mine and his dad have going on for their companies. One owns a national chain of supermarkets. The other is a supplier of fresh foods. How. Fucking. Boring. And it’s my life that’s been put on the line for their businesses to keep striving.

She grabs my wrist when I start putting my day clothes in my bag. “Rose,” I snap. “Stop this right now.”

“I’m sick of watching you going back to him,” she hisses at me. “I made sacrifices for this to work. I want you to do the same.”

I cackle a sarcastic laugh, but it’s not enough for her to release her hold. “What sacrifices? Your pride? Cause it’s so hard to swallow it every time you drop to your knees for us like a good little slut?”

The way her jaw tightens and her eyes darken is a good reminder that she is far from a submissive outside of the bedroom. In a swift movement, she’s got me face-first against the wall, a hand coming under my dress and cupping my pussy through my cotton panties.

“Do you want to repeat that?” she threatens darkly. “Should I fuck Conor

out of your head? Make you drunk on me before you go back to him all wet and bothered?”

I shake my head. “No,” I whisper, embarrassed at how easily she moves me around. I thought training with Sam would help, but I didn’t even see her coming.

Her mouth comes to kiss my neck and I writhe with pleasure under her touch. “I make sacrifices, too,” I tell her. “Every time I’m with you three, I risk him finding out.”

“If only you’d let me kill him. What is he going to do, then?”

“Please, let me go,” I ask, even though that’s the last thing I want. “I have to be home before he comes back.”

“Mmhm, I hear you.” She keeps her mouth against my neck and continues to play with my clit until I’m wet enough that she can easily slide a finger inside me. “I haven’t fucked you in a while. I mean, *properly*. *Fuck. You.*”

“Now isn’t the time,” I pant as she inserts another finger.

“No?”

When I try to push out another word to insist that she shouldn’t, a short moan comes out.

“I couldn’t hear that,” she chuckles against my skin.

“Rose—”

“Push your ass out.”

I can’t even control my body when I press my chest against the wall and push my ass against her.

“Atta girl.” I can feel her smiling against my skin. Next thing, her teeth bite into my neck.

“No marks!” I moan loudly.

“I know,” she growls against my skin. “We wouldn’t want to risk your fucking. Fiancé. Finding. Out.” Every word is punctuated with a pump of her fingers.

She curls them, grazing her knuckles against my g-spot, and I feel my knees buckle.

“I’m going to c-c—”

“Come,” she whispers softly in my ear.

I let the orgasm take over me and scream against the wall as I rub myself against her. My hips follow her movements until she’s slowed down and slowly pulls out of me. Even then, I feel myself twitching from the pleasure

still coursing through me.

She releases me reluctantly, but I can see the resentment in her eyes. Not for me, I know that.

“Rose...” I catch my breath, letting the panting slow down and rearranging my dress. “I will leave him as soon as I can. I want to talk to my parents first, to tell them how unhappy I am with him. My dad has been on business trip after business trip. As soon as he’s back, I’ll mention it to them. I think...”

She comes closer to me, bringing both her palms to my cheeks and letting the tips of her fingers find their way through my hair.

“What?” she nudges me, looking down at me and pulling my head, so I’m looking up at her.

“I think I’m going to come out to them.”

Her mouth drops open before her eyes light up with pure joy. She kisses me, sharing that joy with me. Her love passes onto me with each stroke of her tongue against mine.

She looks straight into my eyes when she pulls away. “I’ll be there, Sunshine. When you tell them, I’ll be right outside, waiting for you. Or inside next to you. Wherever you want me, I’ll be ready to support you no matter what they say.”

I nod, my head still in between her hands. “I love you,” I whisper.

“Not as much as I do,” she answers back.

I watch Sam’s car drive away before I walk into my house. I’m exhausted from the fucking, the cooking, the bliss. I throw my coat on the hanger by the door. Walking straight to the living room without bothering to turn the hallway lights on, I drop my bag on the floor. I enter our dark room, but before I can reach the switch, the light of the small lamp next to the sofa comes on.

I jump in fear, rearing back so much that my back hits the doorframe.

“Evening, baby.”

Conor is sitting on the sofa. His words are frozen, chilling me to the bone. In this low light, his face is ghastly. He’s covered in shadows and the warm orange light, frowning at me, accusing me with a violent glare.

My thoughts run through my mind too quickly to grasp one.

I just checked the app, it says he was still at Beth’s.

What do I look like? Guilty?

Put a cheery smile on your face!

Is my hair still wet from the shower at Sam's?

Why was he hiding in the dark? What does he know?

I can't think anymore. My heart is beating too fast, too harshly against my ribcage. So much that I fear my thin dress is moving, trembling to the beat.

It takes me too long to compose myself, being so obviously guilty of something. But I have to try. I must.

"Conor, sweetie," I smile. "You're home early. Why are you sitting in the dark, silly?"

That's too many cute names, you idiot!

"Where were you?" he asks in his cold voice again.

"I was having dinner with my mom," I lie. How did it come so easily? Survival instinct, maybe. "Have you got your phone with you? I tried calling you about twenty minutes ago, but you didn't pick up."

"I forgot it at my friend's house. Went for a poker game."

He left his phone at Beth's house. That's why the app said he was still there. How long has he been here? Waiting for me in the dark? How long can I say I was gone?

When he gets his phone back, he'll know I never called him. Too many things don't add up, and I know one thing for sure: Tomorrow, I have to tell Sam, Rose, and Lik that we need to be more careful.

"How was the game?" I ask brightly as I make my way to him.

I approach casually, but something stops me dead in my tracks.

He's got a glass of whiskey in his right hand. And in his left one...my contraceptive pills.

I look up at him, my body starting to tremble without my control. Drops of cold sweat form on the back of my neck, slowly rolling down my back.

"Why do you take the pill, Rachel?" he asks. His words reach me slowly to accompany the ringing in my ears.

"I don't." I attempt to give him a tiny laugh that comes out as a dry chuckle. "Those aren't mine."

"Really?" he gets up slowly. "Because I found them in our bathroom upstairs."

That's impossible, I always keep them in my bag.

Oh my god. I was in a rush to get to the cabin earlier to see the people I love. I took my pill upstairs and...I must have forgotten to put it back in my

handbag.

How could I be so stupid? How could I betray myself like that?

His walk is slow, his eyes shining with the violence he hides within himself. He is going to hit me, I know it. I take steps back as he approaches.

“Conor,” I call out in a weak, trembling voice. Fear chokes me and holds me so tightly I can’t breathe. “T-these aren’t m-m-mine,” I sputter, anxiety numbing my tongue.

He smiles at me.

Evil. Pure evil, that’s what he is.

“Baby, please,” I beg as he puts a hand on my shoulder to ensure I don’t go anywhere. “I love you.” I’m not truly talking anymore, a sob constricting my throat.

“You’re a liar, Rachel.”

I expect a harsh slap like he usually does. Because of my naivety, I don’t see it. His right hand coming at me. I don’t understand until the tumbler of whiskey smashes against my face, cutting into me while the strength of the gesture pushes me to the floor simultaneously.

My vision blurs, tears of blood dripping down my face.

Here and now, I see it clearly.

That I’m going to die tonight.

ROSE



THERAPY! - Lauren Sanderson

There's a loud bang as Luke puts the bottle of Jack Daniel's on the table.

"Absolutely fucking not," Chris tells all of us, his voice low and with only a tinge of temptation in it.

Jake and I explode in a laughing fit, but Chris scowls at me.

"Do you need me to remind you what happened the last time we all got together and got too drunk on Jack?"

He rolls up the sleeve of his denim shirt to show the awful, wonky tattoo I gave him in senior year. We had too much to drink, but we were drunk on friendship and happiness. And yes, I guess also whiskey. We all share this horrible tattoo now. Chris and I on our forearms. Jake on his shoulder, and Luke...

As if he could read my mind, Luke pulls down the gray sweatpants he's wearing to show the bottle of Jack Daniel's tattooed on his butt cheek.

"Come on," I laugh. "I will stay far away from any tattoo gun, I promise."

"Maybe I should just look after all of you," Chris mumbles.

"I can't remember if you were boring before Harvard or if it happened there," Luke interjects. "We never see each other anymore, don't be like that."

Jake doesn't even try to convince him. He's already opening the bottle of Jack and pouring four tumblers.

We're staying in Chris's basement that was long ago turned into a place where we chill and get drunk.

"We only have one bottle anyway," Luke keeps going. "So you might as well enjoy it while it lasts."

"No shooting guns. No fucking up the place." He turns to me for his last words. "No tattoos."

"Cross my heart," I smile as I do the sign of the cross.

"Cheers," Jake tells us without even clinking his glass. He downs his drink, and Luke and I follow.

"Whatever," Chris mumbles before downing his own glass.

We're spread out on two different sofas, music playing in the background, when my brother turns to me. I can tell he's going to ask something I don't like before he even opens his mouth.

"So," he clasps my knee and shakes it. "How's Rach?"

I cackle a laugh, throwing my head back. When I look back up, they're all staring at me intensely. Waiting for me to explain whatever the fuck I've been up to lately.

"You guys are suckers for good gossip, aren't you?"

Chris shrugs. He's more than a friend. Having been my foster brother for three years, I'll always see him that way. "Just want to make sure you're not setting yourself up for a disaster," he tells me.

"Life is so boring. Disasters are fun."

Luke is pouring us all more whiskey when he adds, "You've had enough disasters as it is. No need to add to those."

"Come on," Jake adds. "You never shied away from telling us about your dating prowess."

"Rachel's good," I answer.

"And so is Sam?" Chris adds.

"And his boyfriend, Lik?" Luke insists.

I roll my eyes, turning to my twin brother. "You told them we all showed up at your apartment, didn't you?"

He laughs to himself. "Didn't know it was a secret."

Luke already knows what I've been up to, but he's nice enough not to say I told him before everyone else.

"Yeah, I'm gonna need another drink if you want me to talk about those

guys,” I admit.

And Luke is on it, the drink in my hand the next second.

It actually takes another three before I feel myself loosen up.

“Have you guys ever had a foursome?” I wonder out loud. The guys stop scrolling through whoever’s Instagram they are ogling and look up at me.

“No way,” Chris chuckles. “You did not.”

“Please, Ozy,” Jake huffs as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Tell me you’re not actually dating all of them.”

“What counts as dating?” I ask, faking innocence.

“I’ll rephrase,” Chris says. He downs another glass of whiskey and mumbles, ‘I’m gonna need it’ to himself. Then he turns to me again. “Are you fucking all of them?”

“At the same time,” Luke presses, knowing perfectly well I am since I told him before Rachel’s engagement party.

My silence tells them everything. And probably the smile that’s pushing its way onto my face. The alcohol makes my skin numb and my muscles weak. It’s hard to control my reactions.

“You fucking queen,” Luke shouts as he jumps up. I can’t ignore his high-five, joining him with way too much joy. “You’re unbeatable.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I chortle as I give them all an exaggerated bow.

“Ozy, fuck no!” Jake protests. “Sam is an asshole. He’s Nate’s best friend!”

He wants to make it sound like he hates the whole thing, but I can see he doesn’t hate Sam as much as he used to. Probably since that one-on-one they had at his place.

I pour us all another drink and take off the sweatshirt I was wearing. We all eagerly drink another glass. The room is buzzing with excitement, the music loud, yet none of the lyrics make sense to me anymore. A music video is playing on the screen, and I can’t really follow it. The guys are debating whether they’d rather be in a threesome or foursome and I smile dumbly at them.

“You guys used to have threesomes all the time together.” Luke points at Jake and Chris. “Sexcapades.” He wiggles his eyebrows as he reminds them of their high school fun.

“Yeah, that was before Jamie,” Jake fights back.

“Come on,” Chris chuckles. “What if Jamie asks you?”

I laugh when Jake puts his glass on the table hard enough he could have

smashed it.

“I could never share Jamie. Mark my words, if she ever suggests something like that, I’m sequestering her. She’ll never leave the flat again.”

“What about you, Chris?” I ask. “What’s the name of that new girl of yours again?”

“Megan,” he tells me without much enthusiasm. “We’ve only been dating for three months. If she wants to open the relationship, I’ll just tell her to do it with someone else.”

“Damn,” Jake deadpans. “Sounds like true love there.”

“She’s okay,” Chris says as he twists his mouth. “She’s gorgeous and a great fuck.”

“What else would you want,” I mock him.

“Although she’s a bit of a bitch,” he admits.

And don’t we all know it. We met her at Jamie’s birthday, on New Year’s Eve, and we did not get along. Chris hates the *mean girl* type—the exact kind that crowded the hallways of Stoneview Prep—so we don’t understand why he’s still with Megan.

“Why did you even start dating her in the first place?” I groan.

“I don’t know! A friend of mine introduced us and I was drunk as fuck. We had a great night and great sex. I only discovered after that she was the kind of horrible person who treats people like shit and gets high on it.”

“Dude, break up with her,” Jake tells him before I can.

“Yeah, I tried, but she opened up about how unconfident she felt and that’s why she’s so horrible. I just didn’t have the heart to go through with it. And she’s not bad all the time. She can be nice when we’re together.”

“Sounds like you pity her, and it will only lead to drama,” Luke nods to himself. “Trust me, I’ve been there.”

“Yeah, so have I,” Jake adds, and we all know too well the drama he had with his ex from senior year.

“Anyway,” Chris downs his drink, “so how does a four-way relationship work? I thought Rachel was a lesbian,” he digresses.

“Rachel is only now really identifying her sexuality. Yeah, she thinks she’s a lesbian ‘cause she never slept with a man and doesn’t want to sleep with Lik and Sam.”

I don’t mention Conor. I already told them—without specifying exactly what—that he had done unforgivable things and that I was ready to end him. To Rachel and to me, she and Conor don’t count as sex. Rape never counts as

sex.

They're all still clearly waiting for an explanation from me, and I chuckle as I keep going. "Okay, she definitely doesn't like dick. And it might come as a surprise, but that's not what all relationships are about, my friends."

They're all looking at me, clearly waiting for more. I shake my head. "It's possible to love someone for other things than sex. And I guess that's what's happening between her, Lik, and Sam."

"I have no words," Luke tells me. "I guess since one person has never been enough for you, three should do."

"That's not what this is."

I let my head fall back. It's heavy, the alcohol muddling my thoughts. I smile at the ceiling, thoughts of Sam, Lik, and Rach crowding my mind. How can I love the three of them? Even Lik. I fell in love with him so suddenly, like lightning hitting me right in the heart. It wasn't love at first sight, more love at first fuck.

"It's hard to explain," I say out loud, though not sure if I'm talking to myself or them. "I just know it feels really good." I close my eyes and inhale deeply. For one second, I'm with the three people I love so differently yet so fully.

"I just don't want to know any more than that, please," Jake chuckles.

So, I come back to the present. To my best friends who have always been there for me and yet again now that I've told them about my crazy relationship. Crazy to the world, maybe, but perfect for the four of us involved.

A couple of joints, laughter, and love. It only takes another hour for us to be downright out of our minds.

Luke and Jake are fighting over the last slice of pizza, making up 'hunger games' to decide who should have it and I watch from the sofa, slumped so deep into it I don't think I'm ever coming back out.

Luke lied, obviously. He has way more bottles of Jack Daniel's than he said he did. We're on the third one, and the guys have to shout over the music when they talk to me because the ringing in my ears has become too intense.

Jake shouts something, stealing my attention from staring into nothingness. Luke and he are playing ping pong without the table, throwing themselves everywhere to not be the first one to drop the ball.

"Rose," Luke calls. "I've got a song for you. Put it on."

My phone is the one connected to the speaker, so I fish it out from in

between the sofa cushions.

“What is it?” I slur as I unlock my screen.

“It’s by Lauren Sanderson. It’s called...*Therapy*.”

“Fuck you,” I cackle.

Still, I look for the song. We’re drunk enough that we end up listening to it about five times on repeat. Something about someone who’s toxic as fuck.

We’re shouting the lyrics rather than singing when my ringtone cuts off the music.

“It’s Rachel,” Jake tells me, now the closest to the phone.

I run to the sofa, excitement flowing through my veins. As soon as I pick up, Jake connects his own phone to the speakers, and I can’t hear anything of what Rach is saying.

“Hold on, baby, I can’t hear.”

I go up the stairs to the main house, dancing along to the new song as I make my way. As soon as I close the door to the basement, I bring the phone to my ear again.

“Hi, Sunshine,” I say, realizing how drunk I am when the walls start tilting. A dumb smile spreads on my face before I even hear her voice.

“Rose.” A terrifying sob cracks through the phone, forcing my heart to drop. The high from tonight drops, the drunkenness disappearing into the abyss of fear.

“Rach, what’s wrong?” There’s nothing but wordless cries for a short moment, and panic freezes my blood. “Baby, talk to me. What happened?”

“He’s going to kill me.” The words are squeezed in between two choked sobs, and my heart crushes.

In the background, I hear a loud bang and someone shouting. Everything clicks so quickly, hits me so hard, that I take a step back, thumping the wall. One breath and I’m moving again.

“I’m on my way,” I snap as I walk past the entrance. “Where are you hiding?” I put my jacket on and grab my car keys.

“I-I—” A scream escapes her. “Oh my god,” she cries.

“Rachel,” I snap. “Focus. Which room are you hiding in?” Car keys in my hand, I leave the house without a thought for the guys downstairs.

“In...In the b-bathroom. The downstairs bathroom. There’s so much blood.”

My heart stops for a few seconds and I have to bring a fist to my chest to kickstart it. I take a deep breath, not wanting to panic her even more.

“I’ll take care of you, don’t worry. Is there only one bathroom downstairs?” I start the car, speeding out of the Murrays’ driveway.

“I don’t want to die,” she cries out. “I love you... I love you. I don’t want to die.”

“The only person who is going to die tonight is Conor.”

Phone in one hand and holding the steering wheel with the other, I think of all the ways I’m going to end Conor McGill. Fuck any repercussions. Send me to prison for all I care.

“Please, hurry,” she sobs.

“What’s the code for your gate,” I ask to get her talking about something other than dying.

“5732.”

“Is your front door unlocked?” I overtake a slow fucker that won’t move out of the way.

“Y-yes.”

“Sunshine, listen to me. You’re going to be fine. I’m almost there, okay? Now I’m going to hang up so I can call Sam.”

“No, no, no,” she weeps. “Don’t leave me, please. I c-can’t.” Her next words are whispered. “It’s so quiet. I don’t know where he went.” A long pause. “I’m scared.”

“I am two minutes away, but I *need* to let Sam know.” Because someone will need to help me hide the body.

“Call me back, please. I don’t want to die alone.”

“Rachel,” I bark, harshness kicking in as a defense mechanism. “Stop this right now. You are not dying tonight. You are not dying anytime soon.” The fear is so great I have to force myself to breathe again. My brain keeps on forgetting to make me. “I won’t need to call back. I’m almost there. Just stay where you are.”

I hang up, calling Sam right away. While it rings, lists and lists go through my head. Instead of my usual perfect memory, they all tangle together. Names of Monarchs, dates empires were created, the most expensive art on the planet...

“Lovebug,” Sam says as he picks up. Simple, effective. Just him.

And I explode.

“I’m on my way to Rachel’s house because her abusive piece-of-shit husband took it *that* step too far. I swear to fucking god, if she dies, it’s on you. And I will kill you myself. You and your fucking idiotic ideas. I told

you, Sam,” I rage. “I *told you* we had to get her out of there.”

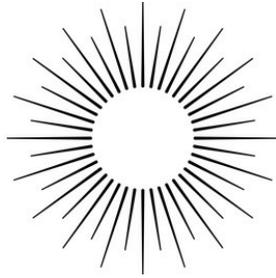
He completely ignores my threats and the blame I put on him. “I’ll leave right now. Do *not* go inside that house before Lik and I arrive.”

“Fuck you,” I yell. “I don’t answer to you!”

“Rose,” he growls, ever so calmly. “If you put yourself in danger, I will make you regret it.”

“Fucking try me,” I snap before hanging up.

RACHEL



Royalty - Kat Meoz

I wonder how many horror films I've watched in my life. How many times have I watched characters do stupid things that would get them killed? I laughed when they dropped their keys, knowing the killer was right behind them. I slapped my hand across my face when they kept trying to turn on a phone that was out of battery while the killer was catching up to them. I giggled when they hid in stupid places and I was eager for the killer to catch and stab them—stupid characters begging to be killed.

Just like me.

Rose said to stay locked in the bathroom. My rational mind fought too hard, and I lost. Why wait in a locked place with no exit, like a lamb awaiting slaughter. Why? When the hallway was silent and the front door so close. I could escape so easily.

Maybe Conor was right all along. Maybe I really am *stupid*.

He grabbed me as soon as I opened the bathroom door. Of course, he was waiting silently behind it.

“You're so fucking dumb,” he laughs in my face as he wraps a hand tightly around my throat. “You honestly thought I left? After what you did?”

My hands come to slap his face and forearms as I rapidly feel the lack of oxygen. My vision dots as my chest starts to heave, and I already feel the strength leaving my muscles. The blood on the side of my head is so warm,

and my lips are busted from the punches he got in before I managed to escape to the bathroom.

He shakes me with a strength that doubles with rage. “You stupid fucking bitch,” he hisses. “Fucking me over. Why, Rachel? I would have stopped as soon as you got pregnant. Did you just love being fucked over and over again?”

A whimper gets stuck in my airways when he shakes me again. A moment of full consciousness brings back the defense tactics Sam spent hours teaching me. I step on his foot as hard as I can, and he screams but doesn’t let go. “Bitch!”

I go for his eyes before he can recover. Pushing my thumbs in both of them and forcing him to retreat. I didn’t get to truly hurt him, but he does finally let go of my neck. I take in a huge breath and run for my life.

Only he’s the killer in my horror film now, and I’ve got no chance of escaping him. He grabs me by the hair before I can flee our foyer. He slams my head against the nearest wall, and dizziness overwhelms me.

“Stop!” I cry out. “Conor...” There are shards of glass stuck to the left side of my face from when he smashed the glass into my head.

Another pull at my hair, and I’m not against the wall anymore. Everything is so blurry, so quick, and almost painless. The adrenaline is saving me from feeling everything but there is still a feeling of sickness inside me and a fear that death is imminent.

He throws me onto the floor, and I try to crawl away, but he kicks my back over and over again until I’m just a weeping mess on the floor. I curl into myself, desperately trying to protect as much of my body as possible. He kicks my side and pushes me on my back.

“Please,” I heave. “You’re going to kill me...” I can barely see straight anymore. The black dots overwhelming my vision are getting bigger by the second. A headache is growing strong inside me.

“I had time to think while you were hiding in the bathroom like a little bitch,” he tells me. “I think the agreement between our families just isn’t worth it for me, babe.”

I shake my head slowly. He’s stopped hitting me, but my body has given up. I can’t move, can’t run away.

I can’t escape him.

“You’re just not worth the headache,” he tells me.

The salty tears that were stinging the cuts in my face seem to have

stopped. Maybe because I'm accepting my fate.

He crouches above me and runs his hand across my wet face. Blood, sweat, snot, tears. "I don't think we're meant to be."

He stands up and I watch him lift his foot. Is this how he's going to end me? Stomping on me repeatedly until my body gives up?

I barely brace myself for the first hit. But instead of that, the front door opens so hard it slams against the wall.

He startles and takes a step back, his eyes going to the door. My head falls to the side, and I watch Rose walk in.

The Goddess of Death has entered.

Darkness engulfs the house. Fury and vengeance hug her like she created them herself.

And yet, she is the calmest I've ever seen her. Determination and finality. That's all.

It happens so fast, but I see it in slow motion. As if the reaper has come to rescue me and I can only watch passively.

I watch her eyes latch onto the heavy crystal vase on the stand by the door. Her fingers wrap around it.

One, two, three long steps, and the vase crashes against the back of Conor's head. It happened way too quickly for him to react, and as soon as he stumbles forward, I roll away.

He falls unconscious onto the floor and everything becomes real again.

The ringing in my ears, the headache. The pain on the side of my face, in my lips. My back, my ribs. Everything hurts.

"Oh my god," Rose whispers when she sees me. "Sunshine..."

She drops to her knees by my side, her hands hovering over me, not sure where to touch me.

"It's okay, baby," she reassures me. "You're going to be okay."

She puts a hand around my waist and slides one under my back. I groan in pain as she lifts me close to her. She falls back on her haunches and rests my upper body on her lap.

I sob, tears running down my face again, mixing with the blood. She's got her back to Conor's unconscious body, and it means I can't see him, which really helps right now.

"Ssh," she runs a hand in my hair and pulls the matted mess away from my face. "It's okay now. I got you. I'm gonna get you to the hospital. He's never going to touch you again."

I know what's going on in her head right now. She wants to get me out of here so she can come back and kill him herself. And right now, I don't even want to stop her.

"It hurts," I sob.

"Let's get you up and to the car," she tells me softly. "You need medical attention."

I nod, sniffing and trying my best not to fall unconscious from the pain. She drops her lips to my forehead.

"I'm sorry," she tells me, her breath warm even against my feverish skin. "I should have done something earlier."

"I told you not to." She can't blame herself for this.

"And I should have been my stubborn self and not listened. I should have gotten you out of this as soon as I found out."

"Aw," Conor's voice rings out, startling us. I feel Rose's heart kicking against her chest, beating hard from the fear. "The reunion of the dykes."

Rose doesn't get to defend herself. The second she turns around, his punch knocks her back. Her grunt from the pain is short as she falls backward on the floor.

My scream is so loud, I hope the neighbors can hear it. How could I be so naïve to think he would stay unconscious? The killer in horror films never dies. He always comes back for revenge, and he always strikes again when the main characters think they got away.

"How could you possibly think she could save you?" he chortles.

Conor grabs me by the hair and pulls me away, dragging me across the floor and to the living room. My strength has barely returned, but I kick and scream anyway, making myself heavy to slow him down. I watch Rose roll onto her side, holding her hands to her cheekbone.

Conor drops me right next to our sofa and makes sure to kick me in the stomach before stepping away. "Stay right here. I'm just going to take care of the bitch before I finish with you."

"Don't," I croak. "Please, leave her alone..."

He doesn't.

I watch him storm back into the entrance hall, his rage kicking up a notch.

"Look at that," he sneers. "The cunt who tried to steal my wife."

"Fiancée," I whisper to myself, correcting him like it makes a difference.

I roll onto my side, trying desperately to get on all fours to at least attempt to crawl over there and save the woman I love. But there's no point.

My body is battered and weak. Every movement I make forces a pain so intense that I fall back onto the floor. Even the adrenaline can't save me anymore, and I fall back down on my stomach, my cut cheek against the floor, as I watch Conor grab Rose by the collar of her t-shirt and lift her up.

She's taller than him and he is quickly reminded of it when she regains full consciousness and stands up by herself.

Her knee comes to meet his balls, and he rears back, howling with pain. She uses the momentum to punch him in the face and he falls backward. The back of his head hits the floor, and he groans loudly. She doesn't jump on him as he did me, instead choosing to give him a chance to get back up, like knowing she's the one who will win anyway.

"See, Conor. That's what happens when you fuck with what doesn't belong to you," she spits her venom at him like the poisonous woman I know she is.

He gets on all fours and finally back up, swaying slightly.

"Suck my dick, Rose," he growls at her.

He goes for her again, but she steps to the side and he stumbles forward. She grabs him from behind, sliding an arm around his neck and holding her wrist with her other hand, making sure to keep him tight against her.

A kick to the balls and one punch, that's all it took for him to lose their altercation. I smile, knowing he could never take everything he put me through. He's simply *too weak*.

He struggles against her. *Being choked ain't so fun, is it?*

I hear her chuckle and watch her shake her head. "You're a rich, white man, Conor. The entire world already sucks your dick. I don't think you need my help."

Slowly, I watch him lose the little strength he has left. His eyes grow heavy as he coughs and chokes. His writhing slows as his face grows purple and blue. My eyes lock with Rose's. She's smiling at me. A small smile, her lips barely tipping at the corners and her lips shut together. She is killing my abuser with the calmness of a winter night. Imperturbable, cold, and cruel, yet so soothing.

When Conor stills, she lets go and takes a step back, watching him fall to the floor while I watch her.

There's a beat as we wait for him to move. He doesn't. She crosses over him with her long legs and runs to me.

"Are you okay?" she asks, panic making her voice tremble slightly.

“I’m okay,” I whisper as she runs a flat hand up and down my back.

“You’re still bleeding.”

I shake my head, a new life entering my body now that Conor is gone. “I’m okay,” I repeat.

She helps me up, and I lean onto her as we walk toward the front door. Instead of leading me out, she lets go of me and I need to hold onto the wall.

“One second,” she states before going off. She disappears into the house, and my eyes go to Conor’s unconscious body. I have to check.

Fear gripping me, I let myself fall to the floor and crawl toward him. I put two fingers against his throat and my heart stops when I feel his still slowly beating. Barely, but he’s still alive.

“Rose,” I whimper. She’s already back. “H-he’s not...”

“I know,” she nods just before showing me the kitchen knife in her hand.

My mouth falls open. I can barely see, one eye now swollen and tightly shut from the punches I got there.

She comes behind me, on her knees, and slides the knife into my hand before pushing my fingers to close around it. I fist it with all my strength, but it’s not very tight, so she keeps her hand around mine.

“Finish him,” she whispers in my ear like the true reaper she is. “Do it the way you love, Sunshine.”

Goosebumps break over my skin and I raise the knife.

“I hate him so much,” I cry.

“Show me how much,” she encourages me.

I drop the knife into his stomach first. She helps me bring it back up, and I do it again before moving to his chest. Images of all the times he hit me come back. All the times he mocked me, humiliated me. And mainly, all the times he raped me. Every tear I shed because of him, every bruise, every time I bled.

I lose it.

“Fuck you,” I rage, knowing he can’t even hear me. “Fuck you! You fucking bastard...”

I stab over and over again, and at some point, I must hit an artery because blood splatters against my body. Sobs are wrecking my chest, like I’m the one being stabbed to death.

“Go to hell!” I scream one last time,

I don’t even realize that Rose has let go of my hand. I just know that when I’m done, I’m kneeling in a pool of Conor’s blood, relishing in the

warmth against my knees and the wounds on his body. Rose got up while I was stabbing, and now she's looking down at me, smiling with her full set of straight, white teeth.

I smile back and let my head fall against her thigh. I let go of the knife before hugging her leg tightly while her hand slides into my hair and she caresses me.

I feel like a worshipper at the feet of the Goddess of Life and Death. I feel saved and empowered. Safe and liberated.

I look at Conor's dead body and then back up at her. "I love you," I whisper.

"I love you too," she rasps back, relief relaxing her shoulders.

I can't describe the feeling that overwhelms me. As much as I love seeing Rose submit to me in sexual situations, I feel utterly at her mercy in my life. My head must be more messed up than I thought, because I have a strange need to thank her for merely existing. I revere her in ways more profound than I've ever felt toward her before.

From this moment, I understand the reasons men have built temples on earth for the Gods. I could not stand her leaving me, and I could not stand her looking away.

And yet, within all that, I feel freer than I've ever been.

She leans down and helps me up. "We need to get you to the hospital."

"Absolutely not," Sam's voice reaches us. He's standing in the doorway, Lik right behind him.

"She's hurt," Rose fights back.

"We'll get her to someone I know. Help her to my car. Lik, get Xi over here right this second. They left the door open, and anyone could have heard what was happening here. You and your brother get rid of the body and come back to clean up. Then get Rose's car back to the cabin. I'll take them to see Sean and—"

"He's King's Crew," Lik cuts in.

"He's all I've got." Sam's voice doesn't leave space for negotiations, and Lik just nods before pulling his phone out.

"I'm gonna need more than Xi to clean this mess," he says before looking at me and I look away.

I feel embarrassed. Ashamed that they all had to come and rescue me, that I couldn't defend myself. I can't seem to face the two men, and I want to stay close to Rose forever.

She holds me while we walk, and as soon as we cross Sam, he puts a gentle hand on my arm, stopping us.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly. I only nod, not meeting his eyes.

“She will be once we get her the medical attention she needs. Move,” Rose growls.

He brings a finger to her cheekbone and runs a knuckle against the bruise forming there and below her eye. He cocks an eyebrow at her.

“I thought I told you to not put yourself in danger.”

“And I’m pretty sure I replied that I didn’t answer to you.”

“Keep fighting me, Rose.” His simple words sound like a warning to do the exact opposite.

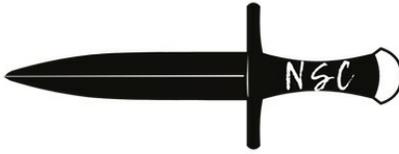
She swats his hand away from her face and pushes past him.

“Unlike you, I wasn’t going to let her die at the hands of a cunt who abuses women who can’t defend themselves. Now let’s fucking go,” she instructs harshly.

My heart pinches, feeling helpless and humiliated that I was the woman who couldn’t defend herself. Even if I know what she meant by that. Not that I am weak, but I was put in a situation that weakened me. A family putting pressure on me and who always told me I was too stupid to be independent. A man who was physically stronger and who struck when I couldn’t defend myself.

But still, I feel like a victim. And I hate myself for it.

LIK



Girls of My Dreams - Guti

“Xi, promise you’re not going to fuck this up,” I insist as I open Rose’s car.

I’m meant to get rid of the body with him, but I can’t stay away from the people I love. Right now, the need to be close to Rachel and know if she’s okay, the need to hold Rose and ask what happened...they’re both too strong for me to ignore. I always go with my gut feeling, no matter what. And it’s telling me to be close to Sam, Rose, and Rachel.

“When have I ever fucked up a body clean-up?”

“Ziad,” I warn him, hoping the use of his full name reflects the situation I’m in.

“*WAllah*,” he promises in Arabic. “I’m going to take care of it. Now, go.” I lock eyes with him one last time before I close the car door and drive away. I trust my brother. He knows what he’s doing.

Dread grips me as I speed my way to Sean’s. I know where he lives because I know everything about the North Shore, especially who the King’s Crew uses. I’m on high alert the moment I drive across the imaginary line that separates our side of town from theirs. It’s stupid. A gang turf war because we all want our cake and to eat it too. But if I’m caught on my own, they’ll send my body back to the North Shore Crew with bullet holes as decorations.

Not taking any risks, I don’t even stop at the red light. When I park in

front of Sean's house, I look around multiple times before getting out of the car. I guess it's a good thing I wasn't driving my own car, or they would have known it was me.

I knock harshly multiple times. He's got a metal security gate, and I have to fit my fist between the bars. When Sean opens, his face falls. He knows who I am and that I don't belong here. We're supposed to be enemies.

"Let me in," I direct calmly. "That's my girl bleeding in your basement."

"Yeah, she's a lot of people's girl," he mutters as he unlocks the metal gate and steps to the side before guiding me to his basement.

The whole space has been turned into the equivalent of a hospital room, and I know that's where the King's Crew goes to heal their wounds from altercations with us. It's strange being here. I'm aware Sean has worked with Sam before, although I never thought I'd end up here. This is how gangs work. He might work with my boyfriend, but I will never be someone other than the North Shore Crew to him. Whether it be now or ten years down the line.

Rachel is sitting on the edge of a stretcher. Rose is holding her hand, staying close to her. On the other side, Sam is talking to—I stop in my tracks.

"What the fuck," I spit, rage building in my chest.

Kayla King and Sam are in a debate, and my desire to break everything grows.

"What is she doing here?" I hiss as I settle next to Sam.

"As far as I'm aware, you're the one in the wrong zip code so watch yourself," she bites back.

"She was here when we arrived," Sam tells me. The composure in his tone doesn't match my anger. He puts a hand on the small of my back, but it doesn't help.

"And let me guess," I say. "She won't let you use Sean to save an innocent girl's life."

Kay snorts. "If she's here, she's not innocent."

My teeth grinding together force my jaw to clench. "I knew it was a bad idea to bring Rach here. The Kings only help themselves."

Kay is the eldest child in the King's family. They only have two, really. Kayla and Caden. She's the brains behind their whole circle and the reason the North Shore Crew, our entire gang, went to shit and lost protection from more prominent organizations.

"Why don't we kill her?" I suggest. "She can't stop us then."

“Please do. And let’s see how you get out of King’s territory after that.”

“Fuck you,” I rage, taking a step forward and ready to grab her. Sam grips my t-shirt, pulling me back.

“Kay,” he interjects. “After everything you’ve done. You owe me. Let Sean take care of our girl. She’s unwell.”

“I don’t owe you shit,” she hisses. “I protected my family and would do it all over again if I had to.”

Sam nods, silent as ever. He runs his knuckles against his jaw while he thinks. Finally, he smiles. “Help her. And I might convince him not to come for you when he gets out.”

I know exactly who he means by ‘him’, but I also know he won’t be more apparent than that in front of Rose. Kay knows who he means too.

Her body stiffens, and I can see it takes all she has not to take a step back. “He’s never getting out,” she counters.

“You know him better than that,” Sam chuckles. “You know he’s capable of anything.”

Her eyes dart to Rachel, and I know we’ve got her.

“I never want him to step a foot into the North Shore,” she says.

“And I’ll tell him that as soon as Sean has looked at Rachel.”

Kay nods and turns to Sean. “Be quick.” That’s all she says before she leaves us.

“She’s going to be waiting outside with half her crew,” I warn Sam as soon as she’s gone.

Sean settles on a stool in front of Rachel. Rose still doesn’t let go of her hand.

“We’re dead as soon as we step out of this house,” I insist.

“Let them try,” Sam growls back.

And surprisingly, no one is out there when we leave so his threats must have worked.

Back at the cabin, Rose helps Rachel settle into bed. She’s been completely quiet since the moment she left her Stoneview mansion.

“We’ll get you a glass of water,” Rose murmurs to her. “Then a shower will do you good.”

Rachel simply nods, but her eyes are glassy, her mind not with us. Sam stayed downstairs, on the phone with Xi.

I sense Rose's hesitation, not wanting to leave Rachel alone. I could go get the water myself, but I've watched Rose's field of vision narrow to Rachel only for the last few hours. She hasn't looked away, hasn't separated. She needs to step away for a minute at least.

"You go," I tell her. "Get water for yourself as well. You're probably dehydrated." She nods but doesn't move.

"Princess," I nudge her. "I'm staying in the room." But her eyes don't leave Rachel, and her hand doesn't let go.

I put my two hands on her shoulders and gently haul her away. "Do me a favor and put some ice on your face," I insist. "Go on."

She finally turns to me, and I bring my thumb to her cheek. She winces when I graze it. It's swollen and darkened since we left Rachel's house.

"Come on." I drag her to the door and push her into the hallway. "Just take five minutes."

As soon as she's gone, I step closer to Rachel.

"Hey," I say as I settle beside her on the bed. She doesn't move or acknowledge me.

I watch her for a long minute. She has three rows of stitches on her cheek. One of them crosses her eyebrow and the corner of her eyelid. She could have lost an eye. The cheek without any stitches on the other side of her face is swollen shut, a dark purple coloring her skin. Her lips are busted, cut, and they'll probably taste like blood for the coming week.

Sickness grips my stomach when my eyes drop to the dotted bruises around her neck. He almost did it. He almost killed her.

And what would I have done then?

No matter how much I used to think of Rachel as the other girl, the woman Rose loves and whom I share her with, it's obviously become much more than that. Our little competition for Rose's attention turned into friendship, and the friendship into love. This pull between us forces us into a platonic love. A love without the physical need for sex turned us sentimental, and deeply emotional toward the other.

And right now, I can feel her pain like I've got a direct line to her heart. Somehow, I know exactly what she's thinking, like I've got access to her most secret thoughts.

"I remember the first guy I ever killed," I tell her quietly, ensuring I don't

startle her. “The guilt wrecked me.”

She looks at me with surprise though she doesn’t say anything. I get it. We have Sam, the skilled assassin who made it his job to kill people. Who never thinks twice before pulling the trigger. Because of that, she forgot I grew up being part of a gang, that I still am, no matter how much I try to not get involved anymore.

Her lack of answer encourages me to keep going, even if that might not be what she means.

“I strangled him.” Playing with the ring in my nostril, I don’t even look at her when I talk again. “He was a guy from the King’s Crew, obviously. He’d broken into our house and was searching for Xi. Probably to beat him up or kill him. He was just shouting his name.”

I don’t know how many people I ended up killing in my life, but I remember that guy so clearly.

“Xi wasn’t even there,” I chuckle, shaking my head. “But my mom and dad were. Dad was ill, bed bound, and couldn’t do anything. I just remember seeing the fear in my mom’s eyes, thinking that if Xi was gone and Dad was ill, she had no one to defend us. She didn’t really see her gay, skinny son as a weapon against attackers.”

Taking a deep breath, I let my head fall back against the headboard. “I told my mom to go lock herself in the room with Dad. And I jumped him. I remember the fury flowing through my veins, and not even taking the time to get a gun or anything. I just jumped him like a feral animal and wrapped my hands around his throat. He’d put my family in danger. There was no way he was getting out of there alive.”

Ultimately, it just fueled the ongoing war between the North Shore Kings and the North Shore Crew. Nothing big, nothing out of the ordinary. Only for me, it changed everything.

“It changes your life to kill someone,” I tell her, not wanting to lie and sugarcoat it. “You’ll never be the same. You’re stronger now, darker. You’re —”

“A murderer,” she whispers with a groggy voice.

I take a moment before replying, letting her know I’ve thought of my answer. “Exactly.”

I grab her hand and interlock my fingers with hers. “We’re humans and we’re animals, Rach. You were with an abuser for two years. Your animal response would kick in every time he was around. Fight, flight, or freeze.

They're all typical reactions. Your last response was to fight to the death. That might make you a murderer, but what's wrong with that if it also makes you a survivor?"

I feel her fingers tighten around mine, and I bring her hand onto my lap. "Your human response kicks in too, and you're allowed to feel. You've been living on high alert for so long, disregarding your feelings so you could survive. You've adapted to him so that you wouldn't get hurt. You altered your entire being to appease him, to get the rare moments of calm. And now it's over. Your emotions are taking back their rightful place, putting your own feelings first. It's all going to come at once, except you can't blame yourself for what you did to survive."

Her head falls onto my shoulder. "You're going to be feeling a lot, Rach," I finish. "We're all here to deal with this one step at a time. We're all with you."

I feel her shift slowly and awkwardly, probably in too much pain to do it all at once. Eventually, she's hugging me, both arms wrapped around my waist and her cheek resting on my chest. The one that doesn't look like she's been maimed by a bear.

I let go of her hand to wrap my arm around her shoulders and grab it again with my other one.

"I think I'm in love with you," she murmurs against my chest.

I wonder if she can hear my heart skipping multiple beats. I wonder if she can feel the weight lifting off my chest and making me feel like I can breathe easier than I have in forever.

"Yeah," I chuckle. "I'm in love with you too."

"How?" she asks, and I hear the smile in her voice even though I can't see it. "You're so annoying and loud. You keep stealing Rose from me, and I don't even like you."

I laugh. I adore the sound of her voice when she pretends to dislike me.

"I just dug my way into your heart, baby. No one can resist me."

She giggles, the only one out of the four of us who does it quite often.

"I'll never have sex with you," she adds. "You ugly, stinky boy."

I cackle loudly, exactly how she had perfectly described me. "You wouldn't know how," I lie.

She is a queen in bed. Rose lives for the pleasure Rachel can provide, and I have no doubt she could easily bring me to my knees. But we don't need that.

“I want Rose in between us at all times.”

My laugh dies down into a loving smile as I glance down at her and she looks up at me.

“Course you do.” I drop a kiss on her forehead before letting my head fall back against the headboard again.

When Rose called earlier, panic overtook me. It’s funny how it often takes extreme situations for us to sit down and think about how we feel about the people around us. Life happens so fast, and we never take the time to feel anymore. There was a moment tonight I thought I might lose Rachel.

It took that to realize I would lose a woman I love.

“I’m scared, Lik,” she says after a long moment of silence.

“Of what?”

I feel her shift, but she doesn’t look at me.

“Of bad things happening to me because I killed someone.”

I bring a hand to her hair, massaging her scalp. “Bad things were already happening to you. You did right by taking the matter into your own hands.”

“Except I didn’t even do that. Rose did. She saved me because I couldn’t save myself.”

“And you saved her in ways we could never comprehend. That’s what we do for each other, the four of us.”

She freezes like she had never thought of that. “Did I?”

“Of course, you did,” Rose’s raspy voice is a gift to my ears. She appears next to us, holding a small bottle of water. “I could kill every single person who ever did you wrong, and it would be nothing compared to the way you saved me.”

Rachel sobs, but I know it isn’t from sadness. It’s from relief, the weight of the last two years with Conor dropping off her shoulders.

“I love you,” she snuffles.

“I love you too,” Rose smiles as she hands her the bottle. “Good and bad things will always happen to us. We can take it as long as we’re together.” Her eyes lock with mine.

After drinking a few sips, Rachel puts the water to the side and cuddles closer to me. “I don’t want bad things to happen,” she pouts. “Surely, with the four of us, we’ve had enough for a lifetime.”

I chuckle and undo the necklace I’m wearing. “Come’ere,” I say as I lift her into a sitting position. She sits on my lap and I slide the necklace around her neck, locking it in place.

“There. You’re all good.”

“What’s that?” she asks as she grabs the golden pendant now hanging in the hollow of her throat.

“It’s a Fatma hand,” I explain. “It protects you against evil by keeping it at bay.”

Her eyes widen when she looks at me again. “But...what about you?”

I laugh. Because I expected mockery from her or telling me these things don’t work. Instead, she said her words while also closing her fist around the hand as if she doesn’t want me to take it back despite her words.

“I’ve got lots, look.” I show her one of the golden rings I’m wearing, it has a Fatma hand on it as well. “But this one,” I point at her closed fist, “was my dad’s. So take good care of it.”

She nods and drops a peck on my cheek. “Promise.”

“Come on,” Rose tells her softly. “Let’s shower.”

I watch them disappear into the bathroom together with a smile on my face. What a strange yet perfect dynamic we have.

The next morning, Sam is silent during our entire breakfast. He cooked for us, checked with Xi that there had been no problems with the neighbors, and made sure Rachel took the pills Sean had prescribed her.

His silence isn’t unusual. However, I feel him sulking, awkward and uncomfortable. Something is wrong, but I’m the only one who seems to notice. Rose’s full attention is on Rachel, and the latter is more than accepting of her girl taking care of her. They slept in the same bedroom last night, and Sam and I in ours. It was strange to sleep without Rose between my boyfriend and me. In the last month, she’s slept here with us. Rachel had always had to go home.

I’m putting the dishes away when Rachel addresses Sam for the first time since yesterday.

“What am I going to tell my parents?” she asks him.

Her face swelled some more during the night, and her lips barely move when she talks. It’s hard to grasp what she says exactly.

“I’m still thinking about it,” he tells her. “How often do you see your parents?”

“Not very often,” she answers.

“If it can wait until your face heals, you’ll just be able to say you haven’t

heard from Conor in a while. No one will trace anything back to you, I assure you.”

“Her face will scar,” Rose interjects. “That’s not the solution. They’ll wonder what happened.”

I watch Sam’s jaw tick, and the reason for his annoyance becomes clear. Rose didn’t listen to him yesterday and he’s still mad about it.

“You could also call them today and say you and Conor got attacked last night. That you don’t know where he is.”

“They’ll want to find the attacker. They’ll tell the police, ask questions. She can’t have that.” Rose’s voice is stern, and provoking. She’s mad at him too, and the result is going to be explosive.

Sam cracks his neck, but he doesn’t respond to her.

“Or,” he tells Rachel. “You could tell a version of the truth. That he was abusing you and that he’s the one who did this to you.” He points at her face. “And that he left. You can tell them he had a mistress that you found out, and confronted him about it and then he attacked you. Direct everyone’s attention to Beth rather than you.”

“Her parents don’t care that he was a cunt,” Rose snaps. “Why don’t you stay silent if you only open your mouth to tell us shit ideas.”

I barely have time to notice Sam move. In two strides, he’s grabbing Rose by the neck. Not stopping his movement, he keeps walking, lifting her off the chair and letting it fall back. He keeps going until he’s got her slammed against the kitchen wall.

“Sam!” Rachel gasps. She probably doesn’t think it has any effect, but I see him relaxing his hand around Rose’s throat.

“You’re mad at me,” he hisses in her face. “Why?”

“Because it’s your fault she’s like this, and you know it. I’ve wanted to kill him since I found out. You didn’t let me. The result is the same except that Rachel suffered some more.”

She smiles at him. That kind she uses when she wants to trigger him some more. He always falls for it.

“You’re dying for me to return the question, aren’t you?” She brings a hand to his cheek. “You want me to ask why *you’re* mad at *me*? Huh?”

His nostrils flare, and I can see the battle to not squeeze her tighter. He doesn’t truly want to hurt her. She pulls her hand away from his face and wraps her fingers around his wrist.

“The problem, Sam, is that I don’t give a shit why you’re mad at me. You

can use your big muscles on me. I still won't care. Not until you admit you fucked up."

SAM



Who Do You Want - Ex Habit

I try to swallow down my rage, but it's becoming more and more difficult—the one against Rose, and the one against myself.

Sometimes, I make mistakes.

When Rose called me yesterday, I realized how big of a mistake it was to not have killed Conor earlier. Rachel was so insistent that she needed time, only I should have known better. I should have made him disappear.

I wanted to control the damage, and I told Rose not to get into that house without me.

I *fucking* told her not to put herself in danger. It was enough to know Rachel's life was at risk. Now I have to watch Rose walk around with a black eye, proof that she does not give a shit about what I say to her.

I don't answer to you.

Just how I would love to prove her wrong right now.

"I'm waiting," she insists.

Her hand is on my wrist, and my hold on her neck is barely anything. She could get out of it easily. She doesn't because she wants me to admit my mistakes. I will. But not because she told me to. I will not let Rose order me around.

I let go of her and take a step back.

"I told you not to put yourself in danger."

She scoffs. "I didn't. As you can see, I'm fine."

"Are you?" I smile. She is so predictable.

"Yes," she growls back. She won't admit she got hurt even with the proof showing on her face. Literally.

"Then you won't mind being punished for disobeying, right? I was going to wait until you're feeling better, but if you say you're all good." I shrug.

She freezes for a split second before she tries to compose herself again. "Rachel isn't feeling well. Now is not really the time, if you don't mind."

I'm about to say something when Rachel steps next to me. "Did you disobey, Doll?" she asks. I struggle to listen to her small voice and barely-formed consonants, though I recognize her need to take control.

Rose swallows thickly, her eyes darting between Rachel and me. "I didn't I—"

"Put yourself in danger when Sam told you not to. What if something worse had happened to you?" Rachel insists.

"It was for you," Rose defends.

"Thank you," Rachel says, the truth in her words hitting us all. "Now get on all fours."

"What?" she squeaks. I have to run a hand across my face to hide my smile. "Why?"

"You know the rules." Rachel shakes her head, faking disappointment. "You listen, or you get punished. It's not like we haven't been practicing this for a few weeks now."

Rose turns to her last exit, pointlessly. "Lik, fucking say something," she tells him.

"I'll just wait for you guys downstairs," he responds.

By downstairs, he means my favorite room of the house.

"Come on," I smile. "Don't make me get the collar and the leash."

"Asshole," she huffs before sliding to her knees.

"My, my," I mock. "You really are piling them up, aren't you? My girl is a sucker for punishment."

She's only wearing one of my t-shirts. It might hide everything when she's standing, but as soon as she gets on her hands and knees, her bare ass shows.

I snap my fingers as I start walking. "Come on."

Before she can move, Rachel leans over and drops a kiss on her lips. "Thank you," she whispers. "I really need this." She runs a hand down her

spine and all the way to her round ass. Then she gives her a small slap and Rose starts crawling.

What a sight it is to see Rose White crawling for you.

Before we enter the room, I look down at her. Why do I get so turned-on by her hate-filled stares? I think it's knowing she truly feels humiliated, yet she does it for us. And for her pleasure, of course.

"What's your safe word, Lovebug?" I ask, my stern tone not doing anything to her. Or at least not that I can see.

"Freedom," she mumbles.

I push the door open and wait for her and Rachel to walk in before following.

As soon as I close the door behind me, Rose crawls to the spot in the middle of the room. She knows exactly where she belongs. She sits back on her haunches and waits silently, her head bowed.

Lik is not far from her, topless and rummaging through a drawer of toys.

"Take her top off," I tell Lik before turning to Rachel. "This is your session. What do you want?"

"It's not my session," she scoffs. "You're the one mad at her."

"And I will only punish her when I've calmed down. You want to take back control? Tell me what you want, and we'll do it."

"I want you to overstimulate her. I want to watch her come until I get bored of it."

Which might as well be never, and we both know it. "That's *my* favorite punishment. Get your own," I chuckle.

She laughs back, and I know how painful it is for Rose to hear us and not be allowed to look up at us. In this room, she's our submissive, our toy, and nothing else. If she wants out, she knows what to do. Although *freedom* never crosses her mouth in here because she enjoys herself too much.

"Fine," Rachel finally says. "I want to try this." She points at the spanking horse in the corner and a sick smile spreads across my face.

"You have impeccable tastes, love."

When I turn around, Rose is still in the same position, now naked. Lik heard us and is already pulling the spanking horse to the middle of the room.

I stop right in front of Rose and nudge her knees apart with the tip of my shoe. "Will you never learn to present yourself?" I ask her. I'm going to be hard on her, and she knows it.

I'm letting Rachel make all the decisions since there is no way I won't

purely hurt her if it was up to me. Then, when I've calmed down, I'll punish her my way.

I lean down to watch her bowed face. She's biting her lips, making herself look irresistible. But she's not fooling anyone. She's trying to stop herself from saying something that'll get her in trouble.

"I'm sorry, Sir'," I tell her. "I can't hear you, Rose." I kick her knees further apart again, until she has to shift and spread her legs properly. She grunts when I push some more. "Wider," I order.

"F—ugh." She holds herself back from cursing at me and it makes me smile.

"*I'm. Sorry. Sir.*" I repeat.

Her breathing accelerates, fighting herself. I grab her chin, pulling her head up. "Don't be stubborn, Rose. Be my good little slut."

Her eyes come to mine, and she doesn't answer anything. She doesn't tell me to fuck off, but she doesn't give me what I want to hear, either.

"Fine," I sigh. "Up."

She slowly stands up and I turn her around to face the spanking horse. The main flat piece where she will lay down on her front is padded and covered in black leather. On one end, two legs start from the main bit, separating so her legs will have to spread. They then bend ninety degrees, parallel to the floor, for her to rest her shins. The buckles will make sure she can't move. On the other end, two cuffs will keep her from going anywhere.

"Do you know what this is?" I ask her.

"Pretty self-explanatory," she bites back.

"Jesus, Princess." Lik intervenes. "You're very brave for someone who's about to be buckled to a spanking horse."

"I'm only doing this for Rachel, so the two of you better not expect anything. *I*, unlike Sam, didn't do anything wrong. So, suck my dick. That brave enough for you?"

I knew she wouldn't last. From the moment she bit her lower lip, I knew there was too much fight in her to follow instructions.

Instead of answering her blatant disrespect, I put a soft hand on her lower back. "Get on it. On your stomach, with your legs on here," I say, tapping where she should put her legs.

She huffs, turning around to Rachel. "Is that what you want, Sunshine?" she asks, practically ordering her to stop this.

Rachel sits down on the red-padded throne we have in this room and puts

her hands on the armrests. “Yes, Doll,” she answers sharply. “That is what I want. Now get on it and close that smart mouth of yours before we gag it.”

Rose takes a deep breath and turns back to the spanking horse. “Whatever,” she mumbles to herself.

Lik helps her on. She lowers her upper body on the main bit, her stomach against the leather. Lik buckles her waist to it while I ensure her thighs and shins are against the leg bits. I wrap the leather buckle around each thigh and then around her ankles.

At the front, Lik extends her arms down the front legs and locks her wrists in the cuffs.

“Beautiful,” I say as I run a hand across her backside. “You owe me quite a few apologies, Rose. How should I go about achieving that?” I click my tongue. “Rachel, love,” I prompt her. “Go to that closet and pick whatever you want.”

She smiles at me, and despite her bruised face and lips crusted with dry blood, she looks the most powerful she’s ever been.

She walks to the closet where I keep the impact play equipment and opens it. I see her hand hovering across many of them, but she settles on the cane, and I can’t help the shiver of excitement that runs up my back. The tips of my fingers tingle at the idea of caning Rose’s perfectly round ass.

I put my hand on her lower back and run it down her ass cheeks, making circular motions and warming up her skin.

Rachel brings me the cane, and electricity zaps between us when I grab it from her, our fingers grazing. She smiles at me and goes back to sit down on the throne.

I spend another minute warming Rose’s ass and the back of her thighs, which are where I’m going to hit. She’s completely relaxed on the bench and Lik is scratching her scalp, his hand buried in her hair.

“Tell me, Rose. What is your definition of pain?”

I tap her ass cheeks lightly with the cane, but she doesn’t answer me. “So bloody stubborn.”

I strike her lightly. She jumps more from the surprise than the pain. “Is that painful?”

She stays silent. “You’re right. I think that’s not hard enough. Let’s do something. Whenever my strikes become too painful. Say you’re sorry for disobeying me, and I’ll stop right away.”

I take a step back and a deep breath. I have to focus, to not hit with all my

strength. I must relax and let go of the rage I've been holding. This is not about hurting her. This is about healing all of us.

I strike. Harder this time. Enough that a line appears on both her ass cheeks. She hisses and tenses in her binds but doesn't say anything. I do it again, slightly harder. Her silence keeps me going. On the third strike, she grunts painfully.

"There are only so many times I can safely strike you with a cane, Rose. I don't want to hurt you beyond repair."

She tries to shift, but she's stuck in her position. The leather wrapped around her is keeping her tightly against the bench. In front of me, Lik's eyes light up and he licks his lower lip. His hard-on is evident in his jeans, and I smile at him. "Do you want her mouth or her pussy?"

"Mouth," he rasps. Lust is coating his usually smooth voice.

I strike Rose, making her shriek. "We're getting there." I run my hand against her backside, knowing it'll help with the pain. "I think you're turning Lik on."

"He's not the only one," Rachel adds with a breathy voice.

Rose's breathing has accelerated, and I know I'm getting close to my goal. The next strike does it.

"Shit!" she screams. "Fuck...fuck..."

"Language. How's that for pain? Does it hurt?"

"Y-yeah," she pants.

"And yet I can't hear how sorry you are for disobeying me."

Rachel and I cross our gazes, and I can't help but smirk. We're both completely aware of the unfairness of the situation. Rose saved her life. Ultimately, it's a good thing she went into that house.

But we all need to release the tension after yesterday. We all need play and pleasure. And who said punishments always had to be fair? We own her, after all. Her soul, her heart, and her body that we get to play with whenever and however we see fit.

Rose must hear the shift in the air when I lift the cane again because she rushes the words out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry!"

I strike, making her scream.

"Would you like to say that again? Properly this time."

"I-I'm sorry, Sir. For disobeying."

"Are you going to do it again?"

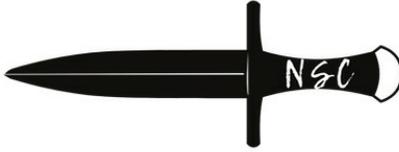
“No! No, Sir...”

“Do you know how I know you’re hurting, Rose?”

She shakes her head before repeating. “No, Sir.”

“Because you’re so wet, you’re practically dripping on my floor. Now open your mouth wide for Lik.”

LIK



Nasty - Bryce Fox

Her blood-red lips spread wide, but I take my time to wrap her long hair around my fist and lift her head. Once her neck is taut and at an awkward angle, I unbutton my jeans and lower my zipper. I squeeze my hard cock through my boxers before pulling it out. I'm so used to Sam teasing me every time we have sex that I enjoy teasing myself. Rose's mouth relaxes while she waits, and I pull at her hair.

"Open," I snap. "Who said you could close your mouth."

She opens wide again at the same time a whimper escapes her. I look up and notice my beautiful boyfriend kneading her ass cheeks and digging his fingers into the red stripes he made with the cane.

"Tsk, tsk," I tut her. "I told you you were being too brave."

I pull my cock out completely and trace the outline of her mouth. Her tongue darts out, licking my tip and a fire starts in me.

No matter how much I try to explain to myself how I fell for Rose, I can't understand it. I couldn't ignore her beauty when I met her, but that's not what did it. It's *her*. The mix of strength and pride. The freedom that emanates out of her.

Rose would do anything for her freedom, which stirs something in me. Hope.

Hope that the world awaits us once we've gotten rid of the Volkov

brothers. To do whatever we want, the four of us.

Everything Rose encompasses, the good and bad, makes me *feel*. It's different from Sam and yet so natural. Sam and I were ordinary in our own way. We met, we flirted, we fucked, we liked the chemistry, and we kept going until we became nothing without the other. True love.

Rose was a shock to the heart. Something dormant awoken after she zapped through me, and now I can't seem to spend a second without thinking of her. The grace, the fight in her, the toxicity. It all comes together to make her whole. Human. Worth it.

A grunt from the goddess in front of me brings me out of my daydreaming. Sam has just slapped her ass. Smiling down at her, I tighten my grip on her hair and start pushing into her mouth.

"Beautiful," I rasp as she takes me in. Pleasure courses through my body, and I stare right into Sam's eyes. "Beautiful," I repeat in a whisper. This time, meaning him.

He knows it because he smiles back at me and runs his hand across his face, failing at hiding the slight tint of his cheeks, before looking down at Rose's exposed pussy.

I feel my cock hit the back of Rose's throat, surrounded by her heat, and she wriggles in my hold. She attempts to say something, in vain, and I caress her cheek.

"Keep sucking, princess. You don't want to disappoint me."

With a new fervor, she bobs her head up and down my dick as I relax my hold on her hair. Every now and then, I tighten again and keep her close to my crotch to make sure she does her best to try and swallow me.

The moment I see Sam align himself with her pussy, I retreat slightly. As soon as he pushes in, it moves her forward and closes the distance between us.

Her loud moan resonates against my dick and my head falls backward. "Holy shit," I groan.

"Squeeze that pussy, Rose. I want to feel every inch of you."

She whimpers against me but seems to obey because Sam hisses as he peers up at me. Our eyes lock, and we smile at each other like the cat that got the cream. Two cats sharing the same cream in this case. And fucking loving it.

He slaps her ass again, and she squeals, the sound being pushed back down her throat by my dick. I watch the way her hips wriggle and how she

attempts to meet Sam's every thrust and accelerate the tempo.

"Rookie mistake," I chuckle as he grabs her hips. "You don't decide the pace when Sam fucks you, princess. Never."

Sam lets out a satisfied laugh, happy that I know my lesson by heart. "All you do is keep still." He pulls out and slams back in. "And fucking. Take. It." He thrusts at every word, controlling the way she sucks on my dick, and both she and I can't help our moans anymore.

"Shit..."

Sensing I'm about to explode, Sam addresses himself to me. "Pull out."

"What?" I choke, not stopping.

He stops fucking Rose, earning himself a long moan of complaint since she can't talk, and digs his gaze into mine.

"Malik," he growls. "If you come, you'll be the one strapped to this spanking horse. And I won't go as easy on you as I was with her. Now pull. Out."

A groan of frustration escapes me as I obey his order. I fist my dick, now drenched in Rose's spit and squeeze hard, trying to calm my trembling. I only realize now that Rachel has gotten up and is walking toward Sam. He pulls out of Rose, earning himself a hiss of complaint.

I grab her jaw and push my thumb in. "Don't stop sucking, baby." Her tongue twirling around my finger makes my dick twitch. I pull my thumb out and wipe the precum on my tip just to push it back into her mouth and watch her lick it off.

She moans loudly, and I look at Rachel and Sam. She's put herself between Rose and him and has started fingering her passionately.

Rose gasps, trembling and on the edge of exploding, and Rachel pulls her fingers out.

"Spread it," Sam murmurs in Rachel's ear. "Right here." I watch him point between her ass cheeks, and my dick hardens.

My thumb pushes further into her mouth, and I watch Sam's finger start making circles. I'm dying to watch the way they're going to stretch her. Quickly, I retreat my hand and get rid of my jeans and boxers. But when I take one step toward the other two, Sam's dark stare comes to me.

"No. Stay there."

"I want to see too," I insist. Yet I don't take another step.

"Stay," he growls.

"Sam—"

“On your knees. In front of Rose. Now.” Rachel’s voice leaves no room for debate.

My mouth drops open at her stern order. My eyes go to Sam, and he cocks an eyebrow.

“Now, Lik,” she repeats. “And watch your manners.”

Taking a step back, so I’m in front of Rose again, I lower myself to my knees. I put my hands behind my back, holding my left wrist in my right hand like I know to do and my gaze crosses Rose’s. Hers is glazing with lust, not fully aware of what is going on. She’s too lost in pleasure now. Me, however, I can feel the burning red of humiliation from the order I’ve been given.

“Rest your forehead against hers,” Rachel continues. “It’ll stop your eyes from wandering. No kissing.”

In slow motion, my forehead comes to rest against Rose’s. And when they touch, she gasps. I can imagine the way Sam just pushed his thumb into her ass.

“Your turn,” I hear Sam whisper to Rach.

A second later, Rose is grunting, her hot breath fanning my face. My dick is rock-hard, precum leaking. I ache to touch her, to push inside her and feel her clench around my dick. I watch her grit her teeth and understand the mix of pain and pleasure she must be going through.

Her breathing staggers and her eyelids look heavier by the second. She screams some meaningless curses and writhes. I feel the trembling against my forehead, and I’m dying to touch her some more. To become one with her.

Another pained gasp escapes her, and this time, I can’t stop myself.

Ignoring the order I’ve been clearly given, I push my lips against Rose’s. Kissing her open mouth, I swallow her next moan. I bring two flat hands to her cheeks and hold her as I devour her mouth. Our tongues dance together, and every time I pull away slightly to get more of her, she whimpers deliciously.

She tastes of everything I love.

And yet, what are all the things I love?

Pain, pleasure, control, and submission. Power, surrender, freedom. She tastes of passion and desire. Yearning and giving in.

Each stroke of my tongue against hers is a step closer to heaven. Each moment that passes, I feel myself falling deeper into her. She bewitches me, takes me for herself, and leaves no more room inside me for reason.

I take it all, and I want some more, but a hand lands in my curls and wrenches me away from paradise.

And here begins the delicious trip down to hell.

ROSE



Chaos Mode - DEZI

Lik is pulled away so suddenly, a cold wave passes over me. He hisses in pain as Sam drags him by the hair and pulls him up to his feet.

“It has been a while since you’ve been a naughty boy, hasn’t it? Thank you for the present, my love,” he says, his mouth against Lik’s ear.

I can’t focus on them one more second. Not when I feel Rachel’s finger probing at my tight entrance again. She and Sam have been going in and out of my ass in turns for what feels like forever. What started as an uncomfortable burn has turned into a deep, satiating pleasure.

I barely notice Sam locking Lik’s wrists into cuffs hanging from the ceiling. Instead, I’m focused on the bliss from Rachel inserting two fingers inside me.

“Look at her while I’m plugging your ass,” Sam’s harsh voice brings me back to the present.

He has a large butt plug in his hand that he’s covering in lube. “I can’t hear you begging me, Lik,” he growls.

“Please, Sir,” he pants. “Please put the plug in my ass.” A groan follows. I can’t see Sam’s hand, just from the fact that it’s behind Lik.

“Clench it tightly,” Sam smiles just before slapping his ass. “I’ll be back for you in a few.” Before he moves, I watch as he presses a button on a remote he’s holding in his other hand.

“Aah...” Lik moans. I’m assuming the plug is now vibrating in his ass.

Sam is back behind me before I can see him move. His hand caresses my burning ass cheeks as I writhe under his touch. He’s keeping Rachel between us.

“Do you want to try? Should I plug you too and watch as you attempt to survive the vibrations?” Sam asks me.

“N-no,” I stutter.

“Ask nicely, and I’ll consider going gentle on you.”

“Please,” I try to say as Rachel keeps playing with my ass. Waves of pleasure keep spiking deep inside me, making me wetter by the second while also aware of how empty my pussy feels. “Please,” I say again. “Be gentle, Sir.”

A kiss on my back. “Anything for you, Lovebug.”

Rachel pulls away and the next thing I know, I’m being freed from the spanking horse. Rachel is walking back to the red throne she was sitting on earlier and Sam helps me up. I fall into his arms, my legs incapable of holding me up. Before I understand what’s truly going on, Sam’s put me back down, right in front of the throne, and I go on all fours.

My face is just before Rachel’s spread legs and I don’t hesitate one second. I move forward to bury myself against her pussy, but my hair is being pulled back in a violent gesture.

“Wait,” Sam growls. I feel his fingers against my asshole again, and I squeak in fear. “Ssh, relax. I’ll make it painless.”

He must have coated his fingers with lube because, mixed with my own wetness, he slides his thumb in easily. Pushing in and circling as he and Rachel had done just a minute ago, he seems satisfied with the stretch. I feel something thicker coming in and out, and I assume he’s now using more than one finger.

Pleasure courses through my body from deep within me, and I groan, moving back and forth against his fingers.

“We’re going to try something bigger, Lovebug. Just don’t tighten.”

I feel his dick pushing against my entrance.

“Sam,” I grunt. “You’re too big...”

“You can take it, baby,” he whispers as he rubs against the small of my back. “You look beautiful with my dick stretching you out.”

“I can’t...”

“Just take a deep breath for me.”

Wanting it to work desperately, I take a deep breath. At the same time, Rachel goes on her knees in front of me and kisses me, intertwining her tongue with mine. And just when she's put me in a state of blissful pleasure, Sam pushes in.

I groan into her mouth. Behind me, I can hear Sam's gasp of pleasure, and not too far, Lik moaning. I can imagine his eyes on Sam's dick as it enters me.

He starts slow, taking his time to push in. I can feel myself stretching out around him and I can't help the deep moans that drive past my throat. His hands are squeezing my hips like he's trying to get under my skin.

Once I'm used to his girth, he retreats and pushes back in. Repeating the movement slowly but with a little more strength every time. I can feel him building up both our pleasure.

Rachel, now sitting back on the throne, grabs my hair and pulls me toward her simultaneously as Sam pushes. My face lands against her pussy and she starts grinding against me.

It's not long before her moans mix with mine, Sam's grunts, and Lik's whimpers.

The whole thing is a blissful torment. It's overwhelming and leaving me yearning for the next thrust, for Rachel's next moan. Her legs are squeezing my head, but I've lost awareness and I'm not capable of telling if she's come or not. I'm too focused on my own pleasure and sure we're now all linked. My pussy is pulsing and my clit throbbing, but they're not touching it, and I whine a complaint.

A slap against my ass cheeks brings me back to the present. "Are you desperate for us to fill that little cunt, Rose?"

Moaning against Rachel's pussy, he understands my agreement.

"Make me come, and maybe we'll take pity on you," Rachel rasps above me. Her voice is high and desperate, but her words are harsh to my ears.

I double my efforts, making out with her clit until I feel my jaw and tongue ache. The grip of her legs against my head tightens and she accelerates the movements by thrusting her hips against my face and holding me by the hair. Behind me, Sam hardens his thrusts, and I feel myself shaking to the rhythm of pleasure.

Rachel explodes against me, and I feel my pussy clenching without being able to do anything about it nor follow her into the depth of pleasure.

Sam slows his thrusts and pulls out gently. In just a few seconds, all their

touches are gone, leaving me desperate for more.

“Don’t you wish you were touching her, Lik?”

Lik’s grunt resonates loudly behind me. As I feel Sam walking away, Rachel helps me sit up and turn around. I watch him undo the cuffs holding Lik. He falls to his knees in front of Sam. His dick is rock-hard, and he puts two hands on Sam’s thighs.

“I’m sorry for disobeying. Turn it...ugh...turn it off. I can’t take the teasing anymore.”

Sam looks down at him from his impossible height and smiles wickedly. “You are nothing in this room. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” His eyes are cast down and his voice a low rasp.

“I own you, Malik. You obey me, you come for me, you breathe for me. When I give you an order, you execute, or you suffer.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Apologize to Rachel for disobeying her.”

I can sense the hesitation as Lik shifts. Sam pushes the end of his boot against Lik’s hard dick and presses. He hisses and forces choked words past his raw throat. “I’m sorry—”

“No,” Sam cuts him off. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, for disobeying.”

Rachel’s hands land on me from behind, her sitting on the throne and me on the floor with my back against her legs. She wraps a hand softly around my throat, and the other comes to play with my right nipple.

I moan as Lik says, “I’m sorry, Ma’am, for disobeying.”

Rachel’s mouth is against my ear. “I want to hear you call me Ma’am.”

She tweaks my nipple at the same time, and I tremble with pleasure.

The words spill before I can even think of stopping them. Like I was always destined to say them. “Yes, Ma’am.”

In front of me, Sam puts a hand under Lik’s jaw. “Your tongue.”

Lik shows a flat tongue, already knowing what’s coming. Sam spits from his high position right onto Lik’s tongue.

“Show me you’re a good boy. Swallow.”

Lik swallows thickly. “You’re going to fuck Rose while I fuck you. And if she doesn’t come, neither do you.”

A shiver of pleasure runs through me, and Rachel uses the occasion to stroke my nipple again, a soft moan escaping me.

“Sounds like she’s very excited at the prospect,” Sam tells Lik. “Go get her wet again.”

Oh, I'm wet already. Despite that, Lik gets up and hurries to me. In two strides, he's on me, settling on the floor between my legs. His fingers are pushing inside me before I can form an opinion about the situation.

What would I say anyway?

Yes, please! Fuck me until tomorrow!

They already know what I think.

While Lik fingerfucks me hard enough I can't remember my name, Rachel is playing with my tits like her aim is to make me combust.

I'm expressing my pleasure so loudly I can't even hear Lik's moans when I see Sam behind him, pulling out the butt plug.

As soon as his fingers are out of me, Lik is pushing in with his dick. Emotions overtake me, my body grateful for being filled in the way it's been craving since Sam started caning me on the spanking horse.

Desperate for my clit to be touched, my hand slides down, but before I can reach it, Lik grabs my wrist and hands me over to Rachel. She grabs it and then the other.

"Fuck," I moan. "Touch me."

"Not yet," Sam answers instead of him. "Hold on a little longer for me, Lovebug."

I've slid to lying down on the floor now. Rachel's had to sit down on the ground, and my head is resting between her thighs. Lik is on top of me, his hand on either side of my face. He grunts loudly as he pushes inside me restlessly.

"Kiss her," Sam tells his boyfriend.

Lik's face falls on mine, and our tongues connect as our breathing becomes one. Pleasure is zapping through me, an orgasm building so deep inside me I don't control my ragged movements anymore.

And just as Lik starts nibbling on my bottom lip, Sam enters him. I know it because Lik suddenly bites down, moaning loudly as he does so and choking the sound down his throat.

I whimper, but the pleasure is too big to feel the pain. I feel blood running down my lips and as soon as Lik pulls away, Rachel's fingers spread it across my upper lip then pushes it into my mouth.

A frenzy has overtaken all of us. None of this feels real anymore, and I'm losing myself to the agony of pleasure. Every time Sam thrusts into Lik, the latter pushes into me. Lik falls on top of me, his mouth in the crook of my neck and Sam's hands come to rest on either side of his body.

Sam is so close to me, his breath is against my bloody lips. He licks it off me and sucks on my bleeding lip. Pushing harder into Lik, I feel him fuck me through him. He kisses me like our whole lives depend on it. If any of us stop now, if any of us slows down the madness, we might realize how far we've fallen down the rabbit hole.

No, we might as well keep falling, because no one is coming to save us now. Insanity is who we are. Outrageous, senseless, eccentricity is what we live for.

Sam pulls away from me just to bite harshly into Lik's shoulder. I feel him whimper against my neck before biting into it.

I scream at the strength he puts into it. I'm not sure if the wetness I feel on my skin is sweat, his spit, or blood. I don't care anymore.

Words have escaped us. Nothing could accompany our moans and whimpers anyway.

Sometimes, letting the animal in you take over is better than trying to put a human explanation to your passion.

Lik's thumb comes to stroke my clit, and it takes only a few seconds for me to explode against him. All my body has been waiting for is the most basic touch as pleasure detonates from my lower belly. My hips thrust, my pussy clenches, and my nails dig into Rachel's wrists. I'm screaming too loudly to comprehend anything around me anymore.

I feel Lik coming from the result of my own orgasm, and Sam is soon to follow. His eyes are on me when he does so. His face is scrunched and his mouth agape.

He falls onto Lik and me as soon as he's done, his arms not supporting him anymore.

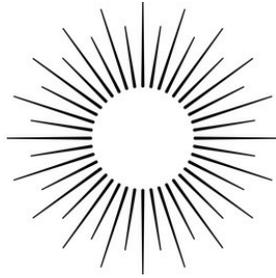
We're just a panting, sweaty mess as everything falls back into silence. None of us can move, and I won't be the first. I can already feel sleep trying to grab me and lock me in. My body has no energy left, and the orgasm has taken everything I had left.

My eyelids are heavy, and I don't even care that two bodies are crushing me to death.

This is it.

Happiness.

RACHEL



Stick Around - ENVYYOU

After showering and putting some fresh clothes on, I walk into Sam and Lik's room. Rose is fast asleep in their bed, on her front. Her hair is wet and despite being under the covers, I can guess she's completely naked and clean.

Lik is sitting on top of a wooden chest of drawers that looks like an antique. He's topless but wearing a black pair of sweats. Sam is standing right in front of him between his legs, wearing nothing but a pair of tight black boxers. I'm thankful for the little clothes they have. I love them, but I've seen enough of their dicks lately.

Sam is an impressive beast to look at. Entirely covered in ink, his back sports the giant tattoo of two dragons fighting. His muscles ripple as he wraps his arms around Lik's waist and rests his head on his shoulder. Lik plays with strands of his boyfriend's hair and drops a kiss on the top of his head. They both have wet hair, and it's nice to see Sam without his usual hairdo. He looks more relaxed, more approachable.

I lay against the doorframe as I watch them whisper sweetness to each other.

"Are you sure?" Sam is telling him. "I just want to spoil you. Why won't you let me?"

"We can do it when Rose wakes up," Lik whispers back. "You can spoil the both of us at the same time."

“I don’t mind doing it twice. You submit to me, and I take care of you. That’s the deal.”

“I promise I’m fine. It can wait.”

They breathe against the other for a minute, taking the other in. Before officially turning into a stalker, I let my presence be known by walking further in and sitting on the bed next to Rose.

“I don’t know how you got her to shower before she fell asleep,” I tell them as I put a hand in her hair. Instantly, she buries herself against me and nudges me. I softly scratch her scalp in light motions since it seems that she needs to be petted even in her sleep.

They both acknowledge me in their own way. Lik gives me a small wink and Sam lets his boyfriend go to turn around and smile softly at me. From behind, Lik locks his arms around his neck and nestles against him.

“She practically fell asleep on us,” Sam confirms.

My eyes dart to the small heart tattooed on his hip. The one that has an R in it. It matches Rose’s, except hers has an S.

“You know...” I chuckle to myself and shake my head, feeling embarrassment creep up my neck. “No, never mind.”

“What?” Lik insists.

“Forget I said anything,” I smile.

“Tell us, love,” Sam insists, mischievousness sparkling in his eyes. I think he knows where I’m going.

“Well,” I drawl, taking my time. I sigh. “I guess I can tell you now. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

I get up, earning me a soft moan from Rose when my hand leaves her scalp. I walk to them and point at the small heart on Sam. “I used to be jealous of this.” I poke it, feeling the need to check if it’s real. “And the one on Rose, obviously.”

“No,” Lik laughs. “Please tell me you were not that bitter.”

“Oh, I was,” I nod. “Rose and I were the epitome of toxicity in high school.” I raise the booty shorts I’m wearing slightly. “She was a bitch who liked whoring around, and I was as jealous as they come. It earned me this.”

I lift my leg and show them the wonky tattoo I’d practically begged Rose to give me when we were younger. It’s so high on my thigh that it can’t even be seen when I’m in shorts.

Property of Rose White.

“This,” I point. “Is because I knew you guys shared a tattoo. And you

were the one I was jealous of the most. You also had that X tattoo. The one on your neck that she also has on her arm.”

“That one is the Bianco family mark. And as for the heart...I don’t know. Nothing had ever happened between her and me back then,” Sam scoffs.

“I know, but you knew her. Anyone could sleep with Rose. She’d give them her superficial self anytime. But you *knew* her. Her secrets, her past. I hated that you two shared something together from before me.”

“Toxic indeed,” Lik mocks me.

“Thank God you didn’t know about the other ones,” Sam laughs.

“What?” I choke.

Raising an eyebrow in jest, he points at a small sentence on his abs. “This is from the notes she used to leave in my jackets when she lived at Bianco’s. My dad used to work for him, so I was there every single day.”

The writing is almost like Rose’s current writing. Messy, cursive letters from someone who clearly hates using a pen.

Escaping Lik’s hold, Sam takes a step forward and spreads his arms wide. Slowly he spins around. Slow enough for me to notice all the other tattoos of short sentences he sports. There must be more than fifty of them peppered all over his body, mixed with the other designs covering him. His arms, his left wrist, his ribs, and the back and front of his legs. On the back of his neck, one just below his heart.

“They’re all the notes she left you,” I whisper in shock.

“Every single one of them,” he confirms.

“What else,” I ask, fascinated. My old jealousy seems dull and stupid compared to his passion for our girl.

He shrugs. “Some here, some there.” He shows me his inner right wrist. “She drew this for me on a napkin when we were kids.” The hand-drawn heart should have looked ridiculous as a tattoo but knowing where it came from gives it a different meaning.

“This is crazy,” I say softly, not meaning it one bit.

“Hardly,” he tells me. “Rose has been mine for my entire life, Rachel. I’ve had her in my heart, in my thoughts. She’s with me every day that I live. Surely you can understand that. Wearing her on my skin is just a physical way of showing what she did to me emotionally. She marked me the moment she set eyes on me as a kid. Nothing will ever change that. It’s permanent.”

I’m speechless, so Lik takes over.

“They have a past, Rach. We can only accept it.”

I nod, completely agreeing with him.

“It doesn’t mean we can’t create a present all of us together,” Sam jumps back in. “We both grew up and moved on to do our own things. We fell in love with other people, and now all over again.”

“Now again?” I chuckle. My heart kicks into an unhealthy rhythm.

“What? Don’t you think I love you?” His smile is easy, his tone gentle.

“I...I don’t know. I can’t assume,” I stutter. “We’re not even attracted sexually to each other.”

“So? You don’t want to fuck Lik, and you told him you were in love with him. What about me?”

“Lik was never my competition.”

“If I had been your competition, you’d have never stood a chance, love,” he laughs kindly.

I open my mouth to retort, but my words die at the bottom of my throat. This isn’t even an argument. Rose would never have stopped loving Sam.

“Regardless,” I finally say. “I was jealous. And bitter,” I admit. “And I can’t just forget those feelings.”

He shakes his head like I’m a child who doesn’t understand. “Those are ephemeral. Lean into what you feel deeply, not anything superficial.”

“You just want to pry it out of me.” I don’t know why I’m being so stubborn. I *am* in love with Sam. It’s insane to feel and to think, although it would be even more insane to say.

Am I meant to just admit I fell in love with two strangers in the short time since Rose has been back? I need to keep a semblance of credibility. I can’t just fall in love with anyone just because Rose did too.

“He’s jealous because you said it to me and not to him,” Lik suddenly cackles as if it just came to him.

Sam’s lips tip up at the corner of his mouth and a light tint covers his cheeks.

“Oh my god,” I laugh. “You’re jealous!”

Since yesterday, I feel like a weight has come off my shoulders. The session we had downstairs was cleansing. The memories of Conor wiped away in the throes of passion. But as I laugh and enjoy myself, the physical pain from his hits can’t be ignored, bringing back a ball of anxiety in my stomach.

“You’re the one who made a huge deal out of a tiny tattoo. Don’t call me jealous!” Sam defends himself, although he knows he’s been caught.

“Okay,” I nod. “I’ll make you a deal. Tattoo Rose. A heart with an R in it. For me. Put it on her hip next to yours. Then I’ll tell you the truth about loving you...or not.”

“You’re crazy,” he scoffs.

“Oh, I’m absolutely unhinged,” I smile wickedly. “Did Rose ever mention it?”

He shrugs. “I’ll do it right now.”

“Do you have what you need?”

“I do.” He runs his knuckles against his jaw and smirks. “But if I do that to soothe your jealousy, I’m warning you now, I want something bigger than when you admitted to Lik that you were in love with him.”

Noticing my confusion, he adds, “I want a full-on declaration of love.” His British accent somehow turns his words more serious than they actually are. “I want something big. Balloons and banners. I want you down on one knee reading me a love letter.”

It’s my turn to cackle a laugh. My cheeks are hot from knowing he cares about me admitting my love to him. My heart beats rapidly and spreads tingling warmth through my whole body.

“Why not a ring while we’re at it,” I mock him.

“If your declaration doesn’t look better than a bloody marriage proposal, you’ll regret it. I want to feel like you did when Rose asked you to prom.”

My eyebrows shoot up from my surprise. “How do you know about that?”

“She told me. ‘Sam, she loved it. You should have seen her face when I invited her. She practically melted in my hands.’” His attempt to imitate Rose’s voice is somewhat sour, clearly jealous of that time. He shrugs. “You guys got what I didn’t. And I want to feel that.”

It’d never occurred to me that among the madness Rose and Sam had been through, the insanity of having grown up in a criminal organization, the trauma they went through together and that brought them closer than anything...All Sam has ever wanted to share with her was something simple.

As simple as going to prom together. Like I did with her.

“Proms are overrated, baby,” Lik adds, as if to soothe an ache.

“They truly are,” I tell him. “It’s just a bunch of kids who drink before going so they look cool and who just can’t wait for the after-party. In Stoneview, it turns into the Met Ball.”

Sam shrugs. “Proms are sweet.”

“Someone ended up being shot at the North Shore High one,” Lik chuckles to himself.

However, I notice the hope in Sam’s eyes and something pinches my heart. He never got to experience stupid things like *prom*.

“They *are* sweet,” I finally say. “It’s all about who you go with and the memories you create. Did you not have one at all?”

Sam shakes his head, suddenly looking much more innocent than usual. “I dropped out freshman year. My dad wouldn’t let me stay.”

I nod in acknowledgement before smiling at him. “Well, give me what I want.” I tilt my head toward Rose. “And I’ll give you sweet memories to remember.”

By the time Sam has gathered everything he needs close to the bed, Rose still hasn’t moved an inch. She was in such a deep sleep, none of our conversation or moving around woke her up. But when we’re finally ready, I slide a hand in her hair while the other slides down the covers. As I assumed earlier, she is naked underneath. Her soft, tanned skin is cool and she delights in my warm hand going down her back, her ass, and finally caressing the back of her legs.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” I murmur in her ear.

She slowly stirs back to the world of the living and moans something under her breath as she tries to bury herself under the pillow.

“Sam has something for you,” I tell her.

A rasped ‘what’ surfaces from where she’s hiding, and she slowly turns around, still keeping the pillow against her face.

“Come out,” I giggle. I slide my hand to her breast and start playing with her nipple. Once, twice... On the third time I sensually flick the little bud, a heavy breath escapes her.

She wriggles her hips, clearly getting aroused by my hands and Lik uses this occasion to grab the pillow away from her.

She groans and tries to grab it back to no avail. She can’t deal with the three of us at the same time. Especially not when Sam puts a hand on each knee and starts spreading her legs.

“I’m still sore,” she grumbles, now trying to escape us. “Why are you all attacking me?”

“I’m not fucking you,” Sam chuckles. “I’m going to tattoo you.”

She stills and finally gives us her full attention. Sitting up against the

headboard, she wipes a hand across her face to try and wake herself up.

“Why? What are you tattooing?” She doesn’t seem against it in the slightest.

“I’m doing a heart for Rachel. Right next to mine.”

Her eyes dart to her left hip.

“And one for me,” Lik adds.

Both Sam and I raise an eyebrow at him. “What?” he defends himself. “You didn’t think you’d both have your initials on her body and not me? What kind of show are we running here?”

“Alright,” Sam laughs to himself. His tattoo gun is in his hand, and some small pots of ink are open on the bed. He’s got those guns that work with a battery, and it makes it easier for him to manipulate.

“Whoa.” Rose shifts closer to the headboard. “I’m not a canvas for your random stupid ideas,” she snaps at us.

There’s a short pause, and the three of us look at each other before exploding into a laughing fit.

“You guys have fucking lost it,” she mumbles as she attempts to get off the bed on Lik’s side.

“You’re not going anywhere, princess,” he tells her as he grabs her shoulders and pushes her back down onto the mattress.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she snaps as she starts fighting back. “I just need to pee!”

“Later,” Sam adds as he now pushes her legs together and sits on her thighs.

“Why was I not consulted in this decision?” she growls at us.

“Because, Lovebug, you belong to us.”

“And we decide what we do with you,” I add.

“Anytime. Anywhere,” Lik concludes.

She gives up in a loud huff and lays down on the bed. “Whatever. I’ll get you all tattooed too.”

None of us reply to her. Probably because we all agree. To make the whole thing better for us, I let my hand go back to her nipple, and this time so does Lik. We both play with her until she’s writhing and moaning. Her hips start to shift and buckle forward, and her eyes are closed. The buzzing of the tattoo gun comes to life, and Sam lifts his head.

“Will you two stop? I can’t do a good job if she’s wriggling all over the bed.”

We take our time to stop, and eventually, Rose settles. When she opens her eyes, she looks right at me, a smug smile on her face.

She knows.

She knows why I'm doing this. That I wanted to be equal to Sam.

And she's loving it.

ROSE



If I Try to Find You - KiNG MALA

7 days until Viktor...

I pop down the car mirror and paint my lips blood red. It's not a huge difference from their natural color, but it definitely enhances them. I rearrange the collar I stole from Sam's dungeon and take a deep breath.

I stole more than the collar he sometimes puts on me. I also took a red latex dress and look absolutely irresistible in it.

I completed the look with thigh-high shiny black boots. I look like sex on legs, and I am uncomfortable as fuck. I tighten the trench coat around my body, hiding my outfit, and attempt to take another deep breath before heading out of my car. The dress makes it hard to move and I wobble on the high heels.

Sam still hasn't found the Wolves' compound and I'm running out of time. I need to find them myself and get this over with. After all, if I can convince Viktor to leave me alone and simultaneously avoid him and Sam being in the same vicinity, it saves him from being hurt. It's easier to not put Sam and Lik at risk. They don't understand Viktor is a powerful man and the number of times he has had to deal with someone wanting to kill him or take down his organization.

I found a way to get to Viktor before he gets to me, and I'm going to make this right.

I knock on the door that leads to Vue Club, and as soon as the guard sees me, he lets me in. You don't forget a face like mine.

Instead of going to the regular club, I take the route that leads to the BDSM underground club Lik had taken me to.

I walk into the room where I had gotten ready last time. Where Lik had made me *beg* him to gag me. The humiliation kicks my heart into a rapid rhythm.

The blonde receptionist, who still isn't wearing much, smiles knowingly at me.

"Back, I see. Where's your Master?"

Ignoring her jab, I say calmly. "I want to see Aaron Williams."

"I'm afraid Mr. Williams doesn't see stray sluts."

I run my tongue against my teeth to avoid insulting her. *Keep calm, Rose.*

"Tell him Rose White wants to see him. He won't refuse me."

Showing me a set of pearly teeth through a perfect bitch smile, she answers, "Mr. Williams isn't here. Sorry."

I huff and slowly walk toward her, taking my coat off as I do so. Once I'm by the counter behind which she stands, I smile at her and raise a hand, pretending to put a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

I grab the back of her head and smash her head against the counter. She shrieks something about her nose and I put my coat on the counter with my other hand.

I lower my mouth to her ear. "Take me to *Mr. Williams* before I give you another reason to get a fucking nose job. Which was really well done, by the way."

"I-I can't," she whimpers. "He doesn't see anyone from outside the club. You can only meet him if you're already in and-and y-you're not a member."

"Go tell him Rose White wants to see him. *Right. Now,*" I hiss in her ear.

As soon as I let her go, she jumps up and runs inside the club. So much for keeping calm.

I check my watch. It takes a total of three minutes for the door to reopen to a shaking bitch and, finally, Aaron comes into the room.

I smile my best sickly-sweet smile, and he squints his eyes at me.

He hasn't changed one bit—the same broody bastard who can't ever spare a smile.

Jamie would die to be in my place right now. To see her long-lost brother. He has the same beautiful Filipino traits as her. The same green eyes that

shine with a golden curiosity. But contrary to her, he is big and takes space. He has tattoos that peek everywhere they can and he's about my height.

He takes in my outfit and his mouth twists, clearly unhappy. Then, knowing we can't talk in front of Blondie, he simply indicates the door.

I give her one last look before I go in. "Don't forget to hang my coat, sweetie." Her death stare doesn't even bother me.

"Still a bitch, I see," Aaron says plainly as he closes the door behind us. And just like that, I'm back at Vue club. This time without anyone to protect me.

A chill courses my body as we walk the BDSM club. I try not to act shocked when I see a man on all fours, dressed in a leather thong with a huge gag in his mouth. A woman is sitting on a sofa and resting her legs on his back. She gives me a wide smile when she notices me and winks at me. She's holding a crop in her right hand and my thighs tighten.

"Rose," Aaron snaps. I realize I've stopped to stare at the woman, then I shake my head before following him again.

He goes past a security guard, walks down a long corridor, and down two flights of stairs. After a long hallway, we come face to face with two other guards. They nod to Aaron and open the door for him.

"No more meetings," he tells them before we both walk in, and he locks the door behind us.

It's a simple room with a metal desk and two chairs. There's a filing cabinet and a small sofa next to it. I hear a strange plastic noise as soon as I take my first step, making me look down.

A sheet of plastic is on the floor, blood sprayed on it. I look up at the desk and notice the bloody knife on it.

"I was busy," he tells me simply. "So, you wanted to see me."

"Yeah. Why is it so hard?"

"Probably since your boyfriends have been trying to get a hold of me for being the only person outside the compound who knows where to find the brothers. I hope you understand I had to reinforce security to ensure I wasn't tortured for information."

I nod, biting my lower lip. "Yeah, okay. That makes sense."

"You've got five minutes before I kick you out and blacklist you from this club." He sits down behind the desk and indicates the other chair.

"I want to see Viktor," I say before sitting down.

He blinks at me for what must be a whole minute before he explodes in a

sarcastic laugh.

“I’m serious,” I insist.

“You’ve fucking lost your mind. Do you know what I had to do after helping you escape?”

I shrug like I don’t care. “No. What did you do?”

“First, I had to kill that fucking guard who shot you. The same one who crashed into our car. ‘Cause I couldn’t have him tell Viktor I was the one who drove you out of the compound. Then I had to make it look like he was driving you, and I was going after you two.”

“That’s dumb,” I snort.

“Then I had to convince Yelena it was her guard who strayed from her plan and freed you.”

“You’re gonna tell me the bitch agreed?”

“It took a bit of convincing, but she was too scared of Viktor finding out about her involvement in your escape to say no.”

“Well done,” I smile. “You kept yourself out of trouble. She didn’t, though. Poor woman...found in the Silver Snake River.”

He waves a hand in the air, dismissing my words. “Don’t pretend like you cared for the bitch who hit you daily. No, what you should care about is that I didn’t go through all that trouble for you to show up at Vue and tell me you want to see your captor.” He finishes with a low voice, making sure I understand he’s not joking.

“*Ex-captor*,” I correct him.

“Don’t piss me off.”

I roll my eyes and take a deep breath.

“He came back for me. Did you know?”

That makes him straighten in his seat. “When?”

“A few weeks ago. He showed up and told me he wanted me to come back.”

“But you didn’t?”

“He gave me two months. He’s a patient man.”

“No, he’s not,” he sniggers. “He’s been using the old warehouses and routes.”

“What?” I choke, both my hands going to the arms of the chairs.

He runs a hand through his hair and pulls at the roots. “I’ll bet my life you’ve got seven days left.”

“How do you know?” This whole situation is giving me bad vibes after

bad vibes.

“Because the houses will be empty in seven days, and he’ll be filling up the new ones. That’s when he’ll need you. Not because he felt bad for you and your little quadruple.”

“But I’m the one who asked for two months,” I explain, still hoping what he says doesn’t add up.

“Good thing you didn’t ask for more. He would have said no.”

I bite my tongue as my jaw tightens to the point of breaking my teeth.

“Motherfucker,” I finally say.

“Viktor doesn’t care about your feelings, Rose. He only cares about how useful you are to his business.”

“*Fuck!*” I snap, hitting the metal desk. “I’m not going back.”

“You wanted to see him just to tell him you wouldn’t go back? How fucking naïve are you?”

“I was going to give him the new locations and...and tell him I was done.”

He shakes his head at me like I’m the most stupid girl he’s ever seen. “And what about the next? And the ones after that? Have you gone stupid?”

“I—”

“The man has found a way to make his entire criminal organization untraceable. And you think he’ll let you go?”

“You helped me escape! Surely you thought I had a chance—”

“I thought you’d be smart enough to stay far away from here.”

“I wanted to,” I bite back. “Except Sam had other plans. You know, like using me to find Viktor. It was a bit hard to keep away when I was being used to find the brothers.”

“I know,” he huffs.

A long silence extends between us.

“I don’t want to go back,” I tell him quietly. Too scared to admit the truth out loud.

“There’s nothing I can do for you, Rose.” The pity in his voice breaks my heart. “All I can advise is to convince your boyfriend to drop the contract and go far away from here. Make yourselves untraceable. Disappear. Sam won’t find the brothers. He won’t be able to kill them. All he’ll do is sacrifice you because once Viktor has a hold of you again...Let’s just say he won’t lose you twice.”

“I can’t go back,” I say again.

I can see Aaron biting his inner cheek before he talks again. “Did you fall in love with him?”

My eyes go to the floor, trying to figure out the feelings I had for the man who wouldn't set me free.

Not knowing the answer, I stall. “Why are you asking?”

“Because it took me almost two years to understand if you wanted to leave or not. You were unhinged. Like none of it was real to you. You partied with the Bratva men. You learned everything he told you to. You didn't just fuck him, you shared a bed with him. You let him move you to a room right next to his marital bed. He basically turned you into his concubine. And in all that...you didn't try to leave. You didn't try to ask anyone for help. Not once. Not even when Sam found you.”

Taking it all in, I struggle to make sense of his words. Viktor turned me into exactly what he needed out of me. And I took it as a gift rather than the curse it was.

It takes me a minute to swallow the ball in my throat. Then I look up.

“Why didn't you?”

His eyebrows shoot to his thick hairline. “What?”

“You were kidnapped. Like me. At barely eighteen. You're twenty-three now. Why didn't you try to leave?”

Biting his inner cheek, his eyes dart to the side.

“You answered your own question, Aaron. All of it feels surreal. It's not a reality I was in, it was a high. Viktor saved me from being in constant pain with Aleksei. For his own interest, as you so obviously pointed out. But what do you think it felt like to me?”

Now he's the one who can't look into my eyes anymore.

“I can't tell you when I started admiring him. He was just there, mighty, smart, and willing to take care of me. I don't even remember why I suddenly wanted to have sex with him. I didn't question why he wanted me closer and closer to him.”

I shake my head.

“None of it felt real. It still doesn't. I don't remember half of my time there. Just locations, names, numbers. I was either high on adrenaline, drunk, or too exhausted to keep my eyes open.”

Vulnerability mixes with my words. It shows in the shakiness of my voice.

“I didn't choose to be there in the first place. No one is allowed to make

me accountable for anything that came after that. Out of everyone, I thought you'd understand."

We look at each other intensely, and I say, "I want to see Viktor. I want to end it all for good."

"Let's say I take you with me back to the compound."

Adrenaline is already kicking in me upon hearing those words. It's a drug that warms my chest and freezes my extremities.

"Are you going to kill him when you see him?"

My heart stops, and the truth is clear as day.

I wouldn't do it.

Aarons reads me like an open book and shakes his head at me. "I'm not judging you. I couldn't either. In that case, I wouldn't suggest asking me to take you to him because he won't let you end it."

I let my head fall backward as I huff loudly. My heartbeat feels irregular from the fear.

"What am I gonna do?" I murmur to myself.

"Go home. And run away or enjoy what little time you have left."

I get up and rearrange the stupid dress.

"I appreciate that you came dressed the part. I'm sure many people in the club would have loved to play with you."

I narrow my eyes at him and lift the corner of my mouth. "Very funny."

He raises his hand in front of him, faking innocence. "I'm just saying. Not for me, though."

I purse my lips and wonder out loud. "Why did we never sleep together?"

"Cause you got no tits?"

I shake my head as he smiles brightly at me. "Bye, Aaron."

"See you next week," he chuckles.

I give him my middle finger before closing the door.

ROSE



You Stupid Bitch - girl in red

One day until Viktor...

I run through the street, my combat boots hitting the Stoneview street loudly.
Shit, shit, shit. I'm going to die.

I finally make it to the gate, and I'm about to grab my phone when Rachel jumps out of nowhere, making me take three steps back in the process.

"Where have you been?" she hisses. "You're late!"

"Oh my god," I pant. "You scared the shit out of me."

"You think this is scary? Wait until I tell my parents you were never a friend and were fucking me in their house for the entirety of high school."

There's a short pause during which I take my breath before saying, "Well, I do hope you're planning on using different terms."

"Rose," she growls.

"Alright, alright. I get it." I rearrange my hair that flew everywhere during the run from my car and smile. "How do I look?"

Whereas she would usually answer that I'm beautiful, or perfect, or hot. She furrows her eyebrows as she observes my outfit.

"Could you have dressed *more* lesbian?" she scolds me.

"What?" I choke. "It is literally the same thing I wear every day." I look down at my black skinny jeans and combat boots.

She points at my black hoodie and leather jacket. "Why didn't you wear

something...*pink*.”

“I don’t own any pink.”

“Well, that’s stupid because it’s a very pretty color.”

“Okay,” I say in a huff. “I think someone’s projecting her coming out anxiety real bad.”

“Sorry,” she sighs. “You know me...I...I hate coming outs. I think they’re stupid, and I never wanted to do one in the first place. Why can’t I just be...*me*.”

I put two hands on her cheeks, keeping her attention on me. “Hey. Firstly, you have nothing to apologize for. It’s okay to be anxious to come out.”

She nods between my palms, her lips pouting from how tight I’m holding her.

“Secondly, you don’t have to come out if you don’t want to. Every queer person’s experience should be tailored to achieve their own happiness. No one else’s.”

“It’s not even fair that I have to go through this, and you never had to,” she complains low.

“Bit weird to say that, since it’s mainly because I have no parents, but let’s put that on the coming out anxiety too.”

“Oh...Yes.” She bites her lip and gives me a sorry smile.

“Okay, I’m going to give you another chance at this.” I twirl for her. “How do I look?”

“Gorgeous,” she smiles before going on her toes to give me a kiss.

“That’s what I thought.” I take her hand in mine and squeeze it. “Let’s go, Sunshine.”

Old money always dines for hours on end. We’ve been here for almost three hours, and we’re only now reaching dessert. Rachel still hasn’t said anything about her sexuality and I’m starting to think she doesn’t want to anymore. Which is fine, she can do whatever she wants. Although, I do wish I didn’t have to dine with her snake of a mother and coward of a father.

The sound of cutlery against china has been a prominent feature of tonight’s conversation, and I’m bored to death.

“Rachel. Your elbows, sweetie,” her mom says, looking right at me.

Right. I pull my elbows away from the table, knowing the message is for me.

She turns to her daughter. "I must say, when you said you were coming with a close friend, I didn't expect...Rose."

I smile brightly at her, pretending I don't understand her unsaid words. She thought she was going to introduce her to a new boyfriend.

Rachel told her parents that Conor was abusing her and cheating on her. She told her mom he attacked her when she confronted him about the cheating and that she hadn't heard from him since.

And, of course, since she learned about all this, her mom has been hoping to set her up with someone else. Someone who can *protect her* from the big bad world. What a fucking joke. She never gives her daughter a break.

"Mom," Rachel groans, her mouth full.

She smiles back, her cheeks trembling from the effort. "But, you know, we've always loved having her around."

Sure.

I must have come to this house a hundred times. They never had dinner with me once.

I give Rachel an encouraging smile, but she stuffs more food in her mouth so she can't speak. I look at my untouched dessert. I can't eat anymore. I have a small stomach, and I don't want to make myself feel sick.

Rachel starts rubbing her fingers against the three scars on her face. The ones that make her look like a tiger used her as a tennis ball. I glare at her until she gets the message and stops touching them.

"Mom," Rachel says more clearly now that she's swallowed. "Dad."

Her dad smiles at her, not really listening. She takes a deep breath and rearranges her chair.

"Rose isn't my friend," she says too quickly for anyone to actually understand. But that's okay. They got it anyway.

Her mom raises an eyebrow so high I wonder if it'll break in two. Her fake smile drops, and her mouth pinches.

Her dad slowly puts his cutlery down on his plate, but other than that, he doesn't react.

"She's my girlfriend," Rachel continues more slowly. "She's always been my girlfriend. Since the day you met her, she was my girlfriend. And when she stayed over, she was my girlfriend and—"

"Yes, we get it. She was your girlfriend," her mom replies tightly.

"Not was. *Is*," she insists.

"Rachel." Her mom gives her a sorry look and tilts her head. "You know

I have nothing against those...*people*.” She says the word like she means aliens and looks at me at the same time.

“Oh, here we go,” Rachel mumbles.

“Sweetie, you’re not one of them. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Mom,” she snaps. “I *am* one of them. Okay? I’m gay. It has nothing to do with you or how you raised me—thank god,” she snorts. “It’s got everything to do with who I am. And trust me, I wasn’t sure for a very long time. At some point, I even thought I could like guys.”

She turns to me, and I know she means Lik and Sam.

“But I’m not attracted to men. Do you understand? I love women. Because they’re understanding and feminine, for so many other reasons, actually. But mainly, because that’s just how I feel. I’m a lesbian, Mom.” I don’t miss her mom flinching at the word. “And I’m in love with Rose. I’ve been for as long as I’ve been able to be in love with someone. You trying to marry me off to every billionaire bachelor you encounter isn’t going to change that.”

Under the table, I put my hand on her thigh and she grabs it tightly enough to cut my blood flow. I’m so proud of her for her courage.

Taking a shaking breath, Mrs. Harris puts her cutlery down and her napkin on the table. With trembling hands, she rearranges her dress.

“Rachel, honey. I know you’ve been through a lot with Conor and—”

“*Don’t* mention him,” Rachel hisses.

“I understand he must have put you off men, but they’re not all like that. He was...sick.”

“Conor knew. He hated me because I wasn’t attracted to him. He hit me because I hated being with a man. He raped me because I couldn’t enjoy our sex.”

Her mom lets out a loud gasp of despair. “Aah...please.” She puts a hand on her chest dramatically. “Don’t say those words. Ah, Rachel, please.”

“Stop being so dramatic, Mom. You’re being ridiculous.”

Her act is over in a split second, and she’s shooting daggers at me. “If it wasn’t Conor, it was her. She made you that way.”

“Actually, you and Dad made me. So, if anyone *made* me that way, it was you two.”

I have to roll my lips inward to stop myself from smiling. I give her a squeeze under the table, encouraging her silently. This is her moment.

“That’s not true!” she shrieks. “Take it back!”

“Jocelyn, that’s enough.”

My eyes widen. I don’t think I’ve ever heard her dad’s voice. He’s like background noise. You kind of forget he’s there.

“Don’t, Robert. Let me handle this.”

“No. I’ve had enough of you treating our daughter like shit.”

“What?” Rachel and her mom’s shock are simultaneous.

“Daddy,” my girl chuckles before smiling widely.

“This is ridiculous,” Jocelyn snaps.

“No. What’s ridiculous is me watching you put our daughter through hell and not doing a thing about it. What’s ridiculous is staying married for so long to a money-sucking harpy.”

“Robert!” she gasps.

“I won’t let you hurt her twice.”

“I’m trying to make her understand she’s not—”

“But she is. She just told you. She’s a lesbian. So what? My baby girl has figured herself out. She’s in love. What’s so wrong about that?”

“You’ve lost your mind, Robert.” She gets up and pushes her chair out of the way.

“I’ve never thought clearer in my entire life.”

“This conversation is not over,” she spits at Rachel and me.

“It is, Jocelyn. Just like our marriage. I asked you to sign those papers three weeks ago. I won’t wait another day. Pack your bags and leave my house.”

“I...this...*you*,” she says, pointing at me.

“Me?” I chuckle.

“Don’t,” Rachel snaps with a warning at the same time as she gets up. “Don’t bring her into this again.”

Her dad gets up too, and he grabs Jocelyn by the shoulders. Not violently, but firmly enough to make her shriek as they exit the room.

“Oh my god,” Rachel breathes out. I hurry to her and take her in my arms. She’s shaking, but she smiles up at me. “I did it.”

“You did it alright,” I laugh.

“Was I okay?”

“You were perfect,” I whisper before dropping my head to kiss her. Someone scratches their throat, and we separate to face her dad.

“So...” he hesitates. “You’re gay.”

“And you’re divorcing,” she replies.

Her dad nods and Rachel follows.

“Big night. Am I right?” I add to cut the tension.

They both start laughing, and he opens his arms to her. Rachel practically jumps onto him, and he hugs her tightly. “I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

He looks at me over Rachel’s shoulder and smiles. “You better take good care of my daughter.”

I try to keep the smile on my face, but my heart drops. Because while I wanted to help Rachel come out tonight, I wanted to be there for her on one of the most important days of her life.

I won’t be there tomorrow.

And I still haven’t told her, Sam, or Lik.

ROSE



THE SOUND - The Plot In You

Time's up

Closing the car door with her hip, Rachel passes me one of the grocery bags she's holding.

"Remind me why you want to cook so much tonight?" I huff as I take another bag in my other hand.

"Because Lik said he had a long day of classes, and he also had an argument with Xi. Do you ever check the group chat?"

The one she called 'the fantastic four' because she likes giving names to group chats, creating them, and sending gifs and emojis. She's cute like that.

"He argues with his brother every day," I mumble.

We walk up the porch, and she takes out her keys to the cabin.

I can't believe we just casually moved in over the span of two months, as if this wasn't meant to be Sam and Lik's cabin in the first place.

"I swear you've been in such a mood today. Can you lighten up a little bit?" she scolds me as she opens the door.

How could I? Every minute I remind myself that they might be the last with the woman I love. I didn't even get to see the other two today. Lik has been in classes all day, and I couldn't even be bothered to go.

Sam has given no news at all, and none of us know where he is. Or maybe Lik knows and he's not telling us.

We put the bags down on the kitchen table, and Rachel starts putting everything away while I look at my phone for the tenth time in the last five minutes.

I'm staring at a text from Aaron that he sent me the day after I went to see him.

Aaron: I told him you needed more time. He said he'd think about it.

My multiple, desperate texts to him got me no answers.

Rose: Have you heard anything back?

Rose: Is he coming today?

Rose: I need another day. I just want to talk to Sam about it.

I see three dots appear on my screen, and my heart jumps.

Aaron: Why didn't you talk to them about this before?

I start to type then stop. My thumbs over my keyboard before I finally tell the truth.

Rose: Because you were right. I don't know how I feel about Viktor. They would hate me for that, and I don't want to lose them.

Stupid. Since I'm going to lose them anyway.

I hear nothing else from him. No more clues.

"I bought everything I need to do my lasagna, or I thought we could make fried chicken? He loves fried chicken. I think he prefers the lasagna, though."

"We?" I say as I peer up.

She rolls her eyes playfully. "Well, me, of course. But you can stand by and sample everything like you usually do. Off my lips, preferably."

There's a noise by the front door, and I jump off my seat, bringing my hand to the back of my jeans to grab the gun I've tucked there. Then, there's creaking on the porch.

"What's that noise?" I whisper hurriedly.

"Rose!" Rachel squeaks. "Why do you have your gun on you? Have you had it all day?!"

My eyes are trained on the kitchen's open door as I slowly advance

toward it.

My heart beats loudly in my ears, making the ringing unbearable.

He's here. He's sent someone already. This is it.

I can't take my next breath until I face whoever Viktor sent to bring me back to him.

The front door makes a strange noise, unclear if it's opening or closing. I hear something light across the floorboard.

"Sunshine," I say low.

"Rose, you're scaring me," she whispers back, now understanding we might be in danger.

"No matter what happens," I say with a tight throat. "I want you to stay in this kitchen and not do anything stupid. Understand?"

My heart is about to burst as I hear them approaching.

I pull my gun up in front of me. Ready to shoot the motherfucker who thinks he can get me. I try to aim it where I think the heart of a man would be when he enters the room.

"Rose," Rachel repeats, her throat tight.

"Just stay behind me," I whisper. "And—"

Meow.

Sam's beloved cat, Bella, saunters into the kitchen like she didn't just scare the shit out of everyone. Despite my gun still being up, she comes to rub herself against my leg and mewls again.

"You little bitch," I tell her softly.

Meow.

"Oh my god," Rach sighs. "You scared me, Rose. It was the cat flap you heard." She lowers into a squat and taps her thigh. "Ps-ps-ps, come here kitty."

Bella leaves me and meows her way to Rachel. She pets her as she talks to me. "Isn't it so weird that you look so much like an animal?" she giggles.

"She's the one who looks like me," I mumble.

"It's your eyes," Rachel adds. "They're so feline-like."

"Mphm," I grunt.

"Will you please put that gun away now?"

I lower my gun, sit back at the table, and check my phone again, but I can hear Rachel talking to Bella in that high-pitched voice she'd use for a baby.

"No, missy. Your daddies aren't here. But we mommies are, and we're gonna feed you. Well, *I'm* gonna feed you like I feed this entire household.

Yes...oh...yes. Who's the cutest kitty on the planet? Yaaay, it's Bella!"

I hear the clink of the bowl and look up to watch her pour food into it. Way too much food.

"I hope you never have kids because they're gonna be spoiled rotten," I tell her.

She puts the bowl on the floor, but Bella just looks at it.

"Don't you want to eat?" she insists.

"You have to tap the bowl with the spoon and tell her to eat. She's used to Sam feeding her that way," I explain.

She does so, with a small *eat* that sounds nothing like Sam's usual soft order, but Bella eats anyway. Rachel then turns to me, her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face.

"You hope *I* never have kids? Just me? Am I counting you out of whether I want a family or not?"

My throat tightens. I don't want kids. But, shit, I'd have a hundred with Rach right now if it meant I get to spend the rest of my life with her.

"You don't even want them anyway," I mumble. I don't mean to be rude, but my stomach is too twisted, and my chest too heavy to talk more clearly.

"Yeah, so what? I might change my mind. And there are four of us now to consider. We have time to have this kind of discussion, though I'd appreciate it if you count yourself in when it comes to it."

Somehow, it reassures me that they'll have each other. "Sunshine, if I wasn't here," I have to scratch my throat. "You'd still be with the guys, right? This is...this is big now. Yeah? More than just about me."

I just want to hear she won't be alone once I'm gone.

"I don't like when you talk like that, and you know it," she admonishes me. She stays a safe distance from me, afraid to break me if she moves. "Rose, you're not thinking of...please tell me because we can do something about it now. I can't go through it again. Finding you unconscious. Bringing you to the bath and making you be sick. Showering you, hoping...hoping the pills didn't..." The rest of her sentence is barely audible. "Take you away." Her wet eyes dart to the side.

"I'm not thinking of killing myself," I admit in a rather deadpan voice.

"Because I can call Sam and Lik, and they'll do something and—"

"I'm fine," I insist.

She lets out a sigh of relief before rounding the table and sitting on my lap. "Come on," she pouts. She puts strands of my hair away. "What's upset

you today? Is it because Sam's been giving no news? Is it something I did?"

My stomach tightens. How could it be something she did when I'm the one who's a traitor?

I hate myself more and more every day. Always an accomplice in my misery through lies and deception. Never able to admit I hurt the ones I love because I'm too focused on getting myself out of trouble.

"Sunshine," I sigh, burying myself against her neck. "How could you upset me? You can do no wrong in my eyes."

"Right," she snorts. "Tell that to the moody bitch who wakes me up at night because I 'steal all the covers.'" She quotes with her fingers as she gets up again. I already miss her warmth. When's the next time I'll be able to feel it? How long will Viktor keep me locked up before he can trust I'll come back to him if he gives me freedom?

I look down at my phone again, despair clogging my throat.

I don't want to live without her. I don't want to live without Sam and Lik.

"Ro-ose," she singsongs playfully as she shakes something from the other side of the table. "Look what I got you."

I manage to laugh at the satisfied smile on her face. She's been bothering me to 'leave something of hers' on me for weeks. I told her she already had a tattoo, but she likes to mark her territory.

So she wants to dye a lock of my pitch-black hair blonde. Just so it looks like hers on me.

I've ignored how psychopathic this sounds and gave in today. Because the reality has come crashing down on me that I might never see her again.

She shakes the box of hair bleach at me some more and smiles widely. She looks like a possessed girl in horror movies. So perfect and beautiful, with that tinge of madness in her eyes.

I love her.

"Alright," I huff. "But I swear if I end up with some orange bits in my hair, you will regret it."

"I know what I'm doing. I've bleached my hair myself for two years."

"You're blonde. I'm pretty sure it wasn't too hard."

An hour later, I'm standing in front of the bathroom mirror with the front right of my hair a copper color. It looks like I had some face-framing highlights done in orange but only on one side.

“Alright,” I say simply. “I guess today is the day I kill you, then.”

“Nooo!” she giggles. “Don’t worry, we just have to do it again. That’s what happens with dark hair.”

Somehow she’s managed to make me have fun during a dark moment in my life. Only Rachel Harris can do that. Only she can make me forget. Keep my mind busy and fill me with love until the fear becomes a dull ache in my stomach. I must consciously think about it to remember why I feel so horrible today.

Another hour later, I’ve stopped jumping at the slightest noises and am giggling with Rachel in the living room. She’s forced us into matching fluffy pink pajamas and I’m not even complaining. These things are much more comfortable than Sam’s hoodies. Only thing is they don’t smell like him. I’m sitting on the rug on the floor, and she’s tying my hair into two French braids while on the sofa. She’s made us hot chocolates while her lasagna is in the oven, and I’m drinking mine while she asks me if she should leave the bleach strands out or include them in the braid.

“You’re the hairdresser. You decide,” I shrug.

“Do you even have any money to pay me? Or am I going to have to ask for sex in exchange?”

I chortle into my mug and attempt to look back at her, but she pushes my head straight so she can keep going.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I have a sugar daddy who gets me anything I want.”

“What a lucky girl,” she keeps the joke going. “And what do you do for him?”

My thighs squeeze together as I think of that. I can feel my nipples hardening as I speak casually. “Oh, you know. The usual. I get on my knees for him and his boyfriend. Suck their dicks once in a while.”

She cackles and tightens the braid, pulling my head back until I see her above me. “I do love a good submissive. Maybe you can pay that way.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I breathe out.

“Good girl. Straighten your head now.”

And I do.

She’s halfway through the first braid when a noise is heard outside. It suddenly comes to me that I left my gun upstairs after our shower sex. I go to jump up, but I’m held back by Rachel doing my hair.

“Ow,” I complain.

“It’s Lik,” she scolds me. “Be a good girl, and don’t ruin my work.”

I wonder how she knows until I stop letting the fear run me and realize there’s the sound of the keys in the door.

I force myself to relax back into her hold while my heartbeat won’t let me forget about today’s anxiety. I don’t have my phone with me anymore. Maybe Aaron really convinced Viktor.

“Honey, I’m home,” Lik shouts as he comes in. “I smell lasagna!” he keeps going happily. I hear his steps toward us, but I can’t look up.

“What the fuck,” he laughs as he enters. “I leave you two alone for one day, and I come back to hair dyes and French braids. I feel like I just walked into a lesbian version of the parent trap.”

“Ew!” we explode, laughing at the same time.

“They were sisters,” Rachel chortles as I struggle to stop tears of laughter dropping from my eyes.

“They were indeed,” he wiggles his eyebrows. “New kink unlocked.” He pretends to write a checkmark in the air and drops his college books on the sofa next to us before sitting on the floor with me.

“She’s been complaining that her scar is ugly while I was dying her hair,” Rachel snitches on me. “Tell her it’s beautiful.”

Lik runs his fingers against the M.B. burnt into the back of my neck, forcing shivers down my spine, and smiles. “We wouldn’t be who we are without our scars. You’re beautiful. All of you.”

I do my best not to smile, but his honey voice and sweet compliment get the best of me.

“Stop it, you fucker,” I defend myself, making him chuckle.

“Can I get braids, too?” he asks behind me.

“Your hair’s too short,” Rachel throws back.

“You’re not even fun. How’s Rose paying you?”

“Why do I have to pay everyone,” I complain. “I thought you guys loved me.”

“We do love you, princess,” he says as he puts a hand on my thigh. “That’s why we love when we can use you.”

“She said she’ll submit to me and be the best girl. Won’t you, Doll?” she pulls at the braid harshly, and I groan as I try to keep my head upright.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say unenthusiastically.

“Oh, great idea. We can make her do all sorts of things. Like, serve us our food naked.”

“And then she can sit at our feet while we feed her,” Rachel keeps going.

“And if you eat all your food,” Lik tells me. “We won’t flog you when we tie you up downstairs.”

I swallow the ball of pleasure stuck in my throat and attempt to ignore the wetness now coating my panties. They know I get turned on by the humiliation, and they know how to use it against me.

“Where’s Sam?” I change the subject.

Lik shrugs. “I don’t know, he said he’d be home late. I’m not sure I’m a fan of these.” He pulls at the pink pajamas.

“Hey,” Rachel calls out. “I love them, okay?”

“She looks like the Care Bears. The pink one. But skinny. I don’t think that’s her look.”

“Well, I picked it, and I think it’s great.”

“I can pick my own clothes,” I try to add to the conversation.

“Ssh, this doesn’t concern you,” Lik waves me away.

A loud knock on the door makes us all startle.

Shit.

“What the fuck?” Lik mutters as he gets up. “Who comes knocking at this time?”

No. No. No. No. I’m not ready.

“Wait!” I jump up. “I’ll get it.”

The knock resonates again. Violently this time.

“Absolutely not. You two go upstairs,” he says seriously as he approaches the door. Next to it, he opens a cabinet and enters a code before grabbing a gun out of its safe. He puts the bullets in and unlocks the safety.

As expected, Rach and I don’t go upstairs. But I keep her behind me anyway because I know I don’t risk anything.

“Lik. Just let me open, please,” I try to force past my throat. But his dark stare tells me not to move an inch from where I’m standing in the open living room.

He unlocks the door and opens it in one vast movement before pointing the gun at whoever is on the other side.

Just shoot. Don’t look. Shoot.

But his shoulders relax as a hand comes to push his gun down. “Shit, you scared us. Hi, baby.”

Sam comes into view, and Rachel and I calm down instantly.

“I forgot my keys,” he says low.

Oh. He is *not* in a good mood, and everyone can already feel it. Great, that makes two of us.

“Will everyone please stop pulling guns out every five minutes? We do not live in a James Bond movie.”

“You’re dating a hitman, a gang member, and a girl who came back from the Wolves. Our film is better than James Bond and definitely needs guns,” Lik mocks her.

I can’t laugh because Sam comes towards the sofa where Rachel and I are and silently takes us in for a minute. The fluffy pajamas, the smell of hot cocoa, my bleached, half-braided, half-down hair.

“You,” he tells me. “Let’s talk.”

He starts moving toward the back of the cabin. Of course, he’s mad because of me. Who else?

“Now, Rose,” his retreating form tells me as he keeps walking.

“Someone’s in trouble,” Lik chuckles.

I narrow my eyes at him as I walk after Sam, but I don’t say anything. Something bad is happening.

I follow him into a small room he uses as an office at the back of the house. He lets me in, closes the door, and locks it. My heart takes a plunge.

Don’t close the door. Why would you close the door? Why is it locked?

“Let me out.” It comes quickly followed by a panic I can’t control.

“Bianco isn’t here. He’s in prison, far away from us, and he’s never getting out. You’re safe even when a door is closed and locked.”

I hear his reasoning clearly, but I can’t control the fear.

“Lovebug,” he insists. He grabs my shoulders softly, and I look up at him. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” I nod, trying to convince myself as much as he is.

“Nevertheless, I do want to have a private talk with you.”

I nod again. “Me too.”

He sits down on a large armchair and taps his thigh. I sit on his lap, and he plays with my new blonde strands. “Cute.”

But I can’t process it because I notice the busted knuckles and bruises on his hand. Before I can ask anything, he says, “Did you know I see a therapist?”

My eyes practically bulge out of my head. “No,” I reply simply.

“It can get heavy on my mind to kill. And I processed a lot of my childhood stuff with her. You know, about parents and all.”

“Her?” I snap.

He chuckles as he tugs my blonde hair harshly, making me wince. “You’ve always been a jealous girl. Such a naughty look on you.”

“Whatever,” I mumble.

“Anyway. I couldn’t recommend it enough. She’s helped me through my problems. So much. I tell her I’m a takeover artist. And she helps me when I feel horrible about ‘ruining someone’s life’ by ‘taking over their company’. Obviously, I can’t tell her I actually kill people.”

He looks at me while he pauses. Observing my features, running his eyes across my face and then back to looking at mine.

“I would like you to see a therapist, Rose. Once all of this is over,” he tells me knowingly.

“All of this?”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Don’t play dumb with me.” He nudges me off him and gets up as I sit back down on the chair.

He paces around the room as he talks to me. “I’ve been trying to catch Aaron Williams for weeks. Although, I’m sure you know that since you went to him last week.”

Shit.

“I was going to tell you, Sam. I’ve been trying to understand this myself. Please don’t be mad. You have every reason to but...but just try to understand.”

He ignores my words.

“He’s a Wolf through and through, you know? They’re good at slipping through your fingers. He should’ve been more careful today when he left the club, though.” He looks down at his knuckles and up at me. “I’ve always found it incredibly fascinating how much men talk when they’re in pain,” he smiles wickedly.

“Sam,” I panic. “I want to explain—”

He takes two gigantic strides toward me and grabs my jaw with his mighty tattooed hand. “I’m talking, Rose. You know I hate being cut off.”

“I know, but—”

“Your rebellious nature is going to piss me off awfully quickly tonight. So, I suggest you sit down and listen, or I will put you on your knees and *make you* listen.”

Keeping my mouth shut, I nod.

He takes a step back and a deep breath, attempting to calm himself down.

“Aaron told me everything about your life with the Wolves. About you going back to Viktor. You had all the answers, Rose.” The frustration in his strained voice makes me want to shrink. “Everything was at the tip of your fingers. His entire organization depends on you, and you know it. You could have told me. Together, we could have taken him down. Only you decided to hide and lie and tell him you’d go back to him.” He shakes his head. “Two months. You had two *fucking* months to tell us the truth, and you didn’t. You had two months to help me take him down. To tell me all his secrets and give me the upper hand in this fucked up game Viktor is playing with your life. Two. Whole. Months.” The next words are pushed on a last breath, “And you didn’t.”

My eyes drop to the floor. I have a list of things I want to tell him. How much I regret wanting to go back to the man who hurt me. But I’m scared to get myself in more trouble with more lies. I can’t describe my feelings toward Viktor. They fluctuate between hate and hope, fear and admiration, so many times a day that it makes me dizzy. So I keep quiet, and I know he appreciates it. I can see it in his eyes. He confirms it with his words.

“Is there anything you want to say for yourself?”

I shake my head.

“I’m proud of you.”

“What?” I choke out my confusion.

“Not about hiding everything, of course. But we’ve all evolved since being together. You, me, Rach, and Lik. We’ve changed and tried to make each other better. And I see that you’re learning, Rose. That sometimes, if you can’t tell the truth, at least you don’t tell a lie. It’s little, but it’s effort nonetheless for a compulsive liar like yourself, and I’m proud of you.”

Compulsive liar.

Why is it always so hard when the cold truth hits? Even heard from a warm voice.

Then, his voice comes out softer.

“I’m mad at myself for not seeing what was right in front of me. Even after Jake told me. Stockholm Syndrome is real, and despite being the strong woman you are, you can’t fight it. But I promised Rachel I wouldn’t blame the victim. So, I’m not mad at you, Lovebug. Okay? Because you’ve always made me learn a lot about myself, and I can only hope to do the same with you.”

I nod, feeling like I’m experiencing this from my inner child’s point of

view—the same girl who always turned to Sam for help.

“I think you’ve been through a lot in your life. You were put in an environment with Bianco where you had to lie to survive and never learned to live any other way. Compulsive lying often develops in childhood when the child has to lie to avoid conflicting situations. That was your way to survive Bianco, and you did. You *survived*.”

A ball of emotions makes its way up my throat. I couldn’t talk if I tried now.

“I also think,” he continues. “That you had to survive Volkov another way. That after what Aleksei did to you, you saw Viktor as someone who saved you. And maybe he did. You let him use you. It was easier than pain and fear. You...” He has to take a break and look away. “You developed feelings for him.”

I feel my face harden. I hate the truth. God, I hate it. It’s so painful. Pretense and lies are so much easier.

“You learned the locations of his warehouses all day long. You learned his routes and the meeting points for his containers. Where he hides his drugs and his firearms. You learned who was on his payroll and how much they were given. Their families, and their addresses. Everything. So he didn’t have to write it down. So his organization could become completely untraceable. He used you because you have a gift for remembering everything when you’re on edge, scared, and running on adrenaline. If you did as he said, you were rewarded with attention, sex, and pretend love. You were given importance and care. You got to do whatever you wanted within the compound. You were *safe*.”

He nods to himself, his voice now tight. “And I get it, Lovebug. Okay? I understand why you feel the way you do toward this man. Even if it kills me. I’ve come to understand it.”

Out of nowhere, a sob explodes from my throat, and Sam squats between my legs to grab my face as it falls forward. My chest is shaking, heaving with a need to forget about everything I’ve been through.

“None of this is your fault,” he tells me softly, even as I struggle to take a breath between my sobs. They’re the kind that are practically silent, stopping you from breathing and choking you with the need to scream. “Stockholm syndrome is real. You’ve done nothing wrong.” His thumbs wipe my tears as he holds my head in his big hands. His fingers are getting tangled with my hair and his warmth is everything I need right now.

“Rose,” he tells me with a shake in his voice and I know this is about to get worse. “You lied to us when you said you didn’t want Viktor anymore. Because you felt real love with us and you thought you were betraying him. He’s been holding you in a chokehold, making you believe your feelings toward him were real because if they weren’t, your life was at risk.”

I try to shake my head, wanting so desperately for him to be wrong.

I don’t want another powerful man to have played with my mind and make me do the tricks he wanted.

Bianco did that, and it took me years to try and get past it. I still bear the scars and consequences.

I’m starting all over again. I’m the thirteen-year-old broken girl who was abused and manipulated. Who needs saving.

I don’t want to need saving.

I just want to be happy.

“This is over,” he tells me with determination. “You’ve been through enough, and I know this is the last thing you want. I know you want to save yourself, be tough, and show all of us that you’re strong enough to do it on your own. Not this time. I’m putting a stop to it.”

His hands tighten around my face. “Rose.” His black, vengeful gaze is poisoning my soul. “I found the Wolves.”

There’s a loud bang in my head. Reality is hitting me hard.

“I’m going to kill the brothers tonight.”

A ringing in my ears.

“And no matter what you want, I’m going to kill Viktor.”

I try to get away from his hold, only he won’t let me. “Let me go!” I shout.

“He’s not a good man, Rose,” he fights back.

“You don’t know that! You don’t know him.”

Reality hits me hard in the face when I realize the real reason I didn’t tell them Viktor had found me. I wanted him to come back again. I wanted to see him, for him to be proud of me, to get in the way. To mess it all up.

Jake was right all along. I was just too blind to see it.

“You don’t know him, either,” he says with a dejection that breaks my heart. “Please, I need you to see that.”

He lets me go and stands up again, taking a few steps back. He runs a hand against his face and shakes his head.

“There’s another reason I’m ending this tonight. I can’t go through with

this contract anymore. I want out of it.”

“Why?” I ask in a wobbly voice, sensing another hurricane coming my way. Sam is on a path to purge his soul tonight. He wants to save us both and put an end to the carnage. He doesn’t even wonder if my heart can take it. He’ll fix the damages later.

He looks down at his shoes and back up at me. “Because it was Bianco who hired me.”

I’m a very volatile person. I know that, and so does everyone around me. I fire up at the tiniest spark.

So I understand Sam’s confusion at the fact that I stay mute for several minutes past his revelation.

He’s had time to explain that he initially wanted to refuse the contract but that the money was too good. It was his escape from the job.

He wanted revenge on the men who had taken me. The job itself was perfect. Just not the man giving it to him.

I heard him tell me that Bianco was still involved in his mafia family from prison. That what he wanted to be done; he could always find someone to do it.

But how can I process it?

Mateo Bianco wanted to kill the Volkov brothers for taking his precious girl.

I want to vomit at the idea that he’s still thinking of me from his prison cell. He still wants me for himself, still wants to hurt me, to make me his wife.

And Sam is working with him.

“I understand more than anyone the need to stay silent,” he finally says. “But I have no time to waste. I know where the Volkovs are. Jake managed to turn on the tracker. This is going to end tonight. I know Viktor is coming for you. I need to get to him before he gets to you.”

Looking up at him, I do all I can in my power to find my voice, yet despite that, it’s only a whisper that whistles out. “You broke my heart.”

“And I’ll fix it,” he promises. “Once I know that you’re safe.”

“I’m not safe with you. You’re a liar.”

“So are you,” he says so casually.

A compulsive liar.

“I don’t want to stay here. I’ll tell Rachel and Lik what you did.”

“Don’t do that.” I narrow my eyes at him, knowing he’s coming with

worse. “Or I’ll have to tell them you wanted to leave with Viktor.”

Again. Sam and I are at an impasse. Hurting and betraying the other with no happy ending in sight.

“I prepared everything I needed today. We’re not going to tell them what we talked about in here. I’m going to leave, and when I return in the morning, it’ll all be over. We’re going to fix this. I promise you.”

He drops a kiss on my forehead, and I hate myself for loving it so much.

I’ve always wanted him to save me.

Samuel Thomas, my hero.

He could never do it with Bianco. He didn’t have the tools or the strength.

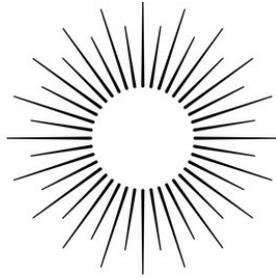
Now he’s going to avenge me from the men who tortured my soul for their own gains.

He’s saving me.

For real this time.

And I hate him for it.

RACHEL



Tell Me Why - Dream on Dreamer

I heard shouting, but Lik said to leave them alone. He promised me he had no idea what this was about and that he didn't know what Sam had been up to today.

I believe him.

However, unlike him, I want to know. He convinced me to not barge into the office, but I'm getting answers when they come out.

I hear their footsteps as I'm taking the lasagna out of the oven. Practically throwing the dish on the counter, I hurry to them in the hallway.

The silence sounds heavier than any words they could be saying.

Rose's eyes are shining, puffed, and her cheeks are blushed.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my stomach already twisting. Lik is close behind me, looking at the two. I wrap Rose in my arms and feel her stiffen.

"I've got to go. I won't be back until the morning. Lock the door and don't wait up," Sam says quickly. He kisses Lik deeply and murmurs a meaningful '*I love you.*' He drops a kiss against my hairline and tells me he loves me too.

"Are you going on a kill?" Lik asks, now seeming to understand there are things to be worried about.

"What happened?" I insist to whoever wants to hear it as I separate from Rose. I'm standing in the foyer, an apron around my waist and thick oven

gloves on both my hands.

Lost.

But Sam is already gone. Not answering Lik or me.

Lik locks the door, and we both turn to Rose as we hear Sam's car loudly driving away.

"What's going on?" Lik pries as we both surround her.

"Did you know?" she asks him, voice ragged from the crying she must have done.

Lik shakes his head. "Know what?"

She drops her head back and groans. When she looks up again, tears are shining. "I love you. Do you guys understand that? I love you so much."

"Princess, what happened?"

She's about to say something else when a knock comes.

"Oh my god, this man!" Lik complains. "How can he forget his keys twice in one day."

He walks back to the door just as I hear Rose mumbling to herself about not having heard Sam's car drive back. She seems to add two and two together as she shouts.

"Don't!!"

But Lik's already opened the door, and on the other side stands a tall blond man. He looks calm and collected in his dark gray suit, a small smile on his face. Rose grabs me by the apron and drags me behind her. I feel her intake of a scared breath.

"Good evening. You must be Malik."

Time stops when his light blue gaze turns to me. "Rachel," he nods as a hello. His smile brightens when his eyes land on Rose.

"Rosalind," he says softly. "Your time is up."

Pop.

My scream resonates in the entire house as Lik falls backward, blood spurting out of him before he can even touch the ground.

"Oh my God!" I scream again as I run to him.

The gun is aimed at me as soon as I'm on my knees.

"Don't move," he tells Rose.

"Viktor..." Her voice is barely audible. She's pale, shaking and swaying, like she's about to faint. She shakes her head. "Please."

Instead of answering her. He talks to me. "Don't panic," he says softly. His composed tone is terrifying. "I didn't hit any arteries. He won't die right

away. You should use one of your oven gloves to stop the bleeding, though.”

Trembling. I take my gloves off and put one against his chest. I’m not sure where the wound is exactly. There’s too much blood. “Lik, can you hear me?” I panic.

His eyes keep rolling to the back of his head, but he nods.

“I’m here. It’s going to be okay. Please stay awake. I’m going to get you help.”

“You should call an ambulance. He’ll be fine if he gets medical attention within half an hour.”

“Viktor, put the gun down.” Rose’s voice is barely more than a squeak.

The gun lowers.

“You’ve got to press harder than that, Rachel. That isn’t helping,” he tells me like he truly cares. “Go on, push hard on the wound.”

“I-I don’t know where it is exactly,” I cry out. “Rose...” Tears are starting to flow down my cheeks and obstructing my vision. I need her. She’ll know what to do.

She must take a step toward me because I hear Viktor tutting her. “I said stay, Rosalind.”

“Please.” I look up at him. “He’s going to die.”

“I guess you should really get him to the hospital.”

I nod as a sob wrecks my chest.

“Alright, then. You do that, and I’ll take Rosalind home.”

“No, no. Wait,” I whimper. “Rose, please. Don’t go. I need you.”

She shakes her head as I look up at her. Her eyes squeeze shut to avoid the reality of the situation.

“It’s your choice, really,” he insists to me. “I can leave right now with her, and you get Malik some help. Or I can stay right here until he bleeds out. Either way, I’m not leaving until Rosalind is in my car, seatbelt fastened.”

“Viktor, stop,” Rose rasps. “I’m coming with you.”

“No!” I shout as another sob breaks me. “I can’t...I can’t do this on my own.”

Viktor snaps his fingers, and Rose makes her way to him.

“No, wait. Wait, please wait,” I bawl. Lik’s eyes are closed now. “Rose, I’m scared.”

She looks at me before leaving. “Don’t be scared,” she whispers. “You’re the strongest woman I know.”

She’s out of our house before I can reply. Viktor gets closer to me, and

my trembling is uncontrollable. He puts a hand in my hair, softly, almost caringly.

“Don’t be sad to lose her. She knew all along that she was coming back to me.”

My heart is about to stop beating. The worst thing is, I’m not surprised by his words.

Of course not, he had her brainwashed. It was always him over us.

He gives me one last look. One last smile, and he’s out, closing the door quietly behind him.

“Lik,” I shake him. “Please wake up. Please, please wake up.” He doesn’t. “Oh my god,” I panic. I took too long. He’s going to die. He’s dead. I don’t know. “It’s going to be okay,” I tell his unconscious body. “S-stay here.”

I don’t even realize I make no sense as I run to the kitchen to get my phone. I dial emergency services with a shaking hand at the same time as I run back to the entrance.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

I look down at Lik and fall to my knees as I break into sobs.

His chest isn’t moving anymore.

ROSE



Monster (Under My Bed) - Call Me Karizma

I'm in the middle seat. Viktor to my left and his right-hand man, Mikhail, to my right. We've been driving for ten minutes, and I can only now find my voice.

"Why?" I question in a whisper.

"Because you didn't want to come back, so I had to teach you a lesson," he replies casually. "I hate being cruel, Rosalind." Mikhail, letting out a mocking snort, cuts him off for only a second. Viktor gives him a pointed glare before carrying on. "But I will be if it keeps you in line."

My eyes close to try and stop the fear from overwhelming me.

"Didn't I tell you to stop whatever you had going on with them?"

I don't give him an answer.

"You didn't want to, did you?" he insists.

I look at him and let the truth fall off my lips. "I'm in love with them." Swallowing my anger, I add, "Is that so bad?"

He puts a hand on my thigh and tilts his head. "It is if it gets in the way of my business."

"I thought you cared for me," I rasp.

"I do. I care about what's in there." He taps the side of my head with his index finger.

I clench my jaw to avoid going into hysterics.

He waves a hand in the air, dismissing my feelings. “It’s done now, Rosalind. And we’re going home. I’ve got much work for you.”

“Where’s home,” I ask, frustrated that he’s left me in the dark for almost two years. About where I was and what I was being used for. About his feelings for me.

“That’s not something you get to ask.”

I feel a hand grabbing my forearm on my other side and snap my head toward Mikhail. It’s too late, he’s got a syringe aimed at my arm.

“No,” I panic, attempting to pull out of his hold and bringing myself closer to Viktor on the other side. “Don’t.” I turn my gaze to Viktor.

He holds me still, both his hands on my shoulders. “You’re being a pain,” he says matter-of-factly.

“There’s no need. Vik—”

The prick in the fold of my arm startles me and then I can feel the tranquilizer spilling into my veins. I can taste the drug at the back of my throat as it turns my body lethargic.

“Sleep,” Viktor says softly as he pushes hair off my face.

“I don’t want to sleep.” My voice is slurred as the car starts tilting. “I want...to go back...”

“Ssh,” he says as my head falls against him. He wraps an arm around me. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

His hands on me feel good.

And his warm breath against my cold skin is reassuring.

So I let myself fall.

I feel myself flying at some point. A blurred ceiling above my head. Steps resonating to infinity in my head.

Softness.

A voice reverberates. I groan when it asks if I’m awake.

A hand in my hair and one on my stomach. Soft words in my ear.

Then darkness again.

I know when the drugs have worn off because of the pounding headache and dehydration. I twist and turn, understanding I’m in a bed and, finally, I open

my eyes.

There's a window and open curtains. They're a midnight blue, thick with gold threads.

I'm in my room.

The one I stayed in after Viktor decided he had a use for me.

"It's been two hours. I think you should be fine now."

Turning to the other side of the room, I watch him watching me. He's sitting on an armchair, one ankle resting on the opposite leg and two hands resting on his stomach while his elbows are on the arms. So casual.

"I'm thirsty," I croak as I sit up.

He goes to the bathroom and comes back with a glass of water. He sits next to me on the edge of the bed and gives me the glass. He observes me as I drink.

"Is this a new style? Half braids and blonde strands?"

Nausea engulfs me. I want to see Rachel. I want to know if Lik is okay.

"Is he alive?" I ask as I put the glass on the bedside table.

He shrugs. "I'd have to care to know."

"I care."

"Then why don't you get up, get out of these horrible pajamas, and help me with a few things. Then I can check if your friend is alive."

"He's not my friend," I tell him through clenched teeth. "He's someone I'm in love with, and I want to know if he's okay. So why don't we do it my way instead of yours? Tell me if Lik is alive, and I'll tell you what you want to know. It's all in here." I tap the side of my head with my finger as he did earlier in the car and smirk at him.

If he wants to play games. I can play games.

I don't expect his next move, because as much as I know Viktor is a ruthless man, he's never shown me that side of him. I was only the recipient of his care and gratification. I guess because I always did what he wanted.

So when he puts a large hand on my face, covering my nose and mouth, and pushes me down on the bed, I go down easily.

In a split second, he has stopped me from taking in a breath. I slap his hand, scratch at it, and attempt to push him off, but he doesn't budge.

My scream for help gets stuck behind my closed mouth, but no one would have come anyway.

Panic settles as quickly as my need for air.

"I'm not liking this new attitude of yours," he says as casually as one can

be. “Freedom didn’t do you any good, and I regret letting you have it for so long.”

Kicking my legs and attempting to twist my body only makes him tighten his hold. I’m pressed against the mattress and shocked that it only takes one hand for him to stop me from breathing completely.

“I can’t kill you. However, I can hurt you very, *very* badly, Rosalind. You’d do good to remember that the only slack you get on your leash is the one I provide you. Now you’re going to revert back to the good girl you used to be and do your job. Is that clear?”

My nod must be imperceptible, though I’m sure he reads the surrender in my eyes.

He lets go, and I gasp, taking in enough air to choke on it.

I sit up despite the dizziness and stare at him for so long that he smiles again. “Don’t look at me with those puppy eyes. You’re making me feel like I betrayed you.”

Didn’t he?

“Finally showing your true side,” I rasp. I might be stuck, and I might be scared, but I can fight back.

I can *always* fight back, no matter how little it is.

“I need the people I use to listen and execute. I always start by getting them scared. Just so they know what happens if they decide to stray.”

I bite my tongue, trying not to reply. I fail. “You didn’t try to scare me last time,” I bite back.

His smile is chilling, his tone satisfied. “No.” His hand on my cheek is soft and warm. “Aleksei had already done that.”

My mouth drops, and my stomach twists with disgust.

He didn’t go there...

“Come on,” he says as he leaves. “We’ve got a lot of work to do. Meet me in the office. Your clothes are on the chair.”

He closes the door behind him. Anger boils my blood, and I grab the glass next to me before hurling it at the door.

“Asshole!!” I scream at the closed door.

I know he heard me, just like I know he doesn’t care.

My entire body is aching, but nothing compares to the deep pain between my legs. My eye feels swollen, my lips are cut, and I can taste blood in my mouth.

My wrists are on fire, and I can still feel the zip-ties around them despite knowing they're gone.

But the pain inside? The pain low in my body? Nothing is worse than that. I feel like I've been cut open with a knife. One movement, and I will hurt some more.

I can't take any more pain right now.

You're about to die. Because while your body will live, your soul will be too shattered to ever be put back together.

Aleksei was right. I died yesterday and ended up right in hell.

A week ago, I was a free woman. Since being taken, I've been kept in that disgusting basement. Until yesterday. Until Aleksei and his men...

Don't think about it.

I'm lying in a bed, and I can hear someone next to me. They're in pain too but not the same kind. Theirs is superficial. They haven't been destroyed inside. The most intimate part of themselves wasn't broken and abused.

"Valentin...I need you to keep still. Let me sedate you, or you'll be in horrifying pain. I need to take the bullet out." The woman's Russian accent is strong.

A bullet? What does Valentin know about horrifying pain?

"No...no," the man fights back. "Viktor will kill me. I need to give him the names."

"You need to be put to sleep!" the woman fights back. She shouts some more words in Russian.

I keep my eyes closed. Listening silently and pretending I am not present.

"The names," he grunts.

"I'll tell him names. What are they?"

"Boris Fedorov. Igor Ivanov." He struggles to take a breath. "The American boy, Oliver...Oliver Thorn. Yuri...I don't remember his last name, but Viktor will know. And Solovyov. His name's...Maksim."

"Okay, okay. Sleep now."

"Did you get them? Write them down...they're all moles. They're..."

His voice disappears as he falls asleep.

I wait another minute before opening my eyes.

The blonde woman who was talking is wearing surgical gloves. Her hair is tied back in a ponytail, and she's wearing a mask. The man lying down, I'm assuming Valentin, is plugged into an IV while she uses forceps to pull a bullet out of his stomach.

It takes her around forty minutes to finish. I know because I keep checking the clock on the gray wall. The room is small. Two beds, and they're both occupied—one by Valentin and one by me. The floor is made of small, white tiles leading to a drain and the only furniture occupying the room are steel trolleys with surgical apparatus.

She tweaks the IV drip when the man is bandaged up and then looks at me.

Her eyes soften.

"You're awake," she murmurs.

I can't talk. It would only be cries of pain. I can't even sit up. Anytime my abdominal muscles contract, the pain deep inside my lower belly worsens.

She ditches the gloves and mask and comes to me. She grabs a small pump, a cuff that she wraps around my upper arm, and fits the end of her stethoscope between my skin and the cuff. She puts the other end to her ears and checks her watch as she presses the little pump that leads to me.

Her sorry look replaces her focus when she takes it all from me.

"Your blood pressure is very low," she tells me softly. Her accent is the same as the men from yesterday. "You need a lot of rest."

Her gaze roams from my head, taking the disgusting state I must be in, and lowers to my legs. She struggles to swallow. "I...You've got—I mean...I stitched you." Her face scrunches up. "Inside. And outside."

I squeeze my eyes shut. I need to wake up because this can't be real.

"I'm sorry..." she whispers low. Her hand comes to my shoulder, and I startle, opening my eyes again. "Sorry," she says as she hurriedly takes it away.

She takes a deep breath. "Aleksei," the mention of his name makes me want to throw up, "is a bad man."

A bad man.

If only he was a bad man.

If only he was just a bad. Man.

"He brought you here after he and his men...were...done." She squeezes her eyes, knowing there is no right way to say this. "He insisted he didn't want you to die. He will be back for you."

"Help me." My voice is barely a whispered rasp. "Help me leave."

She shakes her head. "If I help, my sister...dead. Or worse." Her eyes dart to my legs again. "I can't. I'm sorry."

She can't do anything. Because who would want their sister in the hands

of a monster when she's just witnessed what he can do to a woman's body.

I close my eyes, even though I don't think I have any tears left to cry. They were all forced out of me yesterday.

A door opens, and I barely stop myself from crying out when my body tenses. Every single one of my muscles is aching.

A man walks in. His blonde hair is the first thing I notice. Then it's his dark suit. The same kind my brother Nate wears all the time. Expensive, made to measure. Money suits.

His light blue eyes don't even glance at me. He's looking at the man in the other bed.

"Anya," he says calmly. He closes the door behind him, and she stiffens.

"Mr. Volkov. Hel—Hello."

This is not Aleksei Volkov, yet I don't know enough about their organization to know which family member he is.

His voice is genuinely curious when he asks, "Why is Valentin asleep?"

"B-because I had to extract the bullet from the wound, Sir. I couldn't keep him awake."

"Wake him. Now."

"I can't..."

"He's got names for me. I want them, and I don't want them in an hour. I want them right now."

"He gave them to me." She hurries to the steel platter on her trolley, and her face falls.

"No. No, no, no." She picks up a piece of paper covered in blood. She'd written the names, but they're unreadable now. "I...He'll be up in a couple of hours, Mr. Volkov. I can't do anything else."

"I have an enormous amount of moles among my soldiers. I don't have a couple of hours, Anya."

She starts shaking, her face pales and her eyes fill with tears. "I know...I know...I'm sorry. Yuri was one of them. I remember that."

Volkov runs his tongue against his teeth and smiles at her. "I have good news for you, Anya." He puts a hand on her shoulder softly. "We won't be needing your services anymore."

"Please," she starts crying. "P-please...I don't want to die."

My heart squeezes. It starts to hurt as much as my other muscles.

"I can give you the names," I rasp. Her eyes widen at me, and she shakes her head.

For the first time since he's entered the room, he notices me. He comes to my bed and looks at my wounds, not an ounce of care on his face.

"And, who's this?" he asks her, his eyes still on me.

"Th-that's Rosalind White. Aleksei's—"

"New girl," Viktor cuts her off, not needing further explanation. He must know that the women he sees in here belong to his brother. "How lovely," he says bitterly. "Go on. Give me the names."

"You have to promise not to harm her." I jut my chin as much as possible, putting strength behind my stare.

"My word is everything. I don't make promises lightly."

"I would hope so."

A small smile pulls at his lips. "I promise Anya won't be harmed if you give me every single name Valentin told her within the next thirty seconds."

My heart kicks, and my brain follows. "Boris Fedorov, Igor Ivanov, Oliver Thorn, Yuri—he couldn't remember his last name—and Maksim Solovyov."

With the adrenaline running, I can't feel the pain anymore. My heart is beating in my ears, and I can barely hear his words.

"Is that it?"

I nod and look at Anya behind him. Her mouth is agape, her hands to her chest as she tries to breathe.

"A bunch of ungrateful bastards." He smiles at me. "I hope you didn't forget any names. Don't you, Anya?"

"How will you know?" I ask him.

"If I'm still alive tonight and no one has found my compound, we'll assume you got it all right," he says as he leaves.

I hope to God I forgot a name. I hope I forgot many of them, and his organization goes down in the next few days. That won't only set me free, but also all the girls I saw in that basement.

But deep down, I know I didn't forget any of the names. I don't ever forget.

Anya hurries to my bed as soon as he's gone.

"Thank you," she cries. "How did you? Thank you, thank you."

I'd love to tell her how. But the pain is back. Unbearable.

"I want to sleep, too," I say. "Like Valentin."

She nods. "Yes. Okay. I can do that."

She puts an IV in my arm, and I'm gone before I realize it.

When my eyes open again, it's because Anya is trying to stall someone. Valentin is gone, so she must be talking to someone else. "I can't wake her. She's very weak."

"Get out of my way," a voice barks. "Before I crush you."

And this time, I recognize it all too well.

My body tenses, my limbs shake. Panic overtakes me as he walks past her.

"She looks awake to me."

Why did I open my eyes if it was to wake up to a nightmare?

Aleksei comes to my side, his blue eyes piercing through me. I try to use the little strength I have to move away, but I'm too slow. He grabs my aching jaw, pressing on the bruises he's already put there.

I'm too weak to move my arms and pry him off. A mix of the drugs Anya gave me and the pain is what's keeping my body lethargic.

"Perfectly awake," he smiles wickedly at me. "Did you get a good sleep? Are you all ready to come back with me?"

I try to shake my head, a whimper escaping me. I can't. I'd rather die.

"Mr. Volkov, please," Anya attempts. "She's extremely fragile. You...you don't want to break her beyond repair."

I finally manage to pull a hand up but as soon as I touch his forearm to push him away, my stomach recoils. The feel of his skin against mine disgusts me to no end.

"Did you fix her?" he asks Anya as his hand comes to my thigh. "I want to play with my new toy."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I attempt a ragged breath.

"Don't," I squeak as he brings his hand between my legs. The pain flares up tenfold. I grunt as he presses above the covers. "Please...stop."

"You're coming back with me, you know that? You're going to be part of my girls now. Isn't that exciting? I'm going to fucking. Ruin. You."

I cry out when he presses harder against my sex. Despite the covers and whatever I'm wearing, the pain is unbearable.

"So?" he asks Anya again as he pulls his hand away. He still holds my jaw in a deadly grip, however. "When can I take her back?" he insists, shaking my head from side to side.

“She’s not going anywhere.” The other Volkov is back. He must have been on a killing rampage after I gave him the names, and yet he’s not got a hair out of place.

Aleksei lets go of me, and I can finally breathe again.

“Why not?” he bites out.

“I’m taking her. Go find another toy to play with.”

“What the fuck,” Aleksei hisses. “Viktor, do you have any idea—”

“I said what I said. My decision is final.”

“I want her,” he growls. “I’m the one who found her and brought her here. I can do whatever I want with her.”

Viktor does nothing more than raise an eyebrow at Aleksei to show his disapproval. “I think you’ve done plenty enough. No more damages. She’s precious.”

“No, she’s not. She—”

“If I see you anywhere near her, I’ll kill you.”

Plain and simple. No other explanation.

“Now trot along,” he concludes.

“This is bullshit!” Aleksei shouts as he leaves. “This conversation is not over!”

He slams the door hard enough to make me jump.

“Anya, take a break,” Viktor says, his eyes on me.

She scurries away before being asked twice.

As soon as she’s gone, he sits on the edge of the bed next to me. He pushes a strand of hair away from my face and watches me tense. “I apologize on behalf of my brother. He is a violent man. Unnecessarily so. And he hates women.”

My nostrils flare at the pain I’m trying to suppress.

“Tell me, Rosalind. How did you remember so well?” Now that I know Aleksei is his brother, I’m surprised he doesn’t mention the fact that I killed his father when that’s all Aleksei sees in me.

I frown up at him, but I don’t dare not answer. “I don’t know.”

“Are you a genius?”

“Most likely,” I reply in all honesty. No one ever checked.

He nods silently and brings his thumb to his lower lip, thinking deeply. “I want you to remember a few things for me. We’ll start small and see how it goes.”

“What things?”

“You’ll see,” he smiles. “You’ll be staying in my section of the compound from now on, not Aleksei’s.”

I nod, a sense of relief filling me despite knowing I’m not out of danger.

He gets up and looks down at me, smiling. “As soon as you’re better, Anya will show you to your new room.”

He turns his back to me, and I call out. “You know who I am.”

I don’t need to ask. He must know.

“I do.” He looks back at me.

“I killed your father,” I remind him like I’m suicidal. “He was right in front of me, holding my brother and ready to kill him. I shot him without an ounce of hesitation.”

“And for that, I will never let you go,” he tells me calmly. “Solitude will haunt you, and you will miss your loved ones. I am going to use that little gift of yours. You will work for me, and that’s all you’ll ever do.”

He rearranges his tie and looks up again.

“Nevertheless, I will not hurt you. I will not rape you. I will not let my brother get close to you. You are free to do as you please in this compound, and you will be under my protection. I promise you.”

And as he said only a few hours ago, his word means everything.

I step away from the door I know leads to Anya’s infirmary. I start my walk along the hallway again. One door. That’s all it took to throw me back to the day I met Viktor.

Not long after our conversation, Aleksei was banned from entering Viktor’s mansion in their compound. It’s composed of quite a few houses, but there is only one Aleksei doesn’t have access to. The one I was in. Just as Viktor promised, his brother never hurt me again.

But I didn’t just work for him. It’s not all I ever did. No, with time, we grew closer. Whenever I was outside Viktor’s house and Aleksei tried to come near me, he was there. It made me fall for him, that protection he held over me. The fact that he was the first person to keep a promise.

I know now it actually was just for the work I could do for him, only it didn’t seem like it back then when I was scared. It didn’t seem like it when he held me close and whispered how special I was. It just seemed like he was falling for me too, not grooming me into being his little personal soldier.

Back then, it didn’t cross my mind that I could ever escape this place. I

was too broken, too afraid. Too thankful to Viktor for saving me from Aleksei.

But I did end up escaping.

Now I'm back, knowing there's a possibility to leave, and nothing feels the same anymore.

Just as I'm about to push open the door that leads to his office, Viktor comes down the hallway.

He smiles as soon as he sees me, his blue eyes sparkling.

The Volkov brothers share the same blood but not the same genetics.

Aleksei is a tyrant. Everyone fears him, and they don't want to be in his way. No one wants his wrath. But Viktor?

He's a monarch. He paces with the calm of someone who knows he doesn't have anything to fear. You bow to him out of respect; his presence is a gift to the world.

Or at least that's how it used to feel for me.

Now I want to fight him every step of the way.

"Shall we?" he says as he opens the door for me.

Nothing has changed. The same few people are in the room, ready to hear everything I have to say. Mikhail is always here because he is Viktor's right hand. His most trusted man and friend.

And Aaron.

Because he will be the one to take the information outside the compound and give out orders to the Wolves.

Viktor indicates the comfortable sofa for me, and I sit down. He stands behind it and gathers my hair behind my shoulders, pretending he wants to make me comfortable.

"Would you like to drink something? Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. The clothes he pulled out for me feel tight. Simple light-denim jeans and a black tank top. These are clothes I already had here, and I'm forced to notice I put on weight with Rachel, Lik, and Sam. I look healthier and less like the kind of person terrified of eating.

My heart tightens. I miss them, and I want to know if Lik is okay.

"Alright," he tells me softly. "I believe I'm owed money."

"Don't you want to start with the upcoming shipments?" I say without looking at him.

Instead, I observe Aaron. Sam got him good. His face is bruised, and both his upper and lower lips are cut. He's got an arm in a sling, and I have to

pinch a smile back. I don't like seeing Aaron hurt, but I simply love that Sam did it for me.

It reassures me that I'm not going to be here long. He's going to come get me.

"Why would I start with the shipments?" Viktor asks me with genuine curiosity.

"Because there is one coming the day after tomorrow. Firearms."

He chuckles to himself. "Good thing you came back to me tonight, then. Isn't it?"

I pull away from his hands on my shoulders and turn around to glare up at him. "I didn't come back to you," I snap. "You forced me to."

"Semantics," he smiles. "Give me the names and the amounts those people owe me. Then we'll get to the shipment."

I start with the name and amounts. Every time I do so, Aaron makes a phone call, sending a Wolf to collect.

Then I give him the coordinates of the next shipment and what it includes exactly. Mikhail is the one who checks where it is on the map. I tell them who it comes from, how it's meant to be picked up, and where they should take it.

Viktor is an intelligent man. He already knows a lot of the things I tell him. He remembers from the times I had to learn them myself. But his only sure source is me.

Isn't he worried? I'm not a machine. My memory can't be trusted one hundred percent.

When I'm done, and Aaron has left to brief men on the upcoming shipments, I let my head fall backward.

I'm tired, except I know it's not over.

"You should get some dinner, Mikhail," Viktor gives him his cue to leave.

Once we're alone, he goes to his desk and comes back with a single sheet of paper. He puts it on my lap. "Those are the coordinates to our new storage warehouses."

The numbers are infinite. There are at least ten locations. Each with its own set of numbers.

"Get started," he says as he takes his phone out to text someone. "I want this piece of paper burned by the night's end. And then we can check on Malik."

Glaring at him, I grab the piece of paper.

But even when I've learned them all, he doesn't leave me alone. Because before he burns it, he makes me repeat the numbers countless times.

"Oh my god, I know them," I snap when he asks again. He's the one holding the paper now, asking me to repeat them for the hundredth time.

"Again," he tells me with a simplicity in his tone that is so him.

"Viktor. I know them."

"Then you won't mind repeating them."

"I do mind. I'm exhausted."

"Say them one more time and go to bed."

"I want to know if Lik is alive!" I shout at him as I get off the sofa. "Find out."

He gets up too, and his hardening features tell me I've made a mistake.

"Don't make me hurt you, Rosalind."

"Do you know what would be terribly unfortunate for you," I say low. "If I died."

He chuckles like I'm ridiculous. "You're going to kill yourself because I won't let you see your trio of lovers?"

"I'll kill myself because you took away my free will. I'll die for my freedom. You can be sure of it."

"You didn't want to die for your freedom last time you were here. You were happy with me. You agreed to come back."

"I was stupid and brainwashed. I...I thought I was in love with you," I let out on a last breath.

He cocks an eyebrow, clearly as surprised as me. He didn't love me back; I can tell by his reaction. He truly was using me all along.

"And now?" he asks.

"Now you shot Lik. It taught me the difference between Stockholm syndrome and true love."

His eyes narrow on me.

"You keep asking about Malik," he tells me. "Don't you wonder why Sam hasn't come yet? Isn't he the knight who always gives you that sacred freedom you always talk about?"

My heart stops and drops.

I kept thinking Sam would show up at some point. He knew the location of the compound when he left earlier tonight. He should have arrived before us.

I'm starting to think he did.

"Where is he?" I hiss at him, taking a step closer.

"Having a nap in my basement. Isn't he meant to be a skilled hitman or something? The boy keeps getting caught. I don't know why he still tries."

"Let me see him." I try to keep the panic down, but he's got me, and he knows it.

He waves the paper at me and points at the sofa. "Only good girls who learn their coordinates get to make demands."

I want to scream. I want to break everything and throw a chair at his face.

But I also want to see Sam.

So, I sit down and repeat the coordinates. Over and over again until he's satisfied, and my eyelids drop on their own accord. Until he can safely throw the paper in his fireplace, and I know that I'll be stuck here until he needs that information again.

A never-ending cycle.

SAM



Can You Feel My Heart - Bring Me The Horizon

I run my hands against my face before letting my head fall back against the cement wall. It stinks of mold in here and my head is throbbing from where they repeatedly hit me with the handle of the gun. It didn't knock me out, although it made me dizzy long enough for them to drug me.

I woke up in what seems to be a basement an hour ago, and I can't believe they have an actual jail cell down here. No need to tie me up or keep me asleep when they can see what I'm up to right behind bars. I'm sure someone is keeping an eye on me through the camera I see flashing in the corner of the room.

I never underestimated Viktor Volkov, but I should have taken his stupid note seriously. The one that said I'd only find him when he came to collect what was his.

It was never about me finding him. It was always about him taking back Rose and luring me in.

Now I'm sitting on a dirty floor, my back against the wall, while I'm scanning the rest of the basement through the bars of a *fucking* cage.

I cannot believe this shit.

I try to think of how I'm going to escape—and I know I can escape—but it's impossible to focus when my mind is crowded with thoughts of Rose. Did he get to her? I have no doubt he did. Did she go willingly? Did Lik and

Rachel try to stop her?

Lik must be going crazy trying to reach me to tell me Rose is gone and, when I don't come back tomorrow morning, he'll know something bad happened.

I won't be there to stop Kill from coming out, then.

I know my questions will be partially answered when a door opposite my cell opens.

Viktor is coming to visit me on his own, and I'm sure he will have a lot to say. He takes his time to walk up to the bars, and when he's finally right on the other side of them, I get up and face him.

He smiles at me like I'm an old friend he's been missing. "Samuel. Here we are again." He spreads his arms like welcoming me back home.

I didn't visit this cell last time I got caught trying to get to Rose. It wasn't the same place, and my stay was much shorter. Very bloody. For the Wolves, at least.

His arms come down, and he observes me as I stay silent.

"Well, you found me. Happy?"

My knuckles rub against my jaw, but my brain can't come up with anything to say bar ask for where Rose is. That's what he's waiting for, and I won't do it. He's got the upper hand, and I need to be smarter than him.

"I'm not sure how long we'll keep you here as we have other guests coming soon, but I'll try my best to accommodate you."

Come on, bastard, tell me something about her.

"I will have someone bring you something to drink at some point. Nothing to eat for now. I can't have a big guy like you having too much energy in him."

I glare at him, patiently waiting and perfectly knowing he is not bringing her up on purpose.

"How's the temperature?" *Talk about her. Talk about her.* "Would you like blankets?" *Rose, Rose, Rose.* "I know you don't have a bed, but I'm sure the floor will be f—"

"Just fucking tell me where she is," I snap as my palm hits the bars.

His satisfied smirk makes my blood boil. I played right into his hand. Silent me doesn't exist when it comes to Rose's safety. Only the possessive man who needs to know everything about her.

"My, my, where is your patience?"

"Not in this room. I want to see her."

“I’m afraid she’s asleep. She did so well today. Once I got rid of that pesky rebellious attitude of hers, she did everything I asked.”

My breathing accelerates, and I can’t stop all sorts of scenarios from running through my head.

One point does help keep my fury under control. If she was rebellious, that means she doesn’t feel the same as before toward him. She doesn’t like him anymore. She doesn’t want to be here.

And while it’s not good that she’s here against her will, at least I know that she will want to escape with me when I do.

Viktor pulls a stool from the side and sits on it.

I look down at him, yet it doesn’t change anything about our power balance. I’m still the one in a cell, and he’s the one with the keys.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot, Samuel.”

I can finally find my silence again. Safely keeping my thoughts behind tight lips. He wants something.

“British kid who moved to the U.S. when he was ten. Alcoholic dad who was an enforcer for the Bianco Family. Sweet mom who suffered abuse until he killed her. And amongst all that, you were the silent boy who was trained to become the next enforcer.”

He pretends to think for a minute. “You became Bianco’s man when he had your dad killed. That must have been something. Strange that he trusted you after that.”

I loathed my father, and Bianco knew it. He also had my best friend and the girl I loved with him. He knew I’d stay. He knew I had nothing else.

Only I don’t say that.

No, I keep to myself and Viktor seems to know not to expect something in return.

“And when Nathan White put Bianco away, much to my advantage I must say, you went...” He looks for the word for a short few seconds then smiles playfully. “Freelance.”

I cross my arms across my chest and wait for him to get to the bloody point.

“You work for anyone who makes it worth your time and energy. You make good money. You’ve got a perfect score. Well,” he chuckles. “Except for my brother and me, of course. I have a feeling you’re not going to complete this contract.”

My nostrils flare and my muscles tense, but I manage to keep quiet.

“You’re a war machine, Samuel. You’re a great killer. You’re smart, strong, and practically unstoppable. With the right tools and a support system around you, you *will be* unstoppable.”

“Bloody hell,” I scoff as I take an instinctive step back.

The bastard wants to offer me a job.

He sees my comprehension because he nods to confirm my thoughts. “Being a solo hitman is a dangerous career path. With no one to protect you, you could end up dead at the first mistake.” He looks around the room. “Sooner than you think.”

He expects an answer now, so I make sure not to say anything.

“The Volkov family always prides themselves on great wages, superb health insurance, and not-to-miss employee benefits.”

He runs his tongue against his front teeth, and I know my silence is getting to him.

“You want my organization’s support, Samuel. I can promise you that. And I want a good enforcer.”

He gets up and stands closer to the bars, his chest practically touching them when he breathes. “Perks of the job include being able to live in the same compound as Rosalind. Seeing her every day. I might even let you fuck her as a Christmas bonus.”

I’m on him in a split second, grabbing the back of his neck through the bars and hitting his head against them. Once. Twice.

I stay silent as I slide my other hand around his throat. His bloody smile pisses me off, and he doesn’t even defend himself. He doesn’t need to since three armed men rush in with their guns pointed at my head. I let him go and take a step back.

He dusts off his suit and wipes some blood running down his nose.

“I guess I’ll let you think about it.”

“If you fucking touch her,” I shout at his retreating back, “you’ll experience first-hand how great of a killer I am!”

The three gunmen stay another minute before retreating.

I don’t even have anything here to throw against the wall in anger. All I can do is pull at my hair and try not to go insane.

I still haven’t sat down nor stopped pacing when the door opens again. I don’t know what time or day it is. It feels like I’ve been here for weeks, yet it can’t

have been more than a day.

My heart stops when I see Rose walk in. I practically plaster myself against the bars.

“Lovebug,” I call out.

It must be nighttime because she’s only wearing a thin, black satin nightie. My left hand tightens around the bar I’m holding.

She runs her hands through her hair, cracks her neck, and approaches me carefully. She’s hesitant, almost reluctant.

“You got caught,” she says. “Again.”

I nod. “Trying to save you. Again.”

She shakes her head at me and her eyes dart around the room.

“Is it safe for you to be down here? Don’t get in trouble for me.”

“I’m here for me,” she bites back, and I know she’s mad at me for taking Bianco’s contract.

“It was for a good reason, Rose. I didn’t do it to betray you.”

“What, like when you went on record in his favor?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” I snap. “For *you*. Because everything I fucking do is for you.”

“It’s his dirty money. His...*disgusting*, sick reasons. You know why he wants the brothers dead. Because they took *me*. Because he wants me for himself. None of this was out of your own volition. You were doing his dirty work like you always have.”

“Or maybe I’m using his money for my own revenge. Just look at it from my point of view. Not his.”

“Why don’t any of you look at it from *my* point of view,” she rages in an angry whisper.

“What do you want from me? Bloody hell, look at me.” But she doesn’t. So I shout, “Look at me!”

She startles and finally turns to me. “Do you think I’d be here? Do you think I would have put myself in this position again if it wasn’t for you? I risked my relationship with the man I love, my life, your opinion of me, *everything*. Just to find you. Just to bring you back. Just to have at least the tiniest chance at you loving me.”

She takes a step toward me, and I could reach for her if I wanted to. But I don’t.

“What do you want, Rose? I can’t kill Bianco, he’s in prison. He’s protected. But you know, if I could, he’d be six feet under. You know I

would give you his head on a platter.”

I push myself closer against the bars. “I can’t, okay? I know you’ve put me in this heroic role.” I shake my head at her, feeling like I failed her yet again. “But I’m human, and there is only so much I can do to keep you safe and avenge you. I promise I will spend the rest of my life doing just that if only you see this whole situation how I see it. I’m locked in Viktor Volkov’s fucking basement. I got caught for the second time by the Wolves. Just so I could try and save you. Just...don’t let me go, please. This is all for you.”

She puts herself against the bars and I grab her waist until the metal is useless against our need to be close to one another. She goes on her toes and pushes her mouth against mine. I grab the back of her head and keep her tight against me as our tongues mix and practically tear a moan out of me.

“I love you,” she says as she separates from me.

“I love you too,” I murmur softly as I drop another kiss on her lips. “I’ll get us out of here.”

Despite the darkness of the basement, I find her midnight blue eyes and dig my gaze into hers, reaching for her soul and the truth I need. “Do you want to leave, Lovebug?”

She gulps and nods. “Yes. I want to be home. And this isn’t home.”

I lick my lips and smile at her. “You need to get me out of this cell.”

She starts pacing around, looking at everything. “It’s a code. I don’t know it, but I could find out.” She stops in her tracks and runs back to me. “Lik,” she gasps. Her small hands wrap around mine, holding the bars. “Is he okay? Did you hear from him before you got here?”

I shake my head, but dread thickens my blood. “Why? The last time I saw him was when I left the cabin.”

“Sam...” She takes a ragged breath and rubs her eyes. “Viktor he...”

“What?” I snap. “What did he do?”

“He shot him.”

My entire world falls apart as I stumble backward. The back wall of the cell catches me, but my vision narrows and my heart stops. Cold sweat coats my back as I try to bring myself to understand.

“Wh—” I feel sick. My stomach recoils, and I have to take a deep breath. “Where? Where was he shot?”

Think. Be pragmatic.

“I-I think it was in the chest,” she panics. “I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” I hiss. “Where was he shot,

Rose?!”

“I don’t know exactly. There was...there was a lot of blood, and Viktor didn’t let me get to him. Rachel was putting pressure on the wound and Viktor said he didn’t hit any arteries.”

“*Viktor. Viktor. Viktor!* Shut up! You can’t trust what he says,” I rage. “His whole aim is to brainwash you.”

“I know,” she cries out. “I know. But...”

“I need to get out of here.” I’m feeling claustrophobic and acid burns the back of my throat. “Get me out!” I scream.

“I don’t know how!” She looks around again.

“You need to...” Sickness engulfs me, and I retch dryly before I can keep going. “You need to find out if he’s okay.”

She comes to the bars again. “I will. I promise I will.”

“Find out, Rose.”

She nods.

“I can’t keep going without him, do you understand? I can’t.” I fall to my knees from the pressure in my stomach and chest.

Nothing can happen to Lik. He is my everything. Rose could never understand. She might have fallen for him in the last few months, but I’ve been in love with him for two years. He has been my life, my oxygen, my reason to keep going since we met.

I couldn’t live without his bright smile, his honey voice, or the craziness he brings to my life.

Viktor Volkov doesn’t get to take him away from me.

ROSE



Nightmares - Ellise

“Dine with me tonight.”

I step away from my bedroom door. He knocked, at least. We must be making progress. I’ve been here for seventy-two hours, and I haven’t been able to do anything about getting Sam out nor finding anything about Lik and Rachel.

“No,” I tell him as I turn my back to him and return to the armchair I was using to read a book.

“You can’t be mad at me forever, Rosalind.” He steps in and walks unceremoniously to me. He puts a hand on each padded armrest and lowers until his face is close to mine. “Be nice to me,” he pouts.

“I’ll be nice to you when you free Sam and tell me if Lik is alive.” I pull up my open book to put it between his face and mine.

He pushes it back down before he talks again. “Okay. Fine. Have dinner with me. I’ll find out *Lik’s* state before then.”

“You already said that, remember? Before I gave you the information I knew. And then again, before I learned the new ones. You owe me. Don’t ask anything until you’ve given me what I want.”

He takes a step back. “You used to beg me for attention. Where’s the sweet girl I know?”

I slowly get up and walk to him. “I killed her when she realized you were

a predator seventeen years older than her who used her and abused the weakened state she was in to turn her into a computer he could use for his criminal organization.”

His brows reach up to his hairline. He isn't used to the real version of me. Strong, unafraid, and as stubborn as they come.

“My, my, you slept with someone seventeen years your elder. You are a bad girl, Rosalind.”

“Ugh, fuck off,” I huff as I walk back to the seat and settle down again. My eyes are on the page when he talks again.

“One of us is in desperate need to have information about someone they're in love with,” he says calmly. “One of us just wants a nice dinner. You tell me who will break first.” He walks back to the door.

My teeth are clashing against each other before I shout, “Fine.” He stops and turns back around.

“There she is. I'll find a nice dress for you, and we can have a date in the grand dining room.”

“Wonderful,” I drawl sarcastically.

“Don't bother wearing underwear.”

“We are *not* having sex,” I hiss.

“I killed my wife for you. If not a wedding, you owe me at least good sex,” he chuckles.

My heart drops in my stomach. The girl Viktor knows would beg on her knees for his attention, his love, and his dick.

The girl I am found love and satiation in Rachel, Lik, and Sam.

And she wants nothing from Viktor Volkov except for him to let her go.

I'm just about to zip up the red dress he found for me when he enters my room. Without knocking this time.

“Let me,” he says as he hurries to me and grabs the end of the zipper.

I take a step and turn away.

“I'm fine.” But as I try again, I can't pull it up. He watches me, rolling his lips to avoid smiling, and I finally give up. “Fine.” I turn my back to him, and he zips the dress up slowly, his knuckles grazing against my spine and bringing goosebumps to my skin.

“There you go,” he finally says. He grabs me by the waist and spins me around to observe me. “Beautiful.”

I roll my eyes and push him away. “Let’s eat.”

I step in front of him, making my way to the door, but he grabs my upper arm.

“I believe I said no underwear.”

My jaw tightens. “I’m not having sex with you, Viktor.”

Still holding my arm tightly, he brings the long skirt of the dress up to my waist and grabs the cotton panties I’d put on.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Rosalind. One thing at a time, shall we?”

That’s the thing with Viktor. He never asks for too much at the same time. No, he does it little by little. He eats away at you. Tiny pieces until it’s too late to realize he is the big bad wolf who ate you whole.

He rips the panties off with a strength that makes me grunt between clenched teeth.

He puts the skirt back down and dusts off the long satin dress. I shiver and the spaghetti straps definitely won’t be helping much with keeping me warm.

“Let’s eat,” he concludes.

The dinner lasts forever. Pretend conversation, infinite gourmet courses, and his eyes holding mine the whole time.

“Did you find out about Lik?” I ask, toying with the chocolate fondant on my plate. I barely touched the rest of the food. He should know I can’t eat when I’m in this kind of state.

He puts his spoon down and rests casually against the back of his chair. Tonight, he’s wearing an all-black suit, vest, and tie. It reminds me of the one Lik had worn to Vue Club when we went together.

I miss him terribly. I miss all of them, but I’m especially worried for him.

What if he didn’t make it?

“Come here,” he says, pointing at the floor. Right next to his chair.

“You can’t be serious,” I snarl.

“Do I joke often?”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I get up from my chair and kneel next to his.

“Happy?” I grumble.

With the knuckle of a single finger, he slides one strap of the dress off my shoulder. Then the other one. The fluid satin falls all the way to my waist,

exposing my boobs.

“You’re a dick,” I push through clenched teeth as I glance away.

“How much money do my legal businesses still need to launder this year?”

“Why are all mob bosses the same?” I readjust myself on my knees. “You take and take and take. Nothing is ever enough for you.” Something clogs my throat, yet I keep talking. “I can’t believe I ever liked you. I can’t believe I wanted you. You’re just like him.” I shake my head, finally realizing the extent of the things I’ve ignored from Viktor. “Just like Bianco.”

“Because power is addictive. Now tell me how much.”

I open my mouth to tell him, only nothing comes out. I feel my brows furrowing as confusion overtakes me.

“I…” I hesitate.

“How much,” he insists.

I understand at the same time as it comes out of my mouth. “I don’t remember.”

The shock of my memory failing me hits me hard, but Viktor’s strike hits me harder. Enough that I fall onto my side against the floor.

My shriek comes more out of surprise rather than pain because I don’t feel anything with the adrenaline now running through me.

The taste of copper invades my mouth as I feel blood trickling down my lips and chin.

I put my hand to my mouth and my eyes widen at the amount of red on it. He gets up from his chair, and I crawl away from him until I can get back on my own two feet. I’m unstable on the stilettos he gave me and stumble away until I can use the wall to keep myself up.

“Do you truly want to find out what happens once you’re of no use to me anymore,” he tells me as he approaches.

I keep walking away, helping myself against the wall while I try to get my bearings again. I feel dizzy from the strength of his hit.

I must not have understood just how slow I was walking because he’s on me before I even realize. He grabs the back of my head, his fingers grasping at strands of hair.

“Viktor!” I screech as he drags me by my hair. The dress starts to slip off and I try to grab it and cover my boobs again.

It’s useless anyway because he bends me over the dining table, his hand still in my hair and stopping me from pushing back up.

He pulls up my skirt to my waist and presses two fingers against my entrance.

“Stop! Stop...”

“You used to get wet for me. What happened to you?”

“You just hit me,” I try to say as calmly as I can, but it comes out shaken anyway. If I calm him down, there’s still a chance to survive this. “I’m surprised and scared.”

His fingers leave my entrance for my clit. He rubs me softly, circling and sending a zap of electricity to my stomach.

“Wait...” I pant.

“I know your body, Rosalind. Being scared doesn’t stop you from getting wet.”

Pleasure pools between my legs despite me and makes my legs shake. “No,” I whimper. “Please, don’t make me come. Don’t...” My words are cut off by a moan.

“Why not? Because you only come for them now?”

I bite my bloody lip to stop myself from moaning out loud. My pants are getting heavier, but so is the sickness in my stomach. I don’t want to come for him. I don’t know how I could, but my body is refusing to listen.

I’ve never hated Viktor Volkov as much as I do now.

He’s turning me against myself.

“I don’t want to come,” I whimper as he puts more pressure on my clit. “I’m *begging you*.”

“And I do love it.”

I’m seconds away from exploding when the doors to the dining room burst open. I can’t see anything from my position, facing the opposite wall and being held down by Viktor.

“Sir!” someone shouts. “There’s been a breach. We need you to get to safety right no—”

A loud bang cuts him off and I hear the guard’s body slumping to the floor. Presumably dead.

“Oh, hello, Viktor. I believe you’re holding something of mine.”

My heart explodes from relief.

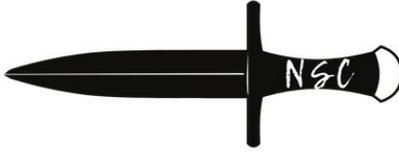
That voice.

Sweet as honey.

Lethal as poison.

I would recognize it among a million.

KILL



Raging on a Sunday - Bohnes

Sadly, Lik never woke up from the gunshot wound.

But Kill did.

And he is *not* in a good mood.

“Give me one second,” I tell a shocked Viktor Volkov. He’s holding Rose down, although he won’t live to tell the tale.

I take a knife I’d strapped around my ankle and bend down to the dead body on the floor. A nice bullet to the head.

“Don’t be sad, Mr. Security Guard.”

I bring the knife just below his ear and push in until blood comes out. Then I move the blade all the way to the corner of his mouth and do the same on the other side. He’s now got a beautiful, joker-like, bloody smile.

“There, now he’s all happy.”

Viktor releases Rose and doesn’t try to hold her back as she runs to me.

Maybe it’s because I look like a serial killer with all the blood covering me. Maybe he now knows the rest of his security is dead with bloody smiles on their faces.

Or maybe he is a good man.

I chuckle to myself. “You’re not a good man, are you?”

“No,” he replies calmly. “I’m not.”

I nod. “But you’re honest.”

“Always.”

“Lik,” Rose says as she falls into my arms. “Oh my god, look at yourself. Are you okay?”

She searches my chest for the bullet wound. She won’t be able to see it in all this blood. It was minimal.

Well, as minimal as a bullet to the chest can get.

“It’s been three days,” Viktor tells me slowly. His low voice is pleasant to the ear. “How are you out of the hospital?”

“Ah,” I say as I grab Rose’s hand tightly in my bloody one. I wave the knife in the air as I explain the rest. “Kill is very strong. You can’t stop him with a bullet, Viktor. You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Kill?”

“Hello, nice to meet you,” I smile.

Rose’s eyes are as wide as saucers, and she looks at me like I’m some sort of maniac.

Oh wait. I am.

“Now, now. What should we do with you?”

“We’re leaving.” I missed her hoarse voice, how low it is for a woman. I missed her long black hair. I want to bury my hand in it and pull until she’s screaming.

“But the fun just started,” I pout. “Surely you want your revenge, too.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “I just want to leave.” There’s a certain fear in her voice I hate.

Rose is not weak. No, she’s like me. Unbeatable, unhinged, in-fucking-vincible.

I let go of her hand and walk over to Viktor. “What have you done to her?”

He smiles at me. “Well, where should I start?” The fucker just watched me cut up his guard and he’s not scared one bit. I could change that.

“You broke her.” I stamp my foot. “See, now I have to kill you. I promised her I wouldn’t, and now I *have* to.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Rose announces as she tries to pull me back. “Let’s get Sam and leave.”

My head snaps to her. “Where is he?”

“In the basement. There’s a code to the cell. I’m sure Viktor will kindly share it with us.”

I smirk maniacally at him. “Yes. Won’t you, Viktor?” The end of my

knife points at his neck while I do a little dance on the spot. "Say no. Then we can play some more."

I see him swallow a lump of fear. Finally, the bastard is starting to get scared.

"6, 3, 2, 9, A."

I frown when I realize his voice is not the only one I just heard say the code. Keeping my blade pointing at Viktor's neck, I slowly turn around only to find Sam standing tall behind Rose, holding the back of her neck in the possessive way he sometimes does to me. He pulls her close and forces her head to tilt up at him.

His thumb wipes her bloody lip and he looks at the blood now coating his skin.

There's a beat before Sam smiles slowly at Viktor and me.

"Did you hit her?" he says low.

No one talks. There's the smell of blood and fear in the room, the tingling of excitement in my body. But it's the heaviness of Sam's words, his lethal presence, that keeps everyone's mouth shut.

Until I let out a big, romantic sigh.

"Isn't he so hot?" I tell Viktor as I turn back to him. That's when I notice him gulping.

It's probably from the deadly stare Sam is giving him.

"You shouldn't have hit her," I tell him slowly. "Don't you know? If Rose White bleeds, it should be at our hands and no one else's."

Leaving Rose behind, Sam steps toward us. Dressed in all black, nothing tells me he's just been in a fight except for his bloody knuckles and one strand of his gelled hair falling to the side of his face.

"You were right after all, Viktor," Sam tells him as he stops beside me. "You do really need an enforcer. Because the current guards you have don't do so well under torture."

"You tortured my guards from inside your cell?"

Sam chuckles. "When you put a lion in a cage, you should hang a sign," he taunts him. "*Don't get too close to the barrier. Our animals are dangerous and might turn you into their lunch.*"

I can't help the loud cackle that escapes my throat.

"They got too close," he now says more seriously. "The same way you got too close to my woman."

There is nothing Viktor can say or do right now, and yet I don't see the

defeat in his eyes despite tasting the victory for Sam in the air.

My boyfriend wraps his hand around my closed fist that's holding the knife I'm pointing at Viktor, and I slowly let go for him to grab it.

"Sam," Rose calls out. "You promised me."

We exchange a look and I know what he wants, what he *needs*. Because we understand each other on a level deeper than simple words.

I turn around and grab Rose by the waist, holding her at my front with her back against my chest. What Sam doesn't realize is that she's not even fighting me.

"Lik," Sam says, still pointing the knife at Viktor, his eyes on him like a wildfire ready to destroy everything in its path. "Tell our friend here what happened to the last man who touched our girl."

"Dead," I say simply, barely able to contain the excitement.

"And the one before that?"

"Dead."

"And the ten before that?"

"Dead." I'm practically jumping on the spot, ready to see more blood.

"I'm no fortune teller, Viktor," Sam says with a hint of mockery in his tone. "But I'm going to say your odds don't look too good."

"You said you wouldn't kill him," Rose insists. "You said—"

"I lied," he cuts her off. "The same way you did. Because it would get me what I wanted. See, now I get to kill him. And I get the girl. Perfect score."

"Princess," I rasp in her ear. "He was about to hurt you really badly. Don't let yourself forget it. He is not a good man."

"I know," she whimpers.

"Let us end him," I insist. "Because whoever hurts you, doesn't get to see another day."

"I know," she says a bit more firmly.

And Sam doesn't need any more encouragement than that.

There's a smile on his face when he grabs Viktor at the back of the head and sticks the knife into the side of his throat. It's neat, with a speed no one could ever stop. Viktor Volkov doesn't even get to make a sound when he drops to the floor.

The perfect, clean kill.

My boyfriend is a professional, after all. He's not here to make a mess.

There's a long silence that ensues. Rose doesn't say anything. Maybe she doesn't believe it, maybe she finally feels free. I'm not sure. But when I

release her waist, she takes a step back from all of us.

Sam's eyes go from me to Rose and then to the body at our feet. The guard to whom I gave a death smile.

"Is Kill paying us a visit, then?" he says softly to me.

"You bet your ass, baby. And I'm ready to kill some more. Let's paint the walls with the blood of the men who hurt her."

He nods and looks at Rose again. Her eyes are on Viktor's body.

"Lovebug—"

"Let's find the girls," she cuts him off. Noticeably not ready to deal with the death of her captor.

"The girls?" I ask, confused, even as Sam seems to get it right away.

"The girls, Lik. The ones I told you Aleksei keeps for himself. The nine-year-old girl who is going to grow up and die at the hands of a rapist if I don't get her out," she rages. God, she is the sexiest woman alive with this red satin dress and blood on her lips.

"Right," I nod. "The *girls*."

"Yes, the fucking girls!" she yells angrily. "The ones I said I wanted to save when you promised me you wouldn't kill Viktor." So, I guess she is a bit mad at us for killing Viktor. She rolls her eyes at me, waiting for me to react, but all I see is how sexy she looks right now.

"That was sexy. Do it again."

"No."

"Sam," I whine. "She won't do it again."

"Later," he tells me as he runs a hand up and down my back.

"Can we fuck her later? Can we tie her down and fuck her until she's crying?"

"Only if she wants to," he answers.

"She wants to," I whisper to him, even if I know she can hear. "She wants Rachel's knife against her throat while we're both fucking her at the same time. I heard her say it to her the other day." I grab another knife I have on me and place it against my own throat before winking at her.

"Really?" Sam asks her, his interest suddenly piqued.

"So not the time for this conversation," she shakes her head.

"Right," he agrees and turns back to me. "Did you bring me a gun?"

"Two," I smile proudly.

"Give me one," Rose orders as she comes forward. I put my knife away and grab my second gun instead.

I wave it in her face. “What’s the magic word?”

“Lik, I’ll fucking kill you,” she hisses.

“It’s ‘Kill, I’ll let you fuck me hard later’,” I cackle.

She takes a deep breath, trying to keep her cool.

“That’s more than one word.”

Jesus, I love how obstinate she is.

“You two are wasting time,” Sam huffs. “Just say it, Rose.”

“Why me? Why can’t he just give me the gun?”

“Because the psychopath in him has bloody woken up! Will you just be the bigger person for once?”

“This is ridiculous. *Fine*. Kill, I’ll let you fuck me hard later.”

“‘And tie me to the bed’,” I insist.

The gun is ripped away from my hand and I gasp at Sam. “See, you pushed your luck,” he says simply as he gives it to Rose.

“Can we go now,” Rose asks us as I pass Sam his weapon.

“Let’s kill people,” I smile as I look down at my gun. “Like, really, *really* kill them. Like dead, you know?” I look up to watch their retreating backs leave the room. Rose has left her heels behind.

“Hey! Wait for me!” I run after them.

The man who was aiming his gun at me falls onto his face. Rose is the best shooter I’ve ever seen in my life. She doesn’t miss anything, and the reason why is devastating.

I pull my knife out for the bloody smile.

“My kill,” she snaps at me. “And I say I want him to die sad. So you’re not drawing one of your weird smiles on him.”

“But...”

“Her kill,” Sam cuts off.

“Is this a competition?” I ask. “And if so, am I winning?”

“Where’s Rachel,” Rose asks as she walks into the house she said belonged to Aleksei.

“In the car,” I tell her, following after her.

She stops and slowly turns her death stare on me. “What do you mean *in the car*?”

“In the car. Right outside the compound.” I shake my head because why is she being dumb suddenly?

“What?” she hisses. Her hand holding the gun starts trembling, and I take a step back. “You brought my girl to this fucking place?!”

“First of all, I didn’t bring her. She’s the one who drove, so she brought herself. Secondly, stop always calling her your girl. We share something special too. She’s the one who took care of me in the last three days—”

She points her gun at me and shoots.

“Fuck!” I yell as I duck. “What the fuck is wrong with you? It’s the second time you attempted to shoot me in your life.”

“You’re welcome,” she growls as she keeps making her way in. Sam is already up the stairs, and she follows after him.

I look behind myself to find another dead man. I look up to watch Sam disappearing into a hallway and Rose following. I join them quickly.

“Sam,” Rose whisper-hisses. “I know you’re trying to lose me, and I’m telling you now. Aleksei is mine.”

“In your fucking dreams,” he throws back after opening a door.

“This is my revenge,” she insists as she goes after him. Sam shoots to kill, and another guard falls. “I’m not letting you take this away from me.”

“My contract. *My* girl. *My* kill,” he growls back.

“That’s bullshit!” She keeps hurrying after him as he goes from one room to another. There’s an alarm that keeps blaring in the background, making us all aware that three skilled killers have made it past their security. “I don’t need you to be my knight right now. I need you to let me get it out of my system.”

He stops and snaps around. “Maybe I need to get it out of *my* system. This man hurt you. He...” The actual word he wants to say doesn’t make it past his clenched teeth. “I want to see him bleed from my hands. I want to see the life die in his eyes and know that it’s because he touched what was mine.”

“No,” she replies sternly as if it was the most logical answer she could have said.

“No?” I repeat. “Do you understand how much we love you? Let us avenge you, princess,” I insist.

“And I need you two to understand that I’m doing this for *me*. Not for your pride, not because you think you’re hurt that someone touched me. You already got Viktor, and I didn’t agree to that, though I’m being kind enough to let it slip. Aleksei did what he did to *me*. I get to kill him. Now get out of my way.”

She pushes past us, and we follow quietly, neither of us convinced to let

her handle this on her own.

When we get to a steel door at the end of a hallway, Rose freezes. She takes a step back and wipes her sweaty forehead with her wrist.

“What’s this room?” Sam asks calmly.

She shakes her head and looks away.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “You can do it, princess.”

Her hand tightens around her gun.

“Is that where the girls are?” Sam nudges her. And by asking that, we know that if it is where they are, it was also where she was being kept before she moved in with Viktor.

“For a whole week, I was kept in there wondering when it would be my turn. I had a bed next to Juliette’s. She was just a kid, and she was the one reassuring me most of the time. *He’s not so bad, you’ll see. He has his good moments.*”

Her voice lowers by the second, barely an audible whisper by the time she carries on. “How can someone put a kid through this? That whole week he didn’t choose her or me. Guards would come down and grab the other girls. And then...they came for Juliette.”

Her body trembles reliving the event. “I couldn’t stand there and do nothing while they took a nine-year-old to be assaulted. So I told them to take me. It would have happened one way or another.”

She puts a hand on the handle. “He’ll be hiding down there. I’m sure of it.”

My trigger finger flexes as she pushes the door open. A fire of fury blazes in my chest. It engulfs my entire being and I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself when we get to Aleksei.

We follow Rose down a metal spiral staircase. There are no windows, no air coming through, and it smells of dampness and fear.

Rose is shaking by the time we make it to the lower ground. There’s a light coming from a room to the right, but we can’t see what’s in there.

We hear a sob, and Rose freezes falling back against Sam and me. Someone is crying yet attempting to hold it back.

“I take it back,” Rose murmurs. “I can’t do it.”

Sam wraps an arm around her shoulders from behind and a hand around hers holding the gun. At the same time, I walk past her, leading our convoy.

“We’ve got you,” he whispers in her ear. “I’ll pull that trigger for you if you need, Lovebug.”

I take the first step into the room and halt in surprise. It's not the six dirty single beds. It's not the five girls huddled on one of them, holding each other in fear. And it's not the tiny blonde girl trying to hold back her sobs. She's very young, and I can only assume it's Juliette.

None of that is what has stopped me.

No, it's my blonde girl standing tall, her t-shirt ripped and holding a knife to the throat of the man at her feet.

"Hello," Rachel cheers in that crystal voice of hers that makes it sound like she's welcoming us to a tea party.

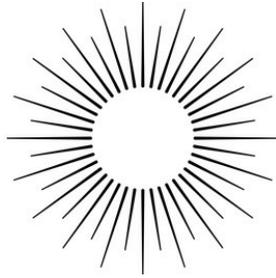
"Sunshine?" Rose chokes.

"Isn't it crazy what perverts would do for a simple girl?" She looks down at who I'm assuming is Aleksei Volkov, holding him by his short, blond hair. "Like letting their guard down." She winks at Rose and presses her knife deeper into Aleksei, who groans.

A laugh blooms low in my chest as Rachel flips her hair back.

Pride is a weak word when I watch our unshakable girlfriend.

RACHEL



Mercy - Adam Jensen

I watch Lik run from the car into the Wolves compound, armed to the teeth. I really thought I had lost him. I watched his unconscious body titter on the edge of death as they took him to the hospital. But he woke up stronger than I'd ever seen him. He also woke up unhinged, and that's how I knew Kill was gracing us with his presence.

It wasn't possible to hold him back. As soon as he remembered what had happened, he fought everyone to get out of the hospital. They managed to keep him for three days to put him back on his feet. We assumed Jake had managed to turn the tracker on if Sam had found the brothers. So Lik got the location from Rose's twin. He didn't need to convince me. I drove us here, and he jumped out the moment I parked at the edge of the forest.

Vermont. Right at the border of Canada. In a reclude forest at the edge of a small town is where Viktor and Aleksei currently hide and rule their organization.

The whole thing sounds insane to me. Since I was never involved in any of this, I never knew this side of society.

What I know, though, is that Aleksei did unspeakable things to the woman I love. And I need to see this through.

I promised Lik I would stay in the car. I undo my seatbelt and grab the knife I hid in the glove box, ready to break said promise.

I take the same trail I saw him take and walk along a brick wall. When I finally reach a place where the barrier lowers, I climb over to the other side. It's still deep into the forest, but at least I'm on the enemy's side now.

I walk for a while before I see the first house. Alarms are blaring everywhere, ear-splittingly. I hide the knife in my boot and take a deep breath before tearing my t-shirt open. I just have to pray that my plan to get to Aleksei won't turn against me.

Running toward the first house, I scream. "Help! Help!"

A guard runs toward me, with his gun pointed. "Who are you?" he barks at me.

"I-I..." I fake some tears as I keep talking. "I want to go home, please."

His eyes narrow on me, and he smirks. "Home, huh?"

"Where are we?" I sob. "Please...help me out of here."

"You must be one of Aleksei's new girls. Is that right?"

"No, please," I cry out, taking one step back and pretending I want to leave. "Don't bring me to him."

He grabs my upper arm violently. "No one's helping you out of here. Now walk."

I lower my head, my hair covering my face, and can barely stop the smile that attempts to spread on my lips.

This man sees me in the same light everyone does. The cute, innocent girl he desperately wants me to be. Little does he know I murdered my ex-fiancé for abusing me. There's a demon inside me that's been hungry for years before I stabbed Conor countless times. And now she's insatiable.

He drags me to a mansion and passes me over to another guy. "She's Aleksei's. Must have attempted to escape when this whole mess started."

The other guard growls something and grabs me by the hair. "You new?" he hisses at me with a Russian accent, looking me up and down.

"I want to go home," I sob.

"I show you new home."

He drags me along endless hallways, going up a flight of stairs and then in front of a steel door.

He pushes the door open and shoves me so hard I almost fall down the stairs.

"Come on, hurry."

I miss the last step and catch myself against the wall.

"In there." He shoves me again.

My stomach recoils when I see the five girls in worn-down sweatshirts and sweatpants. There are six single beds, three aligned against opposite walls.

“What is this place,” I breathe out. This is not pretending anymore. Who keeps women in these conditions just so he can use them for his own pleasure?

“New home.” This time he pushes me hard enough for me to trip and fall on the dirty floor.

I wince and turn around so I’m on my back.

He squats beside me and rips my shirt some more. “No need for this. Aleksei will come to join you, girls, while we clear the compound. Got it?”

There’s a widespread fear that settles within the group. He gets up and leaves us.

I turn to the girls right away. One of them must not be older than ten and my heart skips a beat.

“I’m Rachel,” I tell them. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

None of them react. They just go back to whatever they were doing—reading, playing a board game, sewing a hole in a sweatshirt.

The youngest one comes to me and gives me a lopsided smile. “I’m Juliette. Don’t mind them. You’re not the first one who came in here and said that. Yet, here we are.”

She gives me a gentle, reassuring squeeze on my upper arm. “It’ll be hard at first, but you’ll get used to it.”

My throat clogs. I know I’m not staying here, and I *am* getting them out, but the fact that they all have accepted that this was their new life breaks my heart.

“Do they lock the door?” I ask.

“No,” Juliette shakes her head.

“Alright, we can go then.” And by we, I mean them. I will stay until Aleksei comes here so I can slit his throat.

Juliette shakes her head again. “They’re all upstairs. If we leave this room on our own, we get punished.”

I look at all the other girls. They’re not even giving me attention. Juliette points to a bed right next to the one she had been sitting on. “You can take the bed next to mine.”

The sound of the upstairs door opening throws everyone into a panic. Even Juliette. They all drop what they’re doing and go to their bed. They sit

quietly at the end of their respective mattresses and put their hands on their laps, their heads bowed.

Anger thickens my blood and sweat covers my back. I move my ankle, ensuring I still feel the hunting knife hidden in my boot.

Heavy steps approach, and I see a shadow at the corner of the wall before a well-built, blond man shows himself.

His sour mood lightens when he sees me. “New girl? Who gave me a present?”

I hesitate, entirely at a loss, before I force tears to roll down my cheeks. “I’m scared,” I whisper as my heartbeat doubles, and anger erases any sort of fear I could possibly feel.

“Why are you scared, little lamb?” he smiles as he approaches me.

“I don’t want to die.”

“Oh, you won’t die, don’t worry. You’re going to be mine. I’m going to fuck you whenever I want and scar your pretty porcelain skin.”

I gulp as he comes face to face with me and fake a sob before falling to my knees. I wrap my left arm around both his legs and look at him with pleading eyes. “Please,” I cry. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

He puts his hand in my hair and tightens it into a fist. “Your tears must taste delicious.”

Lik was right. It changes you to kill a man. You’re not the same person anymore. Something in you dies, replaced by a stronger being, less afraid, more capable of doing unspeakable things.

I’ve never felt more like myself than in this moment, mere seconds from changing a man’s fate. Down on my knees, I hold all the power and he’s not even aware of it yet. It’s a thrill I can’t compare anything else to.

“I want to go home,” I whimper as I discreetly pull the knife out of my boot. I make sure to hold it the correct way before I stab him in the thigh, exactly like Sam taught me.

His scream brings me unmatched joy. Blood spurts out of his leg, and he covers his wound with both hands as he falls to the floor. My next stab is to his stomach.

Juliette and some other girls scream before all huddling on one bed. The furthest away from me.

“Bitch...fucking,” he pants. “Fucking bitch!” he roars as he curls in on himself.

“That’s not exactly a polite way to address yourself to me now, is it?”

I hear the door upstairs and step over Aleksei. Shit, if guards with guns come down, I will be in big trouble.

I grab Aleksei by the hair and bring him up to his knees. I put my knife to his throat and brace for the arrival of the guards.

If they point a single gun at me, I will cut his throat.

We will! We will! My demon shouts.

Fuck, we will.

I see Lik first. Or should I say Kill? Rose is right behind him, with Sam who's holding her close.

Look at us, a group of simple humans. The only thing that makes us special? Insanity runs through our veins. Our blood is poisoned with a passion for chaos. And chaos we found in each other.

"Hello," I chime. The lines between reality and craziness are getting blurrier by the minute.

"Sunshine?" Rose chokes. She is beautiful when she's a little scared, a little vulnerable.

When she is that way, I can think of myself as her heroine.

Sam is the savior she's always known.

Lik the unexpected hero.

And me? I am the queen who will slay Rose's enemies until she lives her very own happily ever after.

"Isn't it crazy what perverts would do for a simple girl?" I look down at Aleksei, proud of holding his pathetic life in my hands. "Like letting their guard down." I wink at Rose and press the knife harder against Aleksei's throat.

"Ozy!" Juliette shouts behind me. "You came back!"

Ozy is the nickname only Rose's brothers use for her. The simple fact that this kid knows it tells me everything about the relationship they built.

"It's time to close this chapter of your life, Rose," I tell her softly. My heart is swelling at the idea of helping her move on. Freedom is at the tip of my fingers. "You helped me get out of the nightmare I was in. It's my turn."

Sam can barely stay still. His gun is aimed at Aleksei, yet his eyes are on me. I shake my head. Can he see that I need him to let me have this?

"Come here," I tell Rose. "Do it." I press firmer against Aleksei.

Rose takes a step forward, determination piercing through her eyes.

Aleksei snorts. The mockery of a man who has no other option left.

"I was right, wasn't I?" he taunts her. "You can't get me out of your head,

out of your body. I've ruined you. Kill me, girl. It won't change anything. I'll be with you forever 'cause you're just as dead inside."

Her nostrils flare and her lower lip trembles, but it's Sam and Lik I'm worried about. They're both closing in on Aleksei.

"Your death doesn't have to be quick," Sam growls low.

"We can chain you up, cut your dick off, and fuck you with it. How does that sound?" Lik adds in an angry hiss.

"We'll make sure your mouth is full of your own balls so we can't hear your screams," Sam concludes.

A sick smile spreads on my face. We could do just that.

I hear Juliette's shocked gasp behind me, and I'm reminded of a kid in the room.

"It's your decision," I tell Rose as I feel Aleksei tremble beneath my touch. "I have to tell you, in any case. He's got two stab wounds already, and I'm not sure how much longer he will last."

She nods at me before her eyes go behind me. Silently, she walks to the back, and we all watch with shock as she helps Juliette off the bed and picks her up, putting her weight on her hip.

"Hey, you," she says with a softness in her voice I didn't know she possessed.

"Hey," Juliette snuffles as she rubs her eyes. "You came back."

"I came back alright." She looks at the other girls. "Everyone in this house is dead. You should leave now before guards from other corners of the compound come this way."

The girls slowly move out of their beds, unsure. "Go on," Rose insists. "I'll be right behind you."

They walk out, legs shaking. One of them kicks Aleksei as she walks past, and he grunts as it makes his skin break against my knife.

Once they're all out, Rose turns to the guys and me. She readjusts Juliette on her hip, clearly struggling to carry a young girl. Her eyes dart to Aleksei and back to me. "Do whatever you want with him," she shrugs. "I couldn't care less." She leaves the room with Juliette in her arms.

The little girl watches me, her head propped on Rose's shoulder, and mouths silently, "Kill him."

I smile and wait until I hear the steel door shutting.

"I think you were wrong," I tell Aleksei sweetly. "I think she's moved on from you."

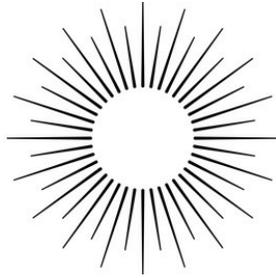
A heaviness falls off my shoulders. Diabolical, brutal Rose has chosen to let go of her demons and move on.

We all expected her to get rid of him violently, but she chose peace, and I am proud of her.

Especially now that it means we can do whatever we want with him.

“Well,” Lik smirks. “Looks like you’ll be dealing with us instead.”

RACHEL



Rescue Me - OneRepublic

“Yes, at least twice a week. I promise,” Rose repeats for the fifth time to Juliette.

“*And* once every weekend. So that’s three times, right?” her little voice insists.

Rose pinches her lips and smiles. We’ve been in the doorway of the Murrays’ house for fifteen minutes, attempting to leave.

After freeing the other girls, we took Juliette to the hospital. Two weeks later, we’re bringing her to Rose’s favorite foster parents. They’re the ones with whom she had the most normal life, and they’re in the process of taking Juliette in.

Unfortunately, she had never been reported missing, and no one was looking for her. She said she was taken when she was three or four, although she wasn’t sure. She only remembers her mom, and we think she’s the one who gave her to the Wolves. For what reason, we don’t know. It could be anything.

Rose was adamant that she didn’t want to put Juliette in the system. She wants her with the Murrays until she can figure something out for her.

Juliette is holding the door tightly, Hannah and Thomas Murray standing behind her, but she won’t let go so we can shut it.

Rose squats in front of her and pushes Juliette’s long blonde hair behind

her ears. "I will come to visit three times a week. Twice during weekdays and once during the weekend. But, you know, soon you're not even going to want me to come anymore."

"That's not true," Juliette pouts.

"So is. Because I stayed with the Murrays for a long time, and I know for sure that they are the best mommy and daddy you could have right now. You're gonna be so spoiled, and you're not even going to remember me."

Juliette giggles and gives Rose a tight hug. "I miss you already."

"Same. Now run along."

Hannah puts a hand on Juliette's shoulder. "How about we bake a cake this afternoon? What's your favorite?"

Juliette shrugs and twists her hands in front of her. "I don't know."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop tears from falling. I can't take this, it's heartbreaking.

"Mine's vanilla," Rose helps her out.

"Rose and Jake never liked chocolate," Thomas confirms. "But they do love vanilla."

How ironic.

Juliette leans into Rose's ear and whispers something that makes her chuckle. "Jake is my twin brother. Remember? We talked about him before."

Juliette nods shyly as Rose goes back to a standing position. "I'll bring him next time I come."

"Okay." Juliette turns to Hannah. "Vanilla is my favorite too. Like Ozy."

"Vanilla cake it is, then," Hannah smiles. She takes Juliette's hand, and they head back inside the house.

"I'll see you in a few days," Rose tells Thomas as they hug goodbye.

"What about when they go away on work trips?" I ask Rose as we settle in her car. She puts it into gear, and we head out of the driveway.

"Maybe we can look after her, then?"

"What, just you and me?"

She shrugs. "Why not?"

"Like...like she's our kid or something?"

"I don't know," she huffs.

"What about the guys?"

"I don't know," she repeats.

“I don’t know if I can take care of her like my own child. I don’t even know if I want kids.”

“No, I know,” she shakes her head. “Me neither. And we’re too young to think about this. *And* it would be something to talk about with Sam and Lik. I just...don’t want her in the system, and the Murrays are rarely here. Jake, Chris, and I were old enough when they were traveling all the time and we were in their care. But Juliette is too young, and she’s been through so much already.”

She’s holding the steering wheel with one hand and her right thigh tightly with the other.

“It’s okay,” I say, taking her hand. “We’ll figure it out. For now, she can stay with us when the Murrays are away. Or you and I can stay at the Murrays. It’ll work.”

She nods, and a comfortable silence stretches between us.

“Oh my god,” I realize with horror. “She’s going to go to Stoneview Prep.”

Rose explodes in a laugh and her gaze darts to me. “Come on, it’s not so bad. You met me there.”

I let my head fall against the headrest and watch her. “That’s true. It might be the best school in the U.S. if we go by those standards.”

Half an hour later, we’re walking into the cabin.

“I’m taking a shower,” Lik screams from upstairs, as I’m assuming he hears the door. “Princess, you are required to join.”

We both chuckle, and she kisses me before heading upstairs. I check my phone and reread the text Sam had sent me earlier.

British Prick ♥: Come to my office when you’ve got a minute.

Does he think I’m his personal assistant or something? I walk in without knocking and raise an eyebrow at him.

“I must say,” he chuckles low. “I kind of love that walking into my office without knocking is an act of rebellion in your books.”

I laugh before approaching his desk. My stomach recoils when I see the three pictures lying there, but there’s also a particular satisfaction I won’t deny.

“Whoa. I didn’t know you had taken those pictures to print them. Making an album of your best kills? A portfolio for your future employers, maybe?”

I sit down and look at them again. The mutilated body of Aleksei Volkov

is staring back at me on the rectangles of printed papers. His eyes are empty. His soul, if he ever had one, had long left his body by the time we were done with him.

First, Sam and Lik took turns beating him up.

Then, we did exactly what we promised. We cut his balls and dick off, and then we fed them to him. Lastly, I stuck my hunting knife in his ass—the blade side.

Sam took pictures while we watched him die slowly. His tears and cries were beautiful.

“I’m sending them to Viktor,” he says in a low growl.

“Sam, we don’t even know if he’s really alive.”

“He is. I know it.”

When we were done with Aleksei, Sam wanted to make sure Viktor was dead. He had a *hunch* something was wrong. We went back to Viktor’s house in the compound and to the dining room where he had left him for dead.

The body wasn’t there anymore. We followed the blood on the floor, but it stopped in front of the house, indicating he might have gotten into a car or something.

“He might be dead somewhere in the forest and we just didn’t find him.”

“Someone helped him. I’ve no doubt it was his little dog, Mikhail. And if Aaron Williams didn’t come back to Stoneview to see his mother and sister, that means he’s still not a free man. Viktor is still alive, I’m telling you. And I don’t want him to forget what will happen if he gets in Rose’s vicinity ever again in his life.”

“Right...” I watch him put the pictures in an envelope. “Do you know where the Wolves are now?”

He shrugs. “No. But Aaron will give them to him. I know he will.”

“If you know Aaron can lead you to him, just go and finish the job.”

“I don’t need to start another war when I’ve found my peace. And I don’t want to run after the Wolves anymore. They have countless places to hide. Safe houses, other compounds. They’re practically unstoppable. Even if I kill Viktor, someone else from their organization will take over.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s the same for the Bianco family. The mob is unstoppable.”

I nod as I lay back in the chair. Sam told us who had hired him for his contract. He said he wouldn’t take the money, that he wouldn’t take anything anymore from Bianco. If Rose doesn’t blame him, there is no reason for me

to do so, either. This is about them. Their past. The only thing that we now know is that he won't stop working. Our silent man is not done being a hitman.

"Is that why you wanted to have a chat? To show me the pictures? They're lovely, by the way."

"I thought you'd like them."

I smile to myself. Not long ago, I was crying about killing a man who deserved it. I was weak, scared, abused. A couple of weeks ago, I assassinated a man for hurting the woman I love.

I am not the same person I was when Rose returned from the Wolves. I am changed, ruthless, confident.

And I love it.

We walk out of the office together and into the living room to find Lik and Rose cuddling on the sofa by the fireplace.

"Oh, by the way," I finally add. "Sam and I are going on a date tonight."

Everyone's shocked faces turn to me.

"We are?" he asks, clueless.

"Yeah," I smile. "I'm taking you somewhere nice. Wear a suit."

A few weeks ago, we had this weird talk about me declaring my love to him. I don't know why we're making a huge deal out of it, but I promised that if he tattooed Rose my 'R' in a heart next to the one she already has for him, I would make a grand gesture. And I'm ready to do that. I've been ready for weeks.

He looks at me, his puzzled look not leaving my face as he goes to Rose and plays with the blonde strands of hair she now has. "What are we doing?"

"You'll see," I tilt my head. "I can't wait."

"What about me?" Rose pouts.

"I'm sure you can last one evening without being the center of everyone's attention," I scold her.

"Uh, no?" she insists. "Lik, what are you doing tonight?"

"Having dinner with my mom. Feel free to join, princess."

"And see Billie? No thanks."

"She won't be there. It'll just be Xi, my mom, and me." His eyes leave his phone, and he readjusts himself into a seating position. "Actually, I really want you to come. It's the perfect occasion to meet them."

"I know Xi."

"Okay, well, I want you to meet my mom."

“So we’re meeting parents now?” Rose chuckles.

“Seeing as yours are non-existent, Sam’s are dead, and Rach’s are homophobic...”

“Hey, my dad is fine with it!” I interject, but he keeps going.

“...we’re left with my mom. And she’s a sweetheart, so you better be on your best behavior.”

“Yes, captain.” Rose salutes him.

“You know why I’m doing this, princess. Right?”

She looks at him, confused.

“Because I love you,” he finally says.

Her mouth drops open and she readjusts herself on the sofa, then smiles.

“I love you too.”

Lik puts a hand on his heart and sighs dramatically. “I’m glad we got *that* out of the way. We can dine now.”

“What time are we leaving?”

He taps on his phone to check the time, and his eyes widen. “Oh shit, get ready.”

Still in her towel, Rose lifts her arms up. “I need help.”

Three heads snap to her right away. We’re such suckers for the bitch.

“Can someone carry me upstairs?”

“Are you out of your mind,” Sam scolds her. “What do you think this is?”

“My therapist said to start small when it comes to being honest and asking for help. Well, my legs are still shaking from Lik’s shower fuck. So, I need help going upstairs.” She enhances her words by shaking her arms up.

“Just go get ready,” I huff.

“You can still walk on your own,” Lik adds.

“You guys are not even trying to help me heal,” she pouts.

In one gesture, Sam rids her of her towel. He grabs the ends and twists before whipping her thigh with it.

Rose shrieks and bursts out laughing. “Go get ready. Right now.”

“You guys are no fun,” she shouts as she disappears up the stairs.

ROSE



Trust - Boy Epic

Rummaging through the fridge, I finally pull out the carton of milk. I bring it to the table, where I already have a bowl of cereal waiting for me. I pour my milk and hurry to find myself a spoon before even putting the lid back on the bottle. Dancing on the spot, I wriggle my ass to a song I'm humming. I can't remember what song it is, but it's been stuck in my head for days. God, I'm starving. I don't think I ate anything today and it's almost dinner time.

I do a slow spin with the bowl in my hand and a spoonful of cereal in my mouth. When I'm back into my initial position, Sam has entered the kitchen, watching me dance with a disapproving stare as he leans against the wall, his legs and arms crossed. My jaw falls open at the sight of him.

He's wearing a dark burgundy suit with a black tie and a black button-down. It's hugging his muscles so perfectly that I feel like I can see every small movement under the piece of clothing. Instead of gelling his hair as usual, he's simply brushed it back and some strands are coming back toward the side of his face.

Coming off the wall, he walks to me and doesn't stop until I have to crane my neck to look into his eyes. His hand comes to my face, wiping milk off my lips with his thumb. Enchanted, I watch him bring his finger to his mouth and suck the white drop.

"Lovebug," he smiles. His deep voice hits places it shouldn't, and I slowly close my mouth. "What are you doing?"

I struggle to swallow the little cereal I have left in my mouth, gulping

multiple times.

“I was eating,” I finally say, hoping the fact that I’m feeding myself will please him or at least get me out of the trouble I seem to have put myself in.

“You’re about to have dinner. With Lik’s mum, nonetheless. Not finishing your plate isn’t an option in an Algerian household.”

Taking the bowl from me, he puts it on the table next to us and grabs my hips. He lifts me, and I end up sitting on the counter.

“Is that your first meal today?”

“No,” I lie.

“Is this what will happen every time I don’t keep an eye on your food intake? Come on.”

“You look so handsome,” I attempt to divert from the topic.

His genuine smile makes me want to giggle out of happiness. “Flattering me to avoid getting in trouble. You’ll never change.”

His nose comes to my neck, and he breathes me in. “Mm, you smell good.” A second later, his teeth are nibbling at the sensitive skin below my ear.

A short gasp escapes me when he cups my pussy over my jeans. I tilt my head to give him better access and wrap my arms around his neck. I buck my hips forward and he pops open the button of my jeans.

“If I fuck you now, I’m not letting you come,” he growls against my neck.

“What? Why?” I lift myself up as he slides my jeans down. He pushes my panties to the side and inserts a finger in me.

I lose my train of thought as a moan escapes me.

“Because you didn’t eat today and are spoiling your dinner. Do you think bad girls get to come whenever they wish?”

“I think bad girls get bad guys to do whatever they want,” I smile as he inserts another finger. I feel myself getting wetter by the second, and I put my hand on his wrist, urging him to accelerate.

“You’re just dying to be put in your place, aren’t you?” He breathes hard and pulls away slightly, his fingers still in me. Grabbing the collar of my t-shirt, he pulls it down and rips it apart.

My gasp probably resonates throughout the whole house. “My little slut is only good at begging to be fucked. Never at taking care of herself.”

Because I never wear bras, he’s now got full access to my naked boobs. While I expected him to fondle me, I’m in for another surprise when he slaps

my tits hard.

“Sam!” I scream in pain. “That hurt.”

“Are you going to apologize for not caring about yourself?” He slaps me again, this time at the same time as his thumb comes to play with my clit.

“Shit,” I hiss.

“Manners.” Another slap.

“I’m sorry!” I cry out. I’m so close to exploding I’d say anything for him to keep going. His thumb draws long circles on my clit and I’m starting to tremble with need.

“For fuck’s sake,” another voice comes. “Princess, we have to leave!”

Sam withdraws quickly and suddenly, leaving me yearning for more. “No, no, no,” I whimper as I cross my legs to put pressure on my needy clit.

“Uncross. Right now.” Sam’s order comes with a snap of his fingers, making me obey in a split second.

I let out a groan of frustration and turn to Lik. “This is your fault. If you hadn’t taken so long to get ready, I wouldn’t have had time for *this*,” I say, pointing between Sam and me.

“Just put on a new shirt and get your ass in the car,” Lik throws as he exits the kitchen.

I look back at Sam. “I’ll come really quickly. I swear.” I bite my bottom lip and bat my eyelashes only to earn a laugh.

“Enjoy your dinner, Lovebug.”

“But—”

“And remember. No touching yourself.”

He drops a kiss on my lips and leaves.

“Have a good night with Rach,” I shout at his retreating back. “You better take good care of her.” He’s not listening, disappearing into the other room, but I still add, “I’ll kill you if not!”

“Love you too,” I hear his shout back from the living room.

SAM



Till Forever Falls Apart - Ashe, FINNEAS

I think I'm the luckiest fucker alive. After showing up at home dressed in a gorgeous gown, a promposal with a homemade banner, and even a corsage and boutonniere, the limo Rachel rented stops in front of the beautiful prep school I know too well. Victorian red bricks, kept gardens, and gigantic wooden doors.

Stoneview Prep is where Rachel and Rose went. After Rose and her twin Jake escaped Bianco, they were placed with the Murrays. And that family sent them here. They went from Bianco's illegal riches to Stoneview. Where the billionaires appear legal on the surface, as they stand on the shoulders of the criminals of the underworld.

I smile to myself looking at their old school.

Rachel has this thing about her that can make everyone around her grin. Her energy, her smile, her voice. She is so human. So...emotional.

Surely, I shouldn't date someone who reminds me of my mother. But our relationship is platonic. We're not sexually attracted to each other, which makes it a little better.

She looks nothing like her. My mum was a tall, red-haired, dark-eyed woman. Very average looking and yet the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes. She was from North London. She spoke the Queen's English, which is what turned my own accent so sharp. I've lost the poshness of it

over time, but I will never forget how my mother spoke. Any word she uttered sounded kind, clean, and beautiful. Maybe it had nothing to do with the accent and everything to do with the fact that she was my mum.

No, Rachel looks nothing like her. And yet, there is something about her.

It's the unconditional love that reminds me of her. It oozes out of her and embraces us all, not letting go even when we're in our darkest phases.

My father had always forbidden emotions. You can't be a great killer if you feel. An unwise decision from him since I am soft at heart. I get that from my mother, and I will never let it go. I feel everything intensely. With that comes the love and the happiness as well as the anger and the rage. I've never felt it more than when it comes to Rose.

She's made me feel it all. The beauty of life, the darkness of love. The fury of betrayal and the soft charm of friendship.

My dad was a horrible man. He was violent, abusive. He hit my mother regularly, and when he couldn't hit her, he went for me. The day she tried to leave, he killed her in front of me, scaring me into silence. I will forever find salvation in silence. He also turned me into the killer I am today. Something else he managed to force on me. I didn't question it since I didn't know anything else I could do with my life.

But there is one thing he failed at: making me into a sociopathic bastard like him.

Every time he tried to stop me from feeling, I fell harder into embracing emotions.

This is something I share with Rachel. She might not see it, because I keep them to myself, and she expresses them tenfold, but being with her makes me feel like someone else understands my emotions daily—the ups and downs of being sensitive and living with being affected by everything around you.

I love that about her. I love *her*.

We get out and the limo drives away. She takes my hand and pulls me to a parking spot not far from the stairs that lead to the entrance.

“Do you remember?”

I quirk an eyebrow but smile. I do.

“This is where we met,” she tells me. “I was standing here with my best friend, Camila. We were hanging by her car at the end of our first week of senior year. And then you appeared. I was facing the car this way.” She shows me the way she was facing.

She steps to the other side and pretends to be her friend. “And Camila was right here. She went: ‘Oh my god, there’s a guy coming our way he’s so hot.’” She shakes her head. “Of course, I didn’t care. I only had eyes for Rose. But Cam wouldn’t shut up about you. And then you came to talk to us!”

“Yeah,” I nod. “I already knew you were Rose’s girl. I’d done my research.”

“Your stalking, you mean,” she cackles. “Cam couldn’t believe it. She was like, ‘act cool. Act cool.’” She laughs harder. “I can’t even remember what you talked to us about. I know now you were just waiting for Rose to come out.”

I nod again. “I was. I wanted to rile her up. Get her attention. Talking to you was a great idea.”

“You did more than talk to me,” she says. “Don’t you remember?”

Brows furrowing, I try to think of what she means. I came that day because I wanted to see Rose. I wanted to check on her; any reason was good enough for me. I knew Rachel was close to her, and my talking to Rachel meant Rose would pay attention to me. I’d just found her after practically three years without seeing her. I could barely hold myself from dragging her away from everyone and keeping her to myself.

“What did I do?” I ask, truly not remembering.

“You put your hand,” she grabs my hand and places it on the small of her back. “On me.” She looks up and smiles. “Drove her mad. It always does.”

“What?” I murmur and put another hand on her waist. “People touching you?”

She giggles and squirms out of my hold. “Yeah. Or people calling me cute names. She once almost got in a fight with a guy twice her size because he called me sweetheart.”

“She’s so possessive,” I chuckle. “It’s bad.”

“And you aren’t?”

“Oh, I’m terrible,” I nod. “Absolutely Terrible.”

She smiles softly. “Me too. I just express it differently than you guys. Like, sulking and shouting at Rose that she’s a bitch.” Taking a step toward the building, she calls for me, “Come on.”

I follow her and, to my surprise, she pushes the door open. “Rachel Harris,” I tell her low. “Are you breaking into your old preparatory school?”

“It’s all about knowing the right people in Stoneview.”

Taking my tattooed hand and dragging me along, she walks the hallways I'd only imagined previously. They're spacious, giving the impression of a grand hall rather than a high school hallway. Walking past rows of lockers, she taps one. "This one was mine," she says, nostalgia coating her voice. A few steps later, she taps another one. "Rose's." And tapping the next three, she continues. "Jake's, Chris's, Luke's. That one opposite us was Jamie's, Jake's girlfriend."

Keeping my hand in hers, she takes a few turns, goes through a few doors, and finally stops in front of a wooden double door.

"Close your eyes," she tells me. I do so, a smile slowly creeping on my face.

I hear the door opening, and she leads me inside. A pop-rock song is playing loudly.

"Okay. You can open your eyes. Tada!"

I spin around slowly as I take everything in. The long table with a buffet of snacks and bowls of punch. The floor is covered with burgundy and white balloons. The one and only round table in the middle of the room. The banner that says, '*PROM NIGHT*' and the stage with a single speaker on it.

"Rach..." My voice is a low rasp from the emotions causing a tornado inside me.

"I couldn't really hire a band just for this. I feel it'd have been awkward, just them and us. But the speaker will do, right?"

I tap one of the balloons with the tip of my shoe. "You're crazy," I laugh. "This is too much." I know I told her I wanted a grand gesture from her, but I was just joking back then, trying to rile her up. Although now, I can see I secretly wanted it badly.

"You killed men because they touched Rose. Don't tell me about 'too much'."

We help ourselves to pastries and canapes on the tables and pour ourselves some punch. Sitting opposite each other, she puts a canape in her mouth, and I do the same.

"I guess proms aren't like this," she tells me, her mouth full. "More people. But most of them would be people I dislike, so I think it's fine just the two of us."

I grab a cheese pastry and bite into it, playing with the crumbs that fall on the table. "Did you not like high school?"

"It was alright, I guess." She takes a sip before continuing, "My best

friend was the queen bee, and I was always at parties and all. But I felt so alone. I was timid, and people who didn't know me assumed that I had great grades. I didn't, I'm a little stupid and graduated with terrible grades."

"You're not stupid." My voice comes out harshly, scolding her for being so hard on herself. "School doesn't determine one's intelligence. It only tells you if you're good at academic stuff."

She traces her finger along the white tablecloth and drops her gaze. "Well, I wasn't good at academic stuff, and now I've applied to zero colleges, and there's not much I can do."

I grab her hand in mine. "There's plenty of time to figure out what you really want to do."

She peers up and smiles at me. "I guess." And then she looks around us. "My favorite thing about this place was Rose. No matter how toxic our relationship was, I only truly felt like myself when I was with her."

Letting go of her hand, I sit back and take a sip of the overly sweet drink. The music is shouting through the speaker, but my focus is entirely on Rachel. "How did you two meet?"

"Just through friends. I was a Freshman when she and Jake moved here, and they were in eighth grade. We would see them quite often because Chris was their foster brother and he was in my year. Stoneview's middle school is just on the other side of the road."

She smiles and looks straight in my eyes. "Then my friend Camila decided Jake would become her boyfriend. And so he did. Fairly quickly. I know few men who can resist Camila's charm. From then, wherever I was, Rose was too."

"But you didn't start dating right away, did you?"

She shakes her head and takes a long sip of her drink. "Oh no. We were just in the same friend group. Rose would get hit on all the time, anyway. I knew I didn't stand a chance."

Her chair scrapes against the floor as she slides closer to me.

"At the beginning of sophomore year, when the twins were freshmen, we were all at a party at Camila's. I remember someone put on that two thousand's song, 'Stacy's Mom'.

"Stacy's mom has got it going on," I attempt to sing.

"Exactly." She starts chuckling to herself, remembering that night clearly. "We were all playing a stupid game of cards, and during the chorus Rose just said: 'Yeah, I could fuck Stacy's mom.'" She cackles louder but stops

instantly when she sees I don't get it.

"Sorry! I should have mentioned that we had a friend called Stacy, and her mom was absolutely gorgeous. Most importantly, Stacy was there with us."

A soft laugh leaves me. I can see Rose doing that so vividly.

"She was so unapologetic about it. And she must have seen it in me that night, that I thought Stacy's mom was hot too, because when her gaze clashed with mine...ugh..." She lets her head fall back. "She has that thing. You see it too, right? She just...*knows*. And fuck, she knew then that I was into girls and hadn't told anyone. That I was just barely understanding myself, why I had never been interested in having a boyfriend. She glanced at me and had already figured me out more than I had ever done myself."

I chuckle to myself. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

"She kissed me that night. She followed me to the bathroom when I went. I let her walk in behind me. I let her lock the door. And I let her kiss me. You know, that kind of kiss. The ones when you feel your feet lift off the floor and your mind is in the clouds even after it ends. And that was it, she'd gotten me. I was hers." She shrugs. "I never kissed anyone else, and I never slept with anyone else. It was just Rose. Always *Rose*."

There's a long silence.

"Wow," I scoff. "And I thought I had it bad."

She bursts out laughing. "You know, at first, she wanted a normal relationship. We were young, and we'd never dated anyone. She'd lost her virginity to Luke Baker because they were best friends and they both wanted to get it over with. But us two were discovering what dating girls was like. We were both the first girl we'd ever slept with. We were uncovering that thing people always talked about...love."

She takes a deep breath, regret settling in her gaze. "But I was scared," she admits. "As much as my friends were understanding and didn't care, my parents were a different deal. They're so homophobic. They're so traditional, Stoneview. I never told them because I already knew what their reaction would be. It wasn't just that she was a girl. She was an orphan, and they couldn't know if she was from a good family. Not like Conor."

My eyes dart to the three scars she has on her face. They're white now and will forever be there, a reminder of how violent Conor indeed was and how I should have gotten her out sooner. The highest one crosses her eyebrow and the corner of her eye, while the other two are on her cheek.

What kind of man smashes a whiskey glass on a woman?

My hand automatically tightens around my glass. It's about to shatter when Rachel puts her soft skin on mine. "Don't be angry," she whispers. "He's not worth it."

We share a meaningful look before I calm down.

"Anyway," she shakes her head. "I told her I wanted to keep it a secret."

I chuckle before she even says the rest of her sentence.

"She did not take it well. With time, she needed to do her own thing. She didn't want to wait for me."

"That's shit," I simply say.

"I hope this doesn't come as a surprise," she huffs. "But Rose isn't a good person. We fell in love with her and put up with everything. She has good intentions but doesn't know how to express them. We can love her for it, in spite of it, or not think about it at all. But it's true. And she's unlikely to change."

I rub my thumb against my lips trying to hide my smile. She's right. Rose is the most beautiful villain I've ever seen. One I love more than everything. Rachel loves Rose despite her not being a good person. And somehow, I love her for it. Different ways to love our girl, yet both strong.

"You're right," I finally say as she rearranges the burgundy mesh belt around her waist.

"I love eating," she tells me. "But I look pregnant every time I eat two bites of something."

Finally deciding to get rid of the belt, her dress loosens, and she stops sucking her stomach in, letting a small bump fill the dress. "See!" she laughs.

"You look beautiful," I tell her. And I mean it.

She blushes a little but waves her hand in the air. "Enough about me. You said you left during freshman year. Where did you go to high school?"

My eyebrows shoot up, surprised at her question. "Oh," I scratch my throat while I rummage into my childhood memories. "Just a random high school right outside D.C. It was called Northland High."

"Did you like it?"

"I don't really remember it," I admit. "I didn't have any friends or anything. People were scared of me, but I barely went. I was always with my dad."

I run a hand through my hair and avoid her gaze when I understand she's going to ask more. I point at her glass. "Refill?"

She shakes her head. “No. I want to ask more questions.”

I wet my lips and smile. “I can’t escape this, can I?”

“Nope.”

“Alright.” I sit back and wait for her to start again.

“Your dad,” she says. “What’s his name?”

“Frank. He’s dead now.”

Her face twists. “I’m sorry.” She puts a hand on my knee, and I instinctively pull back. It’s not her, it’s talking about my dad.

She pulls her hand back.

“Don’t be sorry,” I tell her. “He was not a good man. He was Bianco’s enforcer, and he loved his job.”

“Unlike you?”

“I’m not an enforcer,” I correct her. “I’m a hitman.”

Her brows shoot up, and I can read her mind before she finds the courage to speak it.

“It’s not the same thing. I do it because I don’t know what else to do. It’s all I’ve ever done. When Bianco killed my dad and I took his place, I counted the days until I didn’t have to work for him anymore. Being an enforcer for the Cosa Nostra doesn’t leave you with a choice. You kill who they tell you to. You hurt who they tell you to. You torture who they tell you to. Now...”

I huff, hesitating and wholly knowing there’s not a real difference, only that now I get to choose. “Now I take a contract because I need the money. I rarely do it, and I avoid it as much as possible.”

“Bianco killed him?” she chokes.

“Had him killed. He wouldn’t dirty his hands for such a small thing.” Saving her another question, I keep going. “My dad had a meeting with Emiliano Luciano.”

“Who?”

“He’s the Don of the Luciano family. Remember Vito? The man we met with Lucky when we were looking for Viktor? Emiliano is his dad. Bianco runs some eastern states from D.C. The Lucianos from New York City. They don’t like each other. That means a lot in the Cosa Nostra.”

She gulps as her eyes widen.

“Emiliano offered my dad a new job. My dad made the mistake of attending the meeting to hear his offer. Bianco learned about it and had him killed.” I shrug. “That’s how it works in the mafia.”

“That’s...intense.”

“I’m just glad I’m out of it.”

“But you’re not. Not really,” she challenges me.

“Aren’t you a brave girl,” I say low. “Defying a hitman.”

“I fuck said hitman’s girl. I’m afraid of nothing.”

I explode in a loud laugh, hitting my hand on the table. “Alright, alright. Let’s say I’m not affiliated with any family anymore. That’s what keeps me away from trouble.”

A slow song comes on from the speaker, and I take her hand. “Am I not meant to get a slow dance during my prom?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

We get up and walk to the front of the stage. Despite the heels, the top of her head barely reaches my mouth. She looks up at me when I wrap an arm around her waist.

“Did you know I’m an excellent dancer?”

“No you’re not,” she snorts.

“Is it so hard to believe?” I start moving to “*Till Forever Falls Apart*” by Ashe and FINNEAS, and she follows my lead.

After a minute, I let go of her waist and give her a small nudge as I step away. I’m still holding her hand, and I get her to spin before bringing her back to me.

Flushed, she looks up. “Samuel Thomas,” she smiles. “How many more secrets do you keep from us?”

“Too many to count.” I wink and slow dance with her close to me. I drop a kiss on the back of her hand and when the song accelerates again, I put both my hands on her waist and lift her as I spin. Her own land on the top of my shoulders and she giggles, so just for the sake of hearing it again, I do another spin.

And another. Until she shrieks with laughter.

I put her down, my head spinning and my lungs tickling with the need to laugh. I let it out as my heart swells. Butterflies spread their wings in my stomach, and I smile down at her.

Our gazes lock. Our breaths sync, and her arms wrap around my neck.

After a few seconds of silence, I whisper, “Now is the time to admit you’re in love with me.”

Chuckling, she separates from me and climbs the stage. She pulls out a microphone and speaks as she runs behind a curtain. “You are in such a rush to hear if I love you, Sam!” Her voice is clear, coming out of the speaker

even though she's disappeared.

I bite my bottom lip and smile to myself.

"First," the speaker tells me. "We have to see who has been elected prom queen and king."

Rachel reappears with two crowns and an envelope in her hands. She puts the crowns on top of the speaker and struggles to open the letter while still holding the mic.

"Okay," she says into the mic. "The prom king of this graduating year is...Samuel Thomas!"

Laughing, I walk toward the stage without going on it. At this height, she can easily put the crown on my head.

"Thank you, thank you," I say as I bow my head in fake humbleness.

She goes back to the letter. "And this year's prom queen is...Rachel Harris!"

She steps to the side and grabs the crown. "Oh my god! Thank you so much! I just want to say thank you to the school, to my friends, and more specifically to my girlfriend, Rose White. I also want to thank our boyfriend, Malik Benhaim, and last but not least, I would like to say something to our *other* boyfriend, Samuel."

She takes a deep breath and looks deep into my soul. "Sam. I love you. I am so in love with you that it's probably unhealthy at this point. You are now part of the three people who have made me feel more love than I should have felt in a lifetime, and yet...I keep greedily wanting more. Your mere presence does unexplainable things to my heart. So don't you ever go away."

The grin on my face probably looks ridiculous, although I can't help it. I close the small gap between me and the stage, and she also gets closer with her crown on but leaves the mic behind.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I take a step back, forcing her to come with me. Her face is much higher than mine, so I slowly let her slide down until her feet are hovering above the floor and her mouth is close to mine.

"I love you too," I whisper. Our lips graze, but we both pull away, happy to leave it at that. It's the strangest feeling, being so in love with someone and yet not having the physical need to touch them intimately.

Clapping resonates around the room, and I let Rachel slide back to the floor before turning around.

Lik and Rose are looking at us with love in their eyes and huge smiles on

their faces. He's got an arm around her shoulder and hers around his waist as they're awkwardly clapping at us. When they stop and separate, Rachel runs to them, jumping into Rose's arms.

"What a beautiful queen you make." Rose's raspy words are cut short when Rachel slams her lips against hers.

Lik slowly walks toward me, a half-smile pinching the corner of his mouth. "Hello," he simply says.

I grab his waist. Sliding a hand to the back of his neck, I pull him toward me forcefully like I know he loves. His lips land on mine with a force I give back. I bite his bottom lip, making him open his mouth before I push my tongue against his. He groans against me, softening under my touch and pressing his whole body against mine. The hand holding his neck goes up to his hair and I pull at the strands to separate us.

"Hello," I finally say back.

"Give me this," he says as he grabs the crown on my head. "Being a king doesn't suit you." He puts it on his own head.

"But it suits *you*?" I scoff.

"What?" he shrugs. "Maybe I was born to reign. You don't know."

The girls have closed in on us now, and Rachel glares at Lik. "That wasn't for you."

"What belongs to Sam belongs to me."

Instantly, all our eyes dart to Rose.

"Please," she snorts. "I don't belong to Sam. I'm above all of you, you all belong to me."

"Sorry, we already have a queen and a king," I tell her, pointing at Rachel and Lik.

"Huh. What's above the queen and king?"

"Nothing is above the queen and king," Rachel says as she juts her chin.

"Really?" Rose smiles with that smirk only she has. Pretending to talk to herself, she counts on her fingers. "It goes, jack, queen, king...oh, I know! Ace."

"I like Ace for you," I tell her. But before she can say anything, I add, "because it can be the highest or the lowest card, depending on the game we play. Just like you."

She opens her mouth to retort something, but Lik cuts her off. "Oh. How fitting."

"Okay, I take it back," she defends.

“No, no. It’s perfect,” Rach jumps in. She wraps her arms around Rose’s waist and nestles herself against her. “I love it.”

Rose pretends to roll her eyes but softens as Rach holds her closer. “Well, if the queen loves it,” she pretends a huff. “Fine.”

“Alright,” I yawn. “Home time.”

“You must be joking,” Rach laughs. “What an old man!”

“So old,” Rose agrees as we all start making our way.

“Daddy likes his comfort and early nights,” Lik adds.

I slap his ass as he walks. “It’s *Sir* to you, thanks very much.”

“Yes, Sir,” Lik throws back playfully.

I let him and Rachel take a few steps further. My hand goes for Rose’s neck and I pull her back, making her turn toward me as I do so. We both stop as the other two keep going.

“Not even going to kiss me hello?” I raise an eyebrow at her, and she smiles as she gazes up at me.

“Isn’t it so weird?” she asks. “You’re my *boyfriend* now. My partner.”

“One of many indeed,” I chuckle.

“Yeah, but you...Who knew?”

Drawing my eyebrows together, I ask a silent question.

“Who knew we would make it? After everything we’ve been through, fuck, who knew we would manage to end up together?”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” she scoffs.

I play with her long hair while my other hand caresses her lower lip. “I always knew, Rose, that you belonged to me. That all I needed was patience. And that one day, you’d become my forever.”

A soft, shocked breath escapes her, and I smirk. “So how about you kiss your boyfriend hello now?”

Going on her toes, she presses her lips against mine and I take pleasure in wrapping my arms around her tiny waist. We only separate from our corner of heaven when Lik calls us.

“Come on! You can kiss in the limo.”

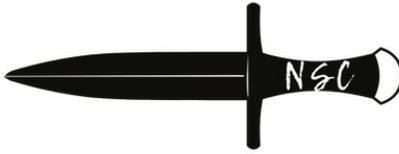
Reluctantly separating, I take her hand in mine and start walking.

“Let’s go, girlfriend.”

The word feels foreign on my lips. So does the happiness.

But her hand in mine...it feels like coming back home after a long trip. Natural, comfy, *perfect*.

LIK



Heaven - FINNEAS

Champagne flows in the limo. With her head resting on Rose's lap, Rachel spills most of her glass on her dress as she tries to drink from her flute.

"Let's open the roof!" she screams excitedly, tipsy from the alcohol she's been consuming.

I practically throw myself on the button. "Great idea," I throw back.

The sunroof opens over our heads and my eyes catch Sam's. The softness in them tells a hundred words. He sips on his glass silently, a small smile tipping up. He can stay silent all he wants as long as he keeps looking at me like this.

I'm the only one not drinking, and it took me a little while to realize that I didn't even care. I'm drunk on the presence of the people I love. Their laughs and their warmth are all I need.

Sam gets up and disappears above the sunroof. I follow quickly, making sure to rub all against him as I come up.

"You finally got your prom," I tell him, raising my voice to speak over the wind. Putting my arms around his neck, I give him a peck on the lips. "You never told me that it's something you wish you had done."

He nods and brings his hand to his jaw, running his knuckles against it. "You know what this whole situation has made me realize?"

"What?"

“Different people bring different things out of you. Rachel reminds me of all the things I could have had. Her kindness leaves me yearning for a simpler life.”

I nod, agreeing. “Yeah,” I chuckle. “But we’re getting there, right?”

After half a minute of silence, I insist. “Right, Sam?”

He smiles. “We’re getting our happily ever after. Nothing will ever get in our way. It’s going to be the four of us, until the end of time.”

A weight lifts off my shoulder. The fear of Sam being a hitman is heavy to carry. Every time he leaves with his guns, his ammunition, and dressed all in black, my heart chips away. It’s small, one at a time, but in two years, my heart has re-shaped itself, piece by piece, to the fear of losing him.

It could take one moment of inattention, one person just a little more skilled than him. Just one job gone wrong, and I would lose him.

I shiver at the thought as he brings me closer to him. He stays above my head as I nestle against his neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“And I love your little arse.”

“Ass,” I correct him.

“It’s mine. I can call it what I want.”

“Sure thing,” I cackle. Just as I calm down, a hand squeezes said ass. “Was that you?”

“What?”

“Hey, lovebirds,” Rose’s hoarse laugh reaches us as she makes her way up, purposely sneaking between us.

“You just have to put yourself between us, don’t you?” Sam scolds her.

“That’s what I’ve been doing for months, baby. Keep up.”

I explode into a loud laugh, grabbing Rose’s jaw with one hand. I pull her face toward mine until I’m kissing her. My tongue strokes her sealed lips, and she parts them open for me. Our make-out session is cut short by someone pushing on my other side.

Rachel is squeezing her way into the open sunroof.

“I hope we don’t get stuck,” she says as we all end up tight against each other.

“I can’t breathe,” I rasp.

“I just want to take a selfie!” she exclaims. She smells of her chamomile shampoo and champagne.

Squeezing herself in front of all of us, Rose wraps an arm across her,

practically choking Rachel with her forearm. Rachel puts her phone up. On the screen, I see the reflection of the four of us.

Sam has a small smile tipped at the corner of his lips, enjoying the moment quietly. His tattoos are peeking from under his suit, on his neck, and on the sides of his head. His big arm sneaks behind Rose and wraps around my waist, which he holds like his life depends on it.

Rose's hair is landing on Sam. A spider web like the hold she has on his entire being. She has one arm back, snaking behind Sam's neck and the other around Rachel. My own hand is in her hair, holding her tightly to make sure she never escapes me. Rose buries herself in the crook of Rachel's neck, leaving a kiss and making her squeal as she takes the first picture.

On the second, I pull Rose's head back, and Sam and I both drop a kiss on her cheeks as Rachel looks up at us from the front.

On the third, we all exploded in endless laughter.

And just like that, with a few selfies, a couple of kisses, and the wind in our hair...we're happy.

Just like that, we've made our quadruple work.

We all slide down back inside. Rose and Rachel take a side and Sam and me another. Rachel slips something into Rose's ear and giggles before hiding her face against her. Rose whispers something back and grabs her waist until she's sitting on her lap, facing us.

"You're drunk, Rach," I laugh. "I've never seen you drunk."

Behind her, Rose drops kisses on her neck, nibbling at the skin and leaving hickeys in her trail.

"You're such a lightweight," Sam adds.

"So what? All the Stoneview girls drink champagne and do coke on a weekly basis. Look at me. I'm specia-ah..." Her mouth drops open and her head falls back as Rose's mouth turns into a smile.

"Keep going," Rose says calmly, her eyes now on me. "You're special?"

"Y-yeah..."

"My special girl?" she insists.

"Yes," Rachel sighs.

My eyes glance down only to realize Rose's arm has slid under Rachel's dress. The skirt covers them both, but the way Rachel's now moving her hips under it is clear.

"Shit," I whisper.

"Lovebug, are you..." Sam trails.

Her eyes go from me to him.

“You don’t mind, do you?” She winks, and Rachel’s hand goes to hold Rose’s arm behind her.

“Don’t stop...” she moans quietly.

“Oh, don’t worry, Sunshine,” Rose chuckles. “Nothing can stop me. No, you’re going to come on my fingers like the special girl you are, huh?”

“Yeah,” Rachel moans louder.

“And you,” this time she addresses Sam, “are going to fuck our boyfriend while I fuck my girl.”

My mouth drops open, a small gasp escaping me.

“Do you make the rules now, Lovebug?” Sam asks, his voice filled with lust.

Rachel’s eyes snap open. “Let her,” she orders low.

Sam’s smile turns carnal and his hand lands on my jeans. Right where my hard dick tents them. “Get on your knees and take my cock out.”

I execute before I can even take my next breath. His cock springs out, hard and thick, ready for me.

“Get me nice and wet.” His words are for me, but his gaze is on Rose.

I take him in my mouth, slowly working him further, attempting to swallow his length. With his hand in my curls, he pushes slightly, helping me past the back of my throat. Tears spring to my eyes and I take a deep breath as I go up and down.

He pulls me up and forces two fingers down my throat. I choke around them, trying to pull away but unable to. “More, Lik.”

His grave voice mixes with Rachel’s moan behind me. I can hear the sound of her wetness as Rose works her up.

I spit in Sam’s hand when he pulls his fingers out, just like I know he wants me to.

“Face down. Ass up.” His words are clipped, unable to make whole sentences because he’s desperate for pleasure.

Pulling my jeans down, I put myself in position, waiting for him.

“Since Rose started this, she’s going to suck your dick once my cum is leaking out of your arse.” He accompanies his word with a wet thumb at my entrance, circling me before he pushes it in.

“Would you like that?” I can hear the smile in his voice and since I can now see Rose, I don’t miss the lust shining in her ocean eyes.

“Yes,” I moan as he stretches me with two fingers.

A harsh slap lands against my butt cheek. “Are we losing our manners here?”

“I meant...Yes, Sir,” I pant.

“Good boy. Look at Rose while I fuck you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Rose’s mouth falls open as I watch her arm accelerate below Rachel’s dress. Rachel is bouncing up and down, bringing herself pleasure, and Rose’s other hand is playing with her nipples above the dress, pinching them one after the other.

“Shit,” Rach whispers.

“Come for me, Sunshine. Show me who owns you,” Rose rasps.

Just as Rachel explodes, Sam enters me harshly. I groan from pleasure, realizing he still used lube, and glad he somehow had one of those little sachets he always keeps with him.

“Oh, fuck,” I cry out as he fucks me relentlessly. He’s not taking his time tonight. He destroys me with pleasure. His knees are on either side of me, a hand at the nape of my neck and pushing me against the floor as he fucks me like he’s trying to kill me.

I turn my head to the side and my cheek slips on the floor of the car. I put two hands on either side of my head to try and hold myself, but he grabs my wrists and holds them at the small of my back.

A rasped moan pushes past my throat as he accelerates. “Who does this arse belong to?” Sam snaps. I can hear his clenched teeth as he tries to control his upcoming orgasm.

“You, Sir!”

He slaps me again, making me whimper. “Again.”

“This ass belongs to you, Sir. Fuck...fuck...”

He explodes in a loud grunt before slowly pulling out, making sure not to hurt me. He helps me up, and both our gazes land on Rose. Rachel is sitting next to her, her head lolling side to side and a post-orgasmic smile on her face.

I pull up my jeans and boxers, sit down next to Sam, and only leave my hard cock poking out of my clothes.

“Right,” Sam smirks. “You got your moment of glory. Happy?”

Rose smiles back at him with all the pride she can muster. “Happy.”

“Good,” he nods before turning to me.

“Now get on your knees and crawl,” I tell her, my voice tight with a need

for release.

She chuckles to herself. “Can’t take one minute of me dominating all of you, can you?”

“You dominate the entire world on a daily basis,” I argue back. “All you have to do is submit to *us*. Now, get your clothes off and crawl to me like a good girl.”

She licks her lips, her eyes locked with mine...and takes her clothes off silently.

There’s a collective silence when she drops to her knees and crawls to me. We’re all watching her like we would die if we looked at anything else.

I squeeze my dick as she gets closer and start stroking myself. There’s only so far she can crawl in a limo, but the minimal distance she did has me dying to stick my cock in her mouth.

“Can you be a good submissive?” I ask as soon as she reaches me.

She doesn’t fight me and instead sits back on her haunches, thighs apart and her palms up on them.

I smile wickedly, the Dom in me kicking at my ribcage. “Show me that pretty tongue of yours, princess.”

Her breathing accelerates before she pushes her tongue out.

“Come on, you can do better than that.”

She widens her jaw, her head goes back, and her tongue comes out until it’s practically touching her chin.

“Tsk, tsk. Keep your eyes on me.”

Her eyes come back to me before she shifts on her knees uncomfortably. I look down and watch with hunger how wet her pussy is getting.

“Our slut is getting very wet,” I mock her. “Is that right?”

She almost makes the mistake of pulling back her tongue to answer me, then stops herself and simply nods. Sam is right, her training is working beautifully. He has a gift for it.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth, princess, and you will stay very still for me. Understood?”

She nods again, and I smile, deciding to push her since she’s being so good.

“If I see your hands moving away from your thighs, I will whip you when I’m done. Okay?”

Her tongue is still out, mouth wide open, waiting patiently for my cock. She nods again.

“Good.” Then I turn away and zip up my jeans. “So, how was your prom?” I ask the other two.

Rose shifts, looking at me with confusion covering her features. “I’ll fuck that mouth whenever I feel. You keep still and quiet.”

A shiver crosses her body, but she doesn’t move. Sam looks at me with a wide smile. “I am so proud of you right now,” he chuckles.

“Thank you, Sir,” I smile back before dropping a kiss on his cheek. Thanks to the three people around me, I’m finding the most perfect Switch balance I’ve ever had.

Rachel and Sam tell me about their date for probably less than five minutes, but Rose is getting restless, and a whimper passes her lips.

“I thought I told you to stay still and quiet.”

I look down between her legs. She is *dripping*.

“Oh, princess,” I snigger. “Degradation gets you so horny.”

Her neck is at an awkward angle and her tongue is still out.

“Would you like to beg me to face-fuck you?”

She nods harshly.

“So eager. Go on.”

“Please,” she pants. “Please, fuck my mouth.”

“Fucking hell,” Sam sighs with pleasure. “Someone’s on her best behavior.”

“Please, Sir,” she insists, looking at me. “I want you to fuck my mouth.”

I pull my dick out and her tongue is back out. I put the tip against it, and she goes to move. “Stay,” I scold her.

She stills, waiting patiently. Slowly, I push in, not stopping until I hit the back of her throat. She gags but stays still, so I keep pushing.

Her lips wrap around my dick, and I let out a ragged breath. “That’s it, good girl.”

I pull away and slam back inside her mouth. Automatically her hands come to my thighs. I rejoice in it, knowing she forgot what I said about whipping her.

“Hands,” I say tightly as I get up on my feet so I can accelerate.

She pulls her hands away and I fuck her mouth as she begged me to. Spit is dripping down her chin and tears down her eyes, but I don’t relent. No, I want to destroy her tight little throat. Enough that she’ll struggle to speak until tomorrow.

I make sure that my tip is in her mouth when I come. I pull out quickly

and hold a finger up. “Hold.”

She does, and I wipe some tears from her face. “Be a good girl and show me my cum in your mouth.”

She opens, trying her best not to let it spill all over herself. “Atta girl. Let it spill, baby. Show me.”

She pushes her tongue out until it drips down her lips and chin. “You’re fucking beautiful.”

I smear it some more with my fingers before looking into her eyes. “Now get on your back and hold your knees close to your chest.”

I turn to Sam. “May I borrow your belt, Sir?”

“No,” Rose whimpers, her voice thick with the need to come.

“I told you what would happen if you moved your hands. Now get on your back before I make you count.”

Rose turns to Rachel, only there’s no pity to find there. No, her Sunshine is loving this way too much to intervene.

Understanding no one is coming to her help, she lies down and brings her knees to her chest, holding herself until I stand above her.

“Wider. And stop pushing my patience.”

She spreads her legs until I can have a full view of her dripping cunt. “My, my,” I chuckle. “What a wet little bitch. So desperate to feel my belt against her clit.”

Her breathing accelerates, but she knows better than to reply.

“Let me know when you’re desperate to come.”

I flick the end of the belt against her swollen clit, and she writhes in pleasure. “Shit,” she hisses.

“What a foul mouth. Want me to come in it again to teach you manners?”

The belt Sam gave me descends on her multiple times before she screams. “Let me come!!”

“What’s the hurry, princess? You’ll come, don’t worry.”

“I want to come now. Please!”

“No.”

I keep flicking and whipping until she’s crying with need. Sometimes, I whip her inner thighs for effect. It takes her what must be unbearably long minutes, but finally, she comes from my belt landing on her clit. It’s slow and shaking her entire body. I do it again, and she screams, even if I know it’s gradual rather than explosive. She rolls her hips, her eyes tightly closed so she doesn’t lose focus and ruin it. I keep going, letting her linger in the

feeling.

When I stop, she's a panting, sweaty mess. Her pussy is leaking all the way to her crack and my eyes flick to Sam's. I want to fuck her. I want to come again.

"Don't look at me," he smiles. "You know what you're doing."

In a hurried step, I grab Rose's waist and flip her around. "Beg me to fuck your ass," I hiss at her as I fumble with my zipper again. That shit is in the way of me getting to my girl.

"W-wait," she pants as I put her on all fours. I feel Rachel shift, and the next second she's kneeling in front of Rose's face, pushing her thumb in her mouth.

"Beg him," she orders softly as her other hand plays with her tits. She flicks a nipple, pinches the other, pulls the first one, and makes Rose moan around her thumb at the same time as I gather more of her wetness to her ass. Slowly, I circle it and push without breaching the barrier.

She moans harder and Rachel pulls her thumb away. "Please...aah. Please fuck my ass."

"Your wish is my command, princess." I slowly push my thumb in. I know she's taken Sam before but she's way too tight to fuck her without prepping her. I don't even need lube, though. She's so fucking wet I'm coming in and out easily.

I change and enter her with my index finger. "Push against me," I tell her, and she does before my sentence is even over. Rachel keeps playing with her tits and Rose cries out with pleasure. I insert another finger and very softly scissor her, trying to stretch her out without hurting her.

"Harder," she growls with animosity. "Fuck me, Lik!"

My mouth falls open in shock before I really start fucking her with my fingers. She pushes herself harshly against me, and I have to put a hand on her lower back to slow her down so I can pull out. Aligning my cock with her ass, I push against her and her against me. The tightness makes me moan loudly and once I'm safely in, I take my time to pull in and out slowly, making her shake with pleasure.

"Shit," she pants. "More..."

I accelerate until she's bouncing on my dick. Slowly, Rachel pulls her dress up as she lays on the floor in front of Rose. She pulls at her hair until her face falls between her legs and my entire body tightens with pleasure.

Rose buries herself in Rachel's pussy as I thrust in and out of her. This

feels fucking surreal.

“You’re not going to leave me out of this, are you?” Sam’s voice is right behind me as he pulls my jeans down.

I watch with fascination as he buries two fingers in Rose’s pussy, from behind me. She screams in pleasure, and in return, Rachel moans something intelligible.

I feel Sam pushing against my dick from Rose’s pussy, and I cry out. “Fuck...I’m gonna come.”

“Not yet,” he chastises me. Pulling out of her, he brings his wet fingers to my ass and pushes in at a torturously slow pace.

He barely has time to stroke my spot that I’m coming hard in Rose’s ass. Rachel is soon to follow, and Sam pulls out of me.

“I didn’t say you could come,” he tells me.

“Worth it, Sir,” I smile as I fall back into his arms.

Rose flattens herself on the floor, completely spent, and I don’t blame her.

I could sleep for days.

SAM



Empires - Ruelle

“A nice dinner, a bath, and a glass of wine,” Rachel says firmly to Lik.

“Don’t come at us with your girly sleepover shit. She needs a good flogging and an hour-long session. That’s what’ll help,” he answers her.

“She needs to talk and express her feelings.”

“She needs to let out the sexual beast she is,” Lik fights her back.

“Sam!” Rachel complains. “Will you say something?”

“Yes, intervene so miss ‘glass of wine and feelings’ finally admits she’s wrong.”

I don’t say anything, rubbing my knuckles against my jaw as I look over the texts Rose sent to the group conversation earlier today. My phone’s on the kitchen counter, and we’re all staring at it like it’s going to give us the answers we need.

Rose: Here goes nothing. I’m not feeling...well today. Like mentally and shit. So, yeah. Can we...do something later so I can try to feel better?

Rose: Or not. I don’t know. It’s not a big deal. I’m just trying to do what that stupid therapist said and verbalize my needs.

Rose: Whatever it’s dumb.

It’s been three months since we killed Aleksei, and we’ve all settled into

our new life together. The girls have moved into the cabin for good this time. They have their own room, and Lik and I still have our room. Rose sleeps wherever she feels like, which sometimes is the couch by the fireplace. She really is a fucking cat.

The worst thing is, when she does that, one of us will always end up on that couch with her. Sometimes all of us. We're such suckers for her, it's ridiculous.

Rose and Lik still go to North Shore Community College, and Rach takes some baking classes so she can keep doing what she loves. She says she wants to open her own bakery and I'm here to support whatever she wants to do.

Rose has started picking up those healthy habits of communicating more since she's seeing her therapist. She asks for help more often, even if it's just for tiny things. Or she'll wake one of us up in the middle of the night and tell us why she can't sleep. Which nightmare it is that still haunts her. Not so strangely, all her nightmares are back to being about Bianco. She feels safe from her other demons now that we've slayed them for her.

What she's never done, though, is explicitly say that she was feeling mentally unwell. This is new to all of us, and our reactions have been entirely different.

Rachel was the first one to reply to her text. Her nurturing nature beat all of us.

Rach: It's not dumb, baby. Thank you for letting us know. I can come pick you up from classes now and we'll spend the afternoon together. How does that sound?

Lik was next.

Lik: I'm having classes in the north building, I'll join you now.

She shut both down by saying she was at the library and wanted to finish whatever she was studying before seeing anyone.

I didn't say anything because I didn't have my phone with me all day. I've just returned home from buying some new weapons for myself and was out of town all day. It's late now. Past dinner late and Rose just messaged that she's still at the library. I don't know if she's avoiding us, reality, or genuinely studying. All I know is she isn't here.

"God, Sam," Lik snaps at me. "Fucking say something."

I open my mouth to talk, unsure of what will come out, when my phone rings in front of us.

Vito Luciano, shows on the screen and my brows furrow. That's rarely good news.

"I'll only be a minute," I mumble as I take the phone and go to my office.

I close the door before picking up. I don't say anything and just wait for him to talk.

"You got played like a fucking rookie, did you know that?" Vito says calmly on the other side.

I take a seat at my desk and take my time to try and understand what he means, but nothing comes up. Knowing I won't ask, he carries on.

"You know what happens when the *Cosa Nostra*'s enemies start making a lot of noise, Sam. Our families unite."

I grab a pencil on my desk and start stroking it, suddenly nervous.

"You got a contract for the Volkovs. You chopped one of the heads off and three grew back. The Bratva is making a lot of noise. Too much, in fact. They've been weakened, and they feel the need to show they're strong."

"What are you saying, Vito?"

"I'm saying they're trying to scare us, and they're trying to hurt us. And when the *Cosa Nostra* feels threatened, we become one, no matter what. Bianco sent you to kill the brothers because he knew the Bratva would unite against us and us against them. And that if we wanted a chance to win that war, we would need him."

"You better not be telling me..." I cut myself off, fear gripping my stomach.

"There was a hearing last week. The four heads of the families went to testify in favor of your old boss. My father included."

"Vito..." I growl.

"Bianco was freed earlier today."

The pencil in my hand snaps as I stand up.

"He knew what he was doing all along, Sam. I'm sorry."

I hang up right away. My hands are shaking when I grab my car keys and leave my office. I call Rose's phone right away, shouting at Lik and Rachel that I'm leaving while I wait for her to pick up.

ROSE



Nightmare - Halsey

I almost drop the three books I'm holding when my phone rings loudly in the college library.

"Shit."

It's past midnight, and there is literally no one around, yet it's impossible to not feel like a dick when your phone rings in what's meant to be a quiet place.

I hold my books with one arm, putting them against my left hip as I grab my phone from my back pocket. It's Sam.

I roll my eyes. No one will ever get more overprotective than him.

It's been three months since we've all completely settled in the cabin, living our happy quadruple life, and he still gets worried when I'm out alone late.

"You don't have to call me every time I'm studying late. I'm trying to get a degree, Sam. I'll be home soon."

"*Where are you?*" he snaps. There's a tint of worry in his voice, and I feel bad.

He just loves me. He cares. That's all I've ever wanted from him.

"Don't stress," I say softly. "I'm at the college library and I've got my car. I'll be home in half an hour."

"I want you to go to your car right now and drive home."

“What?”

“I’ll come and meet you halfway, but I don’t want you to stop driving. You got me?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I exhale. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I just got a call from Vito Luciano. Bianco got out of prison today.”

“That’s stupid,” I snort. “That bastard is never getting out.”

“Rose,” he tells me in that way of his that leaves no doubt about the truth in his words. *“Bianco is free.”*

The books hit the floor before I’ve realized I dropped them. “He’s going to come for me,” I whisper as if he could already hear me.

“Get in your car and come home right. Now.”

I nod even if he can’t see me. “Don’t hang up,” I panic.

“I won’t. I’m already on my way to you, okay? Just keep talking and keep me updated. Drive, and once I know we’re around the same area I’ll turn around and drive behind you.”

I run out of the library.

He’s not here. I know he’s not, or he wouldn’t have waited for Sam’s call to make himself known. He would have attacked me right away. But it’s like turning the last light off downstairs before going up the stairs at night. You just have to run. You feel a presence behind you even though there’s nothing there.

I’m out of breath by the time I reach the empty parking lot. How I wish someone else was studying late right now.

“Are you in your car?” Sam insists.

“I’m getting there,” I pant as I grab my keys. “I forgot my books.”

“I don’t care about your books. Get in the bloody car and lock the doors.”

I nod again. “Okay. Okay. I’m almost there.” I sprint across what seems like an infinite lot.

“Wait.” I put the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I sort out the keys in my hand. Why do I fucking attach them all to the same keyring? I manage to get a hold of the car keys and press once.

Beep. Beep. My car rings as it unlocks.

Just as I open the door, my phone drops.

“Shit,” I rage.

“Rose? Rose!” Sam’s panicked voice seems far away as I reach down to grab my phone.

“Sorry,” I say, putting the phone to my ear.

“*You fucking scared me,*” he says through clenched teeth.

I stand up again. “I just dropped my—*ah!*”

The hit to the back of my head makes me sway. Pain radiates from my neck to my eyes. I try to turn around, but dizziness overtakes me. My vision narrows and blurs. I drop my phone again as I try to hold myself onto the door. I miss and fall onto the harsh ground.

“*Mia rosa.*” Bianco’s face appears above mine. “I’m back now. Don’t be scared.”

Sam’s faint scream through the phone reaches my ears just as I fall into blackness.

A groan of pain and discomfort escapes me as soon as I’m conscious again. I don’t need to open my eyes to understand I’m tied up. My wrists are tied behind my back, and I can’t separate my legs. They’re bound at the ankles.

My heart kicks as soon as I remember the last face I saw.

Bianco is free.

He was released from prison and came to find me right away.

Now all I know is that I’m lying on cold tiles.

Wherever I am, I need to leave.

My head is throbbing. A sharp pain keeps shooting from the back of it and makes it impossible for me to focus on anything. I’m on my side, and as soon as I manage to open my eyes, I realize I’m in complete darkness.

I stir, doing my best to try and sit up. My head feels too heavy to lift and I sit down with my chin to my chest.

Come on. Wake up and find a way out.

It’s tape that binds my limbs, and in a way, it reassures me. With enough strength and a bit of sweat, I can get out of this in no time.

I just need my head to stop pounding for one second. My eyes keep fluttering open and closed, hardly focusing long enough for me to try and find my senses.

Wake the fuck up, Rose. This is life or death.

With all my might I want to, but as soon as I lift up my head, a ringing pierces my eardrums and dizziness overwhelms me again. It’s worse in the

dark. I don't have depth perception and can't get my bearings.

A wave of adrenaline shoots through my veins, and I can see clearly for a second. My eyes are adapting to the room around me.

There's a wall not far from me, maybe one step or two. With my gaze, I follow it to a corner and recognize the outline of a door.

Bingo.

Now the ties. I try to work my wrists first, but exhaustion overtakes me quickly.

I must be badly concussed because every time I make a movement, I feel like my head is going to explode and my eyes twitch.

I try my ankles, shifting my legs in the hope of freeing myself but a few seconds in, a wave of nausea overtakes me.

No.

I can't be sick. I hate being sick.

But I can't control it. I move my head to the side and throw up everything in my stomach.

Definitely a concussion.

I've had enough of those at my high school lacrosse games to know what it feels like.

Another wave of nausea and I'm throwing up some more.

A whimper escapes me. Horrible memories. Trauma I had buried.

All the times I was sick on Bianco's desk from being hit repeatedly after dinner.

I shift away from where I was sick and fall back on the floor, exhausted. I can't let him win, but I can't fight right now, either. I just want to sleep.

My eyes are shutting when I hear the door. I inhale sharply as they shoot back open.

"Rose," Bianco's voice rises in the dark.

His tone sends me back into a nightmare I had barely escaped. I squeeze my eyes shut and curl into myself.

I can't do this. I can't survive him twice.

"Oh no," his fake sweetness makes bile rise at the back of my throat. "Aw..." he squats next to me and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Were you sick, my princess?"

Disgust rolls over me. Not this nickname. He can't steal it back from Lik.

He rolls me on my back.

And I scream with all my might. I call for help as I thrash around.

“*Stai zitto,*” he barks for me to shut up in Italian. “Don’t be so fucking dramatic.”

He slaps me once. Twice. The ringing and heaviness in my head are too much to take another one, so I stop screaming.

“Let me go,” I whimper. “I...” He grabs me and sits me upright until I can rest against the wall. “Mateo, you’re going to go straight back to prison. Just let me go and this can be over.”

He shakes his head as he pushes my dirty hair out of my face. “I don’t care about prison. We’ll be in Sicily by tomorrow evening. They could barely keep me in prison here. I’m untouchable there.”

My heart stops as my eyes widen.

“No, no, no...Please don’t do this.”

“It will be so much easier to get married there. No one will be looking for you.”

“Don’t do this to me,” I pant, pain radiating through my head and making me clench my jaw before I try to talk again. “Don’t do this, Mateo. *Per favore.*”

“Shh, shh, shh,” he soothes me as he puts my heavy head against his chest. “It’s okay. It’s almost over, *mia rosa.*” He opens a bottle of water and brings it to my lips. “Here, rinse your mouth and hydrate. You need to recover from the hit.”

I accept the water greedily. First rinsing my mouth and spitting on the floor, then drinking large gulps.

“Alright, that’s good. Very good girl.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, doing my best to shut the words out.

“Let me go,” I whisper in pain. “Where are we? I can go home and never breathe a word of this. Go to Sicily and no one will ever look for you. Mateo, you know we can’t get married.” I’m panicking. Word vomiting to find a solution. Any solution.

And he hates it.

“That’s enough,” he says sternly. “You and I are going to have to start our lessons again. Right where we left off. You clearly forgot all about respect. Now you need to keep quiet. And if you don’t want to, I can make you.” He grabs something else next to us, and I try to pull away from him.

“No!” I shake my head. But he holds me in place and peels out the duct tape.

“Stop wriggling,” he orders low.

I don't, but he manages to wrap it around my head anyway. So many times I'm scared he's also going to put it over my nose. He wraps and wraps I don't know how many layers. My hair is pulled, agony piercing through my skull.

Tears threaten to fall, and I swallow them back.

No. I promised myself a long time ago that Mateo Bianco wouldn't get any more of my tears. He will not.

The tape feels tight around my mouth, my head, and even down my neck.

"There," he says softly. "I just don't want you to get in any more trouble. Do you understand?" He runs the palms of his hands against the sides of my face, rubbing his thumbs against the tape and making sure it's sticking properly.

Then they come to rest on my waist.

"I've waited your entire life for this, *mia rosa*. I will not wait any longer. One of my friends is lending me his jet since the authorities seized mine. Tomorrow we're flying to Sicily, and in a week we're getting married. I can't wait."

My breath is heavy through my nostrils. He uses the rest of the tape to bind my arms tighter, to the middle of my forearms, and my legs up to my knees.

"There, there. Now you're not going anywhere." He drops a kiss to my forehead and then on the bit of tape that's covering my lips. "I must say, even like this, you look beautiful."

And there it is. That meaningless word again.

Beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful. Fucking beautiful.

I can't hear it anymore. Not from his mouth. Not when it sounds like the worst thing it could possibly be. Not when it means it gets me his attention.

He lets me go, lying me down on the tiled floor again. "Not long, my princess. I promise."

The door opens and shuts.

Sam is never going to find me. I don't even know where we could possibly be. This is not a rescue situation. Either I get myself out, or I know it's over for me.

I drift in and out of sleep, attempting to stay awake while the headache gets worse. My vision keeps getting blurrier until it's impossible to keep my eyes open anymore. I'm not sure if I'm falling asleep or losing consciousness from the concussion.

“Good morning, *mia rosa*.”

I jerk awake. His voice is a whisper and yet it rings out loudly against the migraine. Trying to focus my eyes is impossible and it makes me feel claustrophobic. Bianco’s blurry form is right above me.

“I’m going to bring you upstairs. I need you to sign something for me. Try and be good.”

I want to do everything in my power to make it hard for him, but my power is nothing. I have always prided myself in fighting all I had for my freedom. Here I am, tied up and muted, and I have no strength to fight whatsoever. My entire body is against me, begging for rest. My muscles ache, my head is about to explode. Every time I attempt a strong movement, I give up halfway through.

The weakness is killing my will to survive.

He picks me up easily. An arm under my knees and one around my waist. I can’t even keep my head up, letting it hang as he walks out of the room and up some stairs. It’s only when he sets me down on a chair and the world flips back from upside down that I understand where we are.

In his Washington D.C. house. The one where I grew up. I look around, finding the familiar office that had become a place of nightmares.

My heart kicks with fear from the memories I have here, but I manage to calm it. Because, rationally, this is a place Sam would check. And this gives me a chance of surviving.

He must see the hope in my eyes because he crushes it right away.

From behind me, he brings his mouth to my ear. “I’m sorry, but Sam checked out the place yesterday. He didn’t find anyone, so he left. He was very, very angry.”

I shake my head, denying his words.

“Yes, I can promise you. He had no idea we were right here. No one knows where my safe room is in this house. We were both hiding in there when he came. I’d hidden my car further down the street, but don’t worry, I’ve parked it in the driveway now so we can go to the airport as soon as possible. Who was that boy with him?”

Lik, I think as I squeeze my eyes shut. I just want Bianco out of my head.

“Hey,” he says softly as I feel him come in front of me. “Don’t be sad. I’m here. Look, I’m not even going to punish you that you might have let

Sam and that boy touch you. See? I'm doing good. And you know I always take good care of you."

I know you were always delusional.

I wish I could scream it in his face, but I probably wouldn't have the strength even if I didn't have tape all around my face.

He grabs a piece of paper and a pen. "I'm going to untie your arms so you can sign this."

I look down at the paper and finally understand why the blur is so insufferable. I must have lost a contact during this whole ordeal.

I close one eye and attempt to read, but it's all in Italian. I can speak it fluently, but these are complicated words, and my brain isn't functioning to its full capacity right now. Far from it.

"Don't worry about what any of this means. It's a sort of conservatorship, so I can take good care of you."

My heart drops in my stomach and a scream of despair rises up my chest, blocked by the tape around my mouth. I shake my head but he's too busy cutting through the tape around my arms to see. The air I can take through my nostrils is too little and I feel like I'm choking. My chest heaves but he doesn't see it. He keeps my left hand free and uses handcuffs to cuff my right hand to the chair.

I attempt to stabilize my breathing as Bianco puts a fountain pen in my hand.

"Come on. Just sign, princess," he says through clenched teeth as he bends closer to me. He's struggling to keep his anger under control.

And then it happens. The flash of clarity that tells me this is real. This is going to be my life forever if I don't escape right now.

As soon as he lets my hand go so I can sign the paper, I know what I have to do.

Thump. Thump. Thump, my heart goes, knowing this is it. It's now or never.

It's now.

I flip around and violently stab his neck with the fountain pen. He screams and tries to push me away but I do it again.

Again and again, I stab his neck until blood is spurting and he takes multiple steps back. I get up and fall right on the floor, the chair following me. At least it's not a heavy, big one, and it didn't hurt when it fell on me.

My legs are still bound, and I'm cuffed to the armchair. A scream of

frustration swells in my mouth and resonates high in my head for lack of being able to let it out.

I turn around and drag myself to the desk to grab the scissors he was using a minute ago. From the floor, my fingers are running blindly on the desk until I can finally make out the shape of the item.

Bianco's hand slams on mine on the desk, making me jump in fear.

My muffled shriek makes him laugh. He looks demonic, with blood running down his neck and shirt.

“Don't be silly, *mia rosa*. You can't escape me. Don't you know that?”

There is no way in hell I'm giving up. I stab his stomach with the fountain pen, putting all my strength into it and he is forced to recoil again.

“Fucking bitch!” he screams. “You're going to be punished for that.” I stab again, this time in his calf and he wails as he falls to the floor.

He sits up and punches me in the nose. Despite feeling blood trickling down my nostrils, I'm on him in the next second. I can't straddle him or move much with the way I'm tied up, but I push with all my strength and he falls back, his strength is weakening from all that blood he's losing. I lay on him and stab.

His hands come to my throat, but it doesn't stop me.

I'm bound and I can barely breathe through my nose anymore, blood pouring and choking me.

But I keep going.

I stab and stab and stab. His stomach, his chest, his neck, his face. Everything I can reach, I put all my might into it.

It's just a fountain pen.

Held by a desperate woman.

He dies at some point. He must because he's not defending himself anymore. His hands fall off my throat and his bloody gargles have stopped coming out of his mouth.

When I'm finally sure that he won't wake up, that his open eyes are empty and that he can't hurt me anymore, my body falls on his. He's warm and smells of his usual cologne.

Like when I was a little girl and he'd come to hug me every morning and every night.

His warm hugs and his inappropriate kisses.

That strong cologne that smells like pain and nightmares from all the times he laid me on that very desk and hit me with his ruler, pinched me,

forced me to be sick.

I stay on him until that warmth disappears.

And I smile.

Because Mateo Bianco, the ruler of my hell, is finally gone for good.

I did that. I got rid of him. I fucking did it by myself because I don't need anyone to save me. I can let the people I love think they saved me from Volkov. I can let them feel they're fixing me with their love. And I can submit to them when I choose to.

But I saved myself tonight.

I want to laugh.

I am Rose White, and I am indestructible.

Unconquerable.

Fucking. Immortal.

I cough up some blood and panic. If I don't get rid of the tape right now, I'm going to choke on my own blood.

I drag myself off Bianco's body and grab the scissors again. Instead of pointing them at my face blindly, I undo my legs and get up. I have to drag the chair with me to the bathroom. I realize the house is dusty, furniture covered with sheets. The windows have been sealed with large metal plates. The house was seized with the rest of Bianco's stuff.

There's no electricity, no light, so it's hard to find my way through the tape with the scissors but I manage. I pull it away as much as I can, not caring if it's completely off as long as I can breathe. My reflection in the mirror is a bloody mess but I've never felt so alive in my life. I can see it in the midnight blue that reflects the entire universe back at me.

I smile at myself, spread some of the blood against my cheek, and relish in the fact that Bianco would have hated my ugliness right now.

I take a deep breath.

What now?

No one talks about the loneliness of saving yourself. Because now that Bianco is dead, that no one came to save me, I have to bring myself back home.

Strength and independence don't stop at saving yourself. You have to push yourself to keep living too.

I give up on finding the keys to the cuffs after five minutes. My head is pounding and I won't die here just because I couldn't undo handcuffs. I find Bianco's car keys on him and drag the chair with me outside. I keep having

to stop and take deep breaths to try and calm my dizziness.

It's a fight against the car to get the chair in there. I have to slide myself from the passenger side and then above the middle console then stretch above the chair to close the door. This is the most ridiculous situation I've ever been in.

The gates to his estate are already open. He must have had to do it manually since there's no electricity. Before I drive away, I grab two tissues from a pack he's got in the car and stuff them up my nose. He better not have broken it.

I know the drive back to Stoneview by heart. I will never forget the time the Murrays drove us from D.C. to their rich little town. It's meant to take forty-five minutes on a good day. Today is not a good day and I'm surprised I don't get arrested from all the swaying and slow driving I'm doing. The lanes are blurred and the other cars are barely black dots. I feel sick and I'm pretty sure I'd be passing out if it wasn't for the need to focus and get home safe.

When I pull up in front of the cabin, I start to feel the toll of the hits on my body. I don't know where I find the strength to drag the chair out of the car and up the few steps to the porch. I try the door but it's locked. Of course, Sam always keeps it locked to protect us.

Just in case.

I knock weakly, rocking back and forth, and doing my best not to faint. One eye keeps twitching and closing from the migraine.

I hear the lock, the handle, and Rachel appears on the other side. Her eyes are puffed, her face red. Tears were streaming down her face before she opened the door.

"Oh my god," she gasps.

I guess I'm not really a sight for sore eyes right now. With tape still sticking to my messy hair, bloody tissues in my nostrils and blood all over me. A chair hanging from my right wrist. And just as I start feeling all of my limbs again, I realize that I'm still holding the fountain pen tightly in my left hand.

How did I cut the tape?

How did I drive?

Dragged myself all the way here?

While still holding the pen I used to kill Bianco.

One can truly do amazing things to survive.

"I'm home," I rasp before falling into her arms.

“Lik!” she shrieks.

I’m not too sure what happens after that. The pain is too much, the darkness attempting to drag me and keep me down.

I’m sobbing. I know that for sure. Now that I’m safe, I’m letting it all out and Rachel cries with me, reassuring me that it’s over.

The cuff is cut off at some point.

Lik tends to me, he carries me upstairs, and checks my wound.

“Princess,” I keep hearing resonating in my head. “Your head...” I feel his hand at the back of my head and see the blood on his fingers. “Call Sam.”

I’m in and out. Their voices mixing with my own thoughts.

Am I going to die?

“It’s okay. We’ve got you.”

All this and I fucking die once I’m home? It’s bullshit.

“Sam will fix you. He’s almost here.”

“Stay with me, Rose.” Rachel’s voice is so worried.

“I’m just gonna close my eyes,” I whisper, knowing they’re already closed. “Just for one minute.”

I hear their simultaneous *no*’s but I know it’s okay. It’s just a little rest, just for a minute or so.

A door slams and it gets busier around me.

“Lovebug,” Sam’s voice is grounding. “Lik, get me the hydration IV in my office. Bring me my stitching kit too.” His voice is sharp, his tone calm. I feel his hands on the side of my face. “Open your eyes for me, Rose.”

I groan and force myself to obey. “That’s my girl,” he smiles. “You’re one hell of a survivor, aren’t you?”

Rachel grabs my hand, kissing it like her life depends on it.

“I did it,” I smile. I must look horrifying.

“Did what?” Lik asks as he settles next to me.

“I killed Bianco.”

Time stops and their eyes go to the pen in my hand. The one Rachel is holding.

Sam pinches his lips before a bright smile settles on his face.

“With a fucking fountain pen,” Lik cackles. His laugh is the most comforting thing in the world.

“Let go, lovebug. It’s over.”

Rachel’s slim and soft fingers help me open my hand and let go of the pen.

A sob wrecks my chest and they're all on me the next second. Something pricks at my arm and I understand Sam is inserting the IV. They roll me onto my side and Rachel squats on the floor next to the bed I'm lying in. She pushes hair away from my face.

"I don't want to die," I whisper at her. "I've never wanted to live so badly."

Sam moves behind me and I feel him wipe the blood from the back of my head.

"Don't be scared," Rachel tells me in that soft voice of hers. "You are the strongest woman I know," she repeats the words I'd told her to keep her strong when Lik got shot.

Lik settles next to Rach and wipes the tears from my eyes.

"The strongest," he confirms. "And on the days you feel like taking a break...We got you."

One of Sam's strong hands comes to squeeze my arm. "We got you, lovebug." He drops a kiss on me from behind. Rachel is next, I recognize her soft lips and chamomile shampoo. Lik is last because he always lingers.

"Forever?" I ask as I feel myself fall into a deep, reassuring sleep.

"Forever and some more."

The end.

EPILOGUE

ROSE



golden hour - JVKE

One and a half year later

“You look so hot in a suit,” Lik tells me.

“I know.” I bite my lip as I try to pin this stupid cap to my hair.

“I like that Rachel still bleaches that strand,” he chuckles. “It gives you an edge.”

“Mmhm.” My tongue sticks out as I focus on the mirror. “There.” I smile. “I dare you to fall, little fucker.”

I turn around and my jaw drops. “Lik...you are edible right now.”

His dark gray suit matches my midnight blue one. His tight pearls around his neck and his lock necklace bring an extra touch to the seriousness of the suit and I want to undress him and ride him here and now.

“Wanna taste?” he smiles.

I chuckle and shake my head. “We’re late as fuck.”

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t tempt me, then.”

We run across the lawn that leads to North Shore Community College and burst open the doors to the amphitheatre. We were meant to have the ceremony outside, but the weather refused. Family and friends are squeezed

in here because they wouldn't miss it for the world and I know mine are here somewhere.

The dean is already talking, and Lik and I attempt to make ourselves small as we walk to our chairs.

"Scuse me."

"Sorry," he whispers after me.

"Almost there," I smile to a girl who rolls her eyes at me.

"Right here," Lik adds.

We fall on our chairs and earn ourselves a death stare from the dean. He keeps going on and on forever.

"I wonder if we should have come a little later," Lik murmurs in my ear discreetly. I let out a small laugh and pinch his thigh.

"Quiet," I chastise him.

Lik is called before me, and I have to wait forever on my own to hear my name.

White.

Stupid W-starting last name.

I shake the dean's hand and look out in the crowd. There are too many people here, I can't see shit.

Until I hear, "I love you, Rose!!!" I pinch my lips not to smile too widely and finally find Rachel in the crowd. She's jumping up and down while Sam throws daggers at whoever is complaining about Rachel's excitement.

"I love you too!" Lik screams from his seat. Rachel frowns and looks for him.

The crowd laughs but my Sunshine isn't happy. She loves a good competition with Lik, though.

"Marry me!" she shouts, and everyone erupts in a laugh, including me.

"Alright, that's enough," the dean breaks our party. I walk down the steps and sit next to Lik until they're done with the rest of the students.

"Congratulations to this year's graduates," he finally concludes. "And I wish you the best in your new life."

Lik and I stare at each other as we get up. We hold hands as we throw our caps and smile.

"I love you," he whispers.

"I love you too."

He gives me a passionate kiss and we both miss our caps falling back down.

By the time we separate, Sam and Rachel are on us. Rachel gives me another kiss. It's different, shy, and less possessive, but just as great.

"Congratulations," she jumps on the spot. She gives Lik a hug. "I hate you."

"I love you too," he replies.

Lik goes to his mom and Xi. Billie and Emma are here too with their dad. Billie nods at me and I nod back. We're still not big fans of each other, but we can be in the same room without jumping at each other's throat. Sometimes.

From behind, Sam grabs me by the hips, turns me around and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, and let him bury his hands in my hair as he kisses me deeply.

"I am so proud of you," he tells me. "Of the woman you've become and everything you already were."

I smile against his lips. "I love you."

"I love you, Lovebug."

"My god," someone huffs behind us. "It's always the same. You have to wait for her to entertain her fan club before she gives her family attention."

I explode in a laugh as Sam puts me down. I jump in my twin's arms so quickly he has to take a step back to balance himself.

"You're my other half, Jake. Why do you even need my attention?" I laugh against his neck.

"Because he's the neediest man on the planet," his girlfriend, Jamie adds next to me.

"Whatever," he pushes me away. "Congratulations on attempting to be as smart as me."

"Mmm," I pretend to think. "Who stopped their studies before graduating and who's going to Duke to finish her undergrad degree? Please, do remind me."

"Shut up," he chuckles as he messes with my hair.

Chris is the next one to take me in his arms. His huge form swallows me as he drops a kiss on the side of my head. "I knew you could do it," he whispers in my ear.

I am ever so grateful for the foster brother who always believed in me. Who knew I would eventually achieve the dream of living a normal life and getting into my dream college.

When we separate, I look at the woman next to him. He is still dating that

bitch from sophomore year and I hope she gets run over by a bus soon. She smiles tightly at me and pulls him away. “Congrats.”

“Congratulations!” Luke shouts over her.

“Luke!” I jump up on the spot.

He’s been working hard on getting his dad’s company out of trouble for the last few years and we hadn’t seen him once. He’s about to grab me when someone pulls my gown and I fall backward into Sam’s hold. He wraps an arm across my collarbone.

“I heard he was your first time,” he murmurs ominously in my ear.

Luke looks at me confused.

“You can shake her hand,” Sam growls at him.

“Are you for real?” I laugh.

“Why don’t you try and see if I am?” he tells me.

He grabs my forearm and waves my hand in front of Luke, who grabs it. He only gets to shake it once before Sam pulls my hand away.

“That’s plenty enough.”

“Oh my god,” I cackle. “You get worse as you get older.”

“Come on,” Rachel exclaims. “Let’s take this party to the bakery.”

She grabs my hand and drags me along with her. I look back to watch Sam and Lik kiss deeply, lovingly, and I leave them to share their moment.

We all park in front of *Sunshine’s Bakery*, the shop Rachel opened in Silver Falls. She finally put her baking skills to good use.

There are gasps of awe when we walk inside. She’s decorated everything white and blue, the colors of North Shore Community College. There’s a huge, stacked cake that’s close to a wedding cake and balloons everywhere.

“Ozy!” Juliette runs to me and jumps into my arms. She’s so tall for a ten-year-old and it makes me happy to know she’ll probably reach my height by the time she’s my age. I hug Hannah and Thomas after her.

Juliette is officially a Murray. They adopted her and just like we promised, we make it work when they’re away.

“The cake is vanilla,” Juliette winks at me. “My favorite.”

“Same,” I chuckle.

“Isn’t chocolate so disgusting?” Jake adds as he puts an arm around Juliette.

She laughs. “Hi, ghost.”

“I visit you every holiday, shut up.”

“I visit her once a month,” Chris competes as he puts his arm on her other

side.

My smile is hurting my cheeks. The fact that my twin and my foster brother fell in love with her like I did means everything to me. This girl might have had a rough start, but we'll make sure she's surrounded by love for the rest of her life.

"I visit her three times a week," I add.

"Twice on weekdays and once on the weekend," Juliette beams. "But what about when you go to Duke?"

"Rose, your slice of cake," Rachel's voice comes from behind me.

"One sec, Sunshine," I say without looking. I grab Juliette's hand. "We always figure it out, don't we?"

"Rose, eat." Rachel reminds me but I finish my talk with Juliette. "You won't even miss me now that you're gonna start fifth grade."

"Rose," Rachel insists. "I wasn't joking earlier."

"When?" I ask her as I turn around to grab the plate.

My mouth drops open.

She's on one knee, holding a plate up. It's got cake on it. And a ring on the cake.

"When I shouted marry me," she murmurs with a tight voice. The shyness she managed to get over in the last year is coming back tenfold.

Silence falls over the room. I hear a plate break as someone gasps.

"I..." My heart is kicking in my chest, my hands becoming clammy. I look up for a second, searching for our men. They're right behind her smiling at me.

"We talked about it," Sam said. "We concluded that if you girls do it, then that means we can do it too."

"We know what it's *really* like behind closed doors," Lik adds with a wink.

I want to laugh but I fall to my knees instead, putting my palms on the sides of Rachel's face. I don't know if it's a sob or a giggle. A cry of happiness maybe. But the word is clear.

"Yes."

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All books unfold in the same world at different times.

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Stoneview Trilogy (MF Bully):

Giving In

Giving Away

Giving Up

Rose's Duet (FFMM why-choose):

Queen Of Broken Hearts (Prequel novella)

King of My Heart

Ace of All Hearts

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Lots of Love,

Lola ≡

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lola King is a dark, steamy romance author who loves giving ‘happy ever after’s to antiheroes. She writes flawed, and deeply broken characters, and focuses some of her stories around queer love. Her books are sometimes cute, sometimes angsty, but always sexy! Lola lives in London and if she isn’t writing, she is most likely keeping her mind busy putting together a play or making music.

Let’s keep in touch on IG [@lolaking_author](#) or on FB readers’ group *Lola’s Kings* !

