

LONG LIVE THE KING

*King
of my Heart*

ROSE'S DUET BOOK 1

LOLA KING

KING OF MY HEART

ROSE'S DUET BOOK 1

LOLA KING



Copyright © 2022 by Lola King

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Lola King asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within this book have endorsed the book.

All songs, song titles and lyrics contained in this book are the property of the respective songwriters and copyright holders.

First edition.

Cover art by Dirty Little Creations

Editing by Lunar Rose Editing Services

CONTENTS

[Other books by Lola King](#)

[Content Warning](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lola King](#)

*To every survivor.
Take your time to heal.
I'm still taking mine.*

Stab the body and it heals, but injure the heart and the wound lasts a lifetime.

Mineko Iwasaki

OTHER BOOKS BY LOLA KING

Stoneview Stories (MF, bully)

Giving In

Giving Away

Giving Up

Rose's Duet (LGBTQIA+, why-choose)

Queen of Broken Hearts (FF novella, prequel - you don't have to read this prequel to read *King of My Heart*)

CONTENT WARNING

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

I cannot say it enough: this book is dark. It contains, but is not limited to, on-page SA, CA, and domestic abuse. Those are not from one love interest to another, however, they are part of the characters' stories. Please, do not take this lightly. You must think of yourself first and not start this book if it could affect your mental health.

There are *more* triggers to this book and it is important for you to read them. The only reason they are not listed here is because the big Zon uses keywords to take dark romance books off the platform.

For a full list of triggers please check the authors' Instagram or the Goodreads page:

Goodreads page: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61707488-king-of-my-heart>

Lola King's Instagram:
https://www.instagram.com/lolaking_author/

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.

You do not need to have read the Stoneview trilogy to read this book. However, it unfolds in the same world and might contain spoilers from the other books.

This book is the first in a duet and ends on a **cliffhanger**.

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

SPOTIFY LINK

Hate You For A Lifetime — Connor Kauffman

BLOOD — KLOUD

Mind over Matter (Acoustic) — PVRIS

Comatose — jxdn

mars — YUNBLUD

ALL 4 U (with ghosts in love) — dandelion hands

High Enough — K.Flax

she calls me daddy — KiNG MALA

Goddess — Xana

I Want To — Rosenfeld

Beauty — Layto

Devil Devil — MILCK

Blood on Your Hands — Veda, Adam Arcadia

Head Like A Hole — Sam Tinnesz

Houndin — Layto

War — Sum 41

I Don't Mind — FNKHOUER

Stay — girl in red

Bleach — Call Me Karizma

@ my worst — blackbear
Put It on Me — Matt Maeson
Horns — Bryce Fox
Art Hoe — Call Me Karizma
I'm a Sucker for a Liar in a Red Dress — Adam Jensen
Switchblade — neverwaves
Do It For Me - Rosenfeld
Spell It Out — You Me At Six
counting crimes — Nessa Barrett
Young God — Halsey
A Little Death — The Neighbourhood
Blood In The Cut — K.Fløy
Gimme Love — Rosenfeld
Cravin' — Stiletto, Kendyle Paige
Desert Rose — Lolo Zouaï
New Bad Habit — Adam Jensen
Dead Body — Call Me Karizma
Dancer in the Dark — Chase Atlantic
Chills (Dark Version) — Mickey Valen, Joey Myron
4AM — KID BRUNSWICK
Until I Come Home — Two Feet, grandson
Love Overdose — Daniel Di Angelo
Often — The Weeknd
Start a War — Klergy, Valerie Broussard



PROLOGUE

ROSE



Hate you for a lifetime – Connor Kauffman

16 Months Ago

Graduation Day...

“You’ve packed your bags, right?” I ask as I put a strand of hair behind her ear. Blonde, below her shoulders, with a habit of tickling my nose when I hug her.

She nods, biting her lip and looking up at me. The hope shining in her eyes makes my chest buzz with warmth.

“I just need to grab some last-minute things. Charger, laptop, some cash I’ve got hidden. I didn’t want my parents to understand something’s going on.” She accompanies her words with her arms wrapping around my narrow waist.

Sliding my hand behind her neck, I bring her closer until her cheek is against my own neck and I can drop a kiss at the top of her head. She smells of chamomile and honey because of the shampoo she uses. No one smells more like comfort than Rachel Harris does.

“You go,” I tell her. “My brother will drop me off at your house. Are we still good to take your car?”

She smiles and nods again. I can see the images of freedom and adventure reflecting in her eyes. She is speechless, light, hopeful.

My gaze catches on the groups of parents and Stoneview Prep students around us. Everyone is celebrating our

graduation. Everyone is jovial and ready for their new life.

So are Rachel and me. This town is already in the past for us. Our future is somewhere else together. Far from her restricting, homophobic parents. Far from the rich kids and their poisonous families. Far from the power-hungry wealthy criminals who control the underbelly of a town that is spotless on the surface.

My friends will be going to college, and my twin will be following the love of his life. While I will be going to Duke, taking Rachel with me even though she hasn't applied to any colleges. She'll be with me, and we'll figure it out.

Three years of ups and downs. Of secrets and toxicity that we need to leave behind. It's the only chance we have to flourish peacefully.

“Ready to say goodbye to Stoneview?”

She looks around, too, taking in our beautiful campus. Then, she locks her eyes with mine in that way she does to tell me she's going to say something she means. I see her losing herself in my midnight blue eyes for a few seconds, incapable of resisting and melting for me. She finds her focus again and her stare hardens.

“I'll be waiting, Rose. My parents said we have dinner with the McGills tonight. I know what they want. They'll try to start the process of my engagement to Conor.”

I nod. “I'll be there. Trust me.” I put everything I have into those words, but I know the number of times I've asked her to trust me just for her to be disappointed.

Not this time.

“Don't disappear on me,” she whispers, her throat clogged with pains from the past. From all the times I hurt her. “Not again.”

“I'll be there,” I repeat. “Nate is driving me. I'll be right behind you.”

Words are not enough for Rachel anymore, even from someone as charming and convincing as me. She knows my

promises don't often mean much, that I use human language as a weapon and turn people's emotions against them. I can see in her eyes that it's not enough right now. But it will be very soon.

I observe her going back to her parents with a watchful eye. We didn't hide from anyone but them in the last three years. Her mom looks back at where Rachel just walked from and then stares at me.

She knows.

She's always known I wasn't just the best friend coming for sleepovers. Rachel is helpless when it comes to me. She has this impossibility of hiding her infinite love for me no matter how much she tries. And her mom is a hawk. She sees and hears everything. She plans, schemes, manipulates, and poisons minds like a creature of nightmares.

I smile in response to her glare. Her plan to lock her daughter in a loveless marriage so she can gain more power in our corrupted city is going to crumble under her. A house of cards she spent years building that I will destroy with a whispered breath.

I go my own way and join my older brother waiting for me in his car.

"Look at that. Look at that fucking offer," I laugh as I slide inside.

I show my Duke acceptance letter to Nate. I'm going on a lacrosse scholarship. I'm never going to go pro, but I've now got access to my dream college. And then it'll be law school.

Now that I'm out of the harpy's orbit, I feel myself relax again. Mine and Rachel's future awaits us.

The excitement makes my ears whistle with the melody of freedom.

"Congrats. I can't wait for you to become my bribed attorney," he smiles back at me.

"Ha. Very funny," I say as I put my seatbelt on.

The silence is a little too long.

“Are you for fucking real,” I snap. “In your dreams.”

He chuckles and starts the car. “You sure you don’t want to go to the Murrays’? They’re gonna be celebrating all of your guys’ achievements.”

“Nah.” I let my head fall against the headrest and glance outside. The weather is beautiful, it’s warm and sunny. Students from Stoneview Prep are walking around with diplomas and hats in their hands. Everyone is blissful.

And the best thing in all of that?

Bianco is gone.

I let a long breath of relief escape my lungs.

“I can’t believe it,” I smile. “He’s gone.”

I never imagined a life without Mateo Bianco. I never imagined what freedom would feel like.

Light.

I’ve got butterflies in my stomach, and I can’t stop smiling. I’m going straight to Rachel’s house. I can hardly believe her mom didn’t think I’d get in the way of her plan. She wanted her to do some dumbass online course and get engaged to Conor McGill. I chuckle to myself. As if.

It doesn’t matter, though. She’s escaping Stoneview with me. We’ll figure something out. We always do. I’m going to marry this girl one day.

“Are you not dropping me off at Rachel’s?” I ask as we pass the sign that says, ‘Thank you for Visiting Stoneview – See you soon!’

Nate simply shakes his head and keeps driving. My heart drops in my stomach from fear and my brain starts to overwork itself with that fucking listing coping mechanism.

2019, 36,120 – 2018, 36,560 – 2017 37,473 – 2016...

“Fuck,” I groan as I shake my head.

“Relax, Ozy.” His voice is soft, and I’m not used to it sounding that way. “I can hear you listing shit in your head. Will you stop?” I don’t reply, and so he keeps going. “What is it?”

I huff and run a hand through my hair. It’s so fucking annoying. “Motor vehicle deaths in the U.S. by year.”

“God, your head is a dark place,” he cackles. “I’m not going to get us killed.”

“It’s not that. You said you were taking me somewhere, and you’re not. You don’t exactly have a record of planning lovely surprises.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not kidnapping you.”

I nod and look out through the window again. “I don’t know how to live life without worrying about what’s going to happen next,” I admit in a quiet voice.

“I know.” He sounds like a man full of regrets. Yet, how could he when he’s just saved all of us? “You’ll get used to it. You’ve got your whole life in front of you, and no one will take that away. Or I will fucking end them, trust me. We didn’t go through all this shit for something to happen now.”

It makes me laugh as I look at him. His bun is perfect, keeping his dark blond hair away from his face. He’s wearing a night blue suit that matches his eyes and a slight smile stays on my lips. Women probably fall head over heels for him.

“I bet you fuck a lot,” I drop.

His eyes snap to me, shooting daggers. “Don’t say that to your older brother. I’m not talking about sex with you.”

I laugh so hard my head hits the window. “Jake and I talk about everything. I mean, not in detail, but it’s good to check from time to time. Make sure we don’t fuck the same girl.”

“Yeah, well, you and your twin have always been weirdos. I’m normal. One out of three, thank fuck.”

“So fucking normal,” I mock in sarcasm.

It's nice to talk to him like everything is fine. Nate and I have been through a lot, but it doesn't matter anymore. Because it was all one man's fault, Mateo Bianco, our ex-foster dad, whose been put away for good now.

Half an hour later, Nate slows down as he enters Silver Falls. I recognize the street he takes, and I turn to him.

“Why are we going to Sam's?”

“Why do you know where Sam lives?”

I roll my eyes but don't grant him a response. I want mine before he gets his.

When he parks in front of the building instead of going into the underground garage, I raise an eyebrow.

He takes a deep breath and shifts so he's facing me. “I'm sorry.”

“Wh—”

“For every time I've hurt you, physically or mentally. For not telling you what my plan was even though I knew you were smart enough to understand it. I'm sorry for all the times I wasn't here when Mateo hurt you. I knew what he was doing all along and I sacrificed you for the bigger picture.”

It takes all of me not to flashback to the past. My hands land on my thighs and I'm grabbing them so tightly I feel my heart beating in them.

“Nate, I don't hate you...”

“You should. You have all the reasons to. Jake does. He knows. He understands but won't forget. And I get that. I'm not asking for forgiveness. I just want to let you know that everything I did was so we could get to this point. And I will hate myself forever for some of the stuff I've done, but if it means that it leads to this,” he points at me then him. “Then I'd do it all again.”

I nod, feeling some tears springing in my eyes. None of them fall. I won't be crying today, for it's a beautiful day.

“I love you,” I tell him. I feel like I never did. Not in this lifetime. “Thank you for saving us.”

“I didn’t save you. I fixed mistakes.”

“You didn’t put us at Bianco’s in the first place. The system failed us. And when I say you saved us, I don’t mean just Jake and me. I mean all of us. You included.”

He nods, pushes his glasses up his nose, and pulls his sleeves up to his elbows.

“I’m not staying, Ozy. Stoneview and all that, it’s done for me.”

I could say so many things. I could beg him to leave his life of crime behind. Cry and tell him I’m scared for him. That I want him to be happy.

We’re not the kind of family that cries and begs. We’re ruthless sociopaths. Myself included.

“You’re going to build up illegal shit somewhere else, and I’m telling you now that it’s not a good idea. The deal you got with the FBI for giving them Bianco is not valid on future crimes.”

“No, it’s not,” he agrees. “But I’m not planning on ever getting caught.”

“You’d end up in prison, Nate. A cell right next to Bianco’s.”

My attempts to scare him only make him smirk. He’s the worst of us. So fucked in the head that he would love to end up in prison just to prove he can get out.

“Cool. I can keep on torturing him there.”

I shake my head. What’s the point? A gangster, that’s what he is. That’s all he knows.

“Sam and I are leaving tonight. I thought you’d want to say bye.” He runs a hand in his hair, undoing and redoing his bun. I can tell he doesn’t like this situation and is trying to keep a hold of his patience.

When I don’t answer, he explains further.

“I won’t come in. You guys can just...whatever I don’t want to know. I don’t approve of any of this shit. I just think if you say bye then you won’t look for him.”

“Right,” I chuckle coldly.

“You’ve got so much waiting for you, Ozy. That girl you’re seeing, she’s a fucking angel. You need to take care of her, and you need to cherish what you guys have.”

“I know that.” I don’t need him to tell me how to live my life. I know what’s best for me, even when I make the wrong decisions.

“Do you want to say bye to him? He can drive you back to Stoneview, or I can come to pick you up later. I can even wait here if you want.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Don’t wait. I’ll call you.”

I enter the code and take the elevator all the way to Sam’s apartment. This whole situation is fucked up. I can’t help the pain in my chest knowing it’s going to be the second time I put myself through saying goodbye to him.

I gulp when he answers the door. Why does he have to look so irresistible? Why does he have to be exactly what I want out of him. Dark, dangerous, *lethal*.

There will never be a single word that can describe Sam to me. Childhood best friend, hero, savior, first love. He’s all and none of these things. Really, he just happened to have been linked to Bianco at the same time I was. Fate and criminal organizations. That’s all that connects us. He’s Nate’s best friend, not mine.

He looks at me, then throws his head back, looking at the ceiling while he thinks over what he’s going to tell me. Sam thinks a lot, his words are never wasted. When he looks back down, he gives me a pinched smile.

“He told you we’re leaving, didn’t he?”

“Let me in.”

He nods and shifts out of the way. I walk in and take in the familiar penthouse that looks nothing like him. The modern white furniture, the Scandinavian rugs, and comfortable nooks everywhere. This is Sam's deep need for comfort, the kind he doesn't show to anyone.

Except me. I know this place by heart. I'm special to him and I know it. We often spend precious time together, where we laugh. I make Sam fucking Thomas *laugh*. And no one knows how exquisite it sounds.

We walk together to the living room and sit on the L-shaped sofa, a safe distance from each other. The silence is a little too loud and I hate when he makes me feel like this. Like I have to say something.

I cave about thirty seconds later. "So, bye, I guess."

It makes him laugh and I smile while butterflies flare up in my stomach. It's beautiful. He gets up and stretches his arm above his head, cracking his neck. His top rises and gives me a beautiful view of his lower abs and his marked V.

They're covered in tattoos, his whole body is, and it makes me shiver with need. Why can't I just feel normal around him? Why do I always feel like this young girl discovering love and pleasure for the first time? The effect he has on me is unavoidable, no matter how hard I try.

"Would you like a beer or something?"

I shake my head. "I had champagne at graduation, and I'd like to stay sober." It's needed around him.

"Champagne. Such a Stoneview girl now," he throws as he walks to his open-plan kitchen and opens the fridge.

He grabs a beer, pours me a glass of water, and comes back. This time, he sits a little closer. Close enough that I feel his warmth. It's strange because he's so cold, so dark, that I'm always surprised when I feel his body heat.

"Congratulations," he finally says. "For graduating."

I nod and take a sip of water. "Thanks."

Fuck, this is too awkward.

“Look, let’s just get it over with,” I snap. “Have a good life. See you, probably never, and don’t call me if you ever need an attorney.”

He doesn’t reply. He puts his beer down, locks his black eyes with mine...and kisses me.

I gasp in shock at the last thing I expected from him. My glass slips from my hand, dropping to the floor, the clink barely audible when the beating of my own heart deafens my ears. One hand tangles with the hair at the back of my head. One grabs my jaw to angle me and adapt to his height. And he deepens the kiss.

He kisses me like I’ve always dreamed of him kissing me. Like he loves me. Like he reciprocates the feelings he knows I’ve always had toward him.

At first, it’s the kiss I always wanted from him as a little girl. It’s loving and tender as he plays with my lips and shows me the romance he never showed anyone.

And then, it’s the kiss I’ve begged for as a woman since he’s been back. His tongue breaches the barrier of my lips and intertwines with mine in a passionate embrace. I moan into his mouth from sheer satisfaction. I pull myself closer to him as my hands land on his chest and tighten around his t-shirt.

He groans when I bite his bottom lip and he pushes back harder, dominating the kiss with a strength he rarely uses toward me. His hand in my hair becomes painful, our teeth clash and my lungs beg for air, but he doesn’t stop. He ravages my mouth, my lips, and causes havoc in my heart.

He ravages *me*. And that’s all I’ve ever wanted.

In this moment, nothing else matters. Just him. The British prick who stole my heart when I barely knew how to use it. Who stormed back into my life and never let me get away from him.

Finally. Fucking finally.

For a minute, all my dreams come true. My life becomes clearer, my brain takes a rest, and my fears fly away.

Until he breaks the kiss so suddenly my body shivers.

“Shit,” he hisses as he gets up and steps away.

I can’t help my eyes from widening in shock. Is that regret in his features?

We’re both panting and looking at each other, but I have nothing to tell him for once, and he looks like he has everything to say.

“I shouldn’t have done that. I...fuck.” He huffs as he runs a hand through his black hair. Always short on the side and long on the top. Always gelled back.

I slowly get up and walk to him. “Don’t!” he snaps. “Stop it, Rose.”

“What? I don’t get it.”

I’m trembling, because I was so close to my wildest dreams coming true, and I can currently see them fading away.

“I can’t do this. Don’t you get it? Stop it. Stop pleading with your eyes every time you see me. I see the imploration in them. I see how much you’re in love with me. I can’t give that love back, do you understand? I cannot love you, Rose.”

“But...why?” I rasp.

I’m not even going to deny I’m in love with him. I’ve always been; this isn’t news to anyone. I’ve tried lying to myself too many times to pretend anymore.

“I’m leaving,” he tells me. “You just got a lacrosse scholarship to Duke. I’m leaving, and you’re going to go to college and have a life free of all the shit I’m involved with. I *kill* people for a living, Rose. Do you think I want you involved with that? Do you think Nate wants that for you after everything he’s put himself through to free you from Bianco?” His British accent is so strong when he starts talking fast. His T’s are sharp, his consonants a true hit to the heart.

It’s a real struggle to swallow the rock stuck in my throat.

“All these things are to protect me, and I get it.” I try to keep calm, try to hold on to the hope I felt a minute ago. “But

what do *you* want? You're in love with me too. You're not a liar, and you can't deny it."

He shakes his head but stays silent.

"Come on, admit it," I rage.

"You fell in love with me at such a young age." He sounds so sorry. Why does he sound so sorry? "You needed someone to protect you, needed to escape the reality Bianco put you in. I can understand that. I was happy to fill that role for you."

"No," I try to cut him off. I don't like where this is going.

"We got separated suddenly. It was a rough fracture, and you couldn't get rid of those feelings because of that. Because you kept imagining where it would have led if we had still been in each other's lives."

"That's not t—"

"Nowhere. You loved enough for the both of us, but I never reciprocated those feelings." His voice is so cold.

I'm still panting, but this time it's from all the rage and sadness flooding me. "You're a liar," I push past my tight throat. "I know you feel the same as I do."

"I've got a boyfriend, Rose. I'm in love with him, and I can tell you that what I feel for you is nothing like what I feel for him."

My whole world comes crashing down. Because, while Sam always kept me at arm's length, I had convinced myself it was to protect me, except it was actually because Nate was keeping him away. I was wrong all along. I'm so used to people falling for me. I'm so used to getting my way when it comes to love, that I have no idea how to accept rejection anymore. I fucked my way through all the people around me out of pure greed. Since I knew I could. And the one person I truly want? I was delusional; I made it all up. I thought he loved me because I loved him so greatly.

"Why would you kiss me if you have a boyfriend," I rasp.

I want to know who he is. I want to know why he's so special.

“Why would you do this?!” I shout in fury.

“I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry. I wanted to make sure there was nothing. I apologize for that.”

“You...you apologize?!” I imitate his pathetic accent as the rage takes over. “You’re fucking breaking my heart, but, hey... you apologize!”

I take out my phone and text my brother to come pick me up.

“I hope you have the life you deserve, Rose,” he says quietly. It makes me cackle a sarcastic laugh.

“I hope you fucking die on a job. One day, someone is going to ask you to kill the wrong person. And they will end you.”

He nods slowly. “I know.”

I shake my head and hurry to the door then stop dead in my tracks. “Who is it? What does he have that I don’t? Apart from a fucking dick.”

“Nothing. You’re perfect, you know you are. He’s just the person I fell in love with.”

I take a shaky breath to stop the tears from falling. I haven’t cried in so long. Sam will *not* be the one who gets them out of me.

“It should have been me,” I conclude. I walk out with my head high and close the door inaudibly.

This is unfair. Sam was mine. He was always mine. And some guy just took him from right under me.

The warm air that crashes into my lungs when I leave his building does nothing to help. I feel a little dizzy and hot from the argument, and the temperature is making it worse.

The street is quiet, the view of the river slightly calming. I lean against the barrier while I smoke a cigarette. That river leads straight to Stoneview lake on one side and the Silver Falls on the other. I could just jump in and let it take me somewhere nicer.

I sigh and look at my phone. This was meant to be a good day. I've got a missed call from Rachel and a text, making my heart drop from the shame and guilt.

Rach <3: Are you still coming? My parents want to celebrate with Conor's family tonight. We're leaving for dinner at 6:30.

I put my phone in my back pocket and huff the smoke out of my lungs. How can I face Rachel now? When I was ready to throw it all away for Sam.

Rachel is the love of my new life. Sam of the old one.

The first car I've heard in a while drives behind me and I look around. A black SUV with blacked-out windows. How not creepy.

I peer back at the river, finishing my cigarette and stubbing it against the sole of my sneaker, and then put it back in the pack. Let's not pollute. I need to bring a nicer karma on me.

I turn around and freeze on the spot. That black SUV is back, driving slowly past me. I look around me. No one. No other car.

I shake my head and relax. It's the middle of the afternoon, no one is going to fucking kidnap me now.

But I know.

I know something is wrong because that's just how we women are. We grow up having to be careful. We learn to trust our instincts when we're outside.

The SUV comes back to stop right in front of me, and I take a step back, but it all happens too fast.

The two men dressed in all black come out of the back door.

One grabs my arm as I try to run away.

The other one makes it behind me and slams a hand over my mouth when I try to scream.

I fight with all I have. I kick, and I drop my weight to the ground. Lists and lists of the things I should be doing in case of attempted kidnapping run through my brain, but one is highlighted in red: *do not let them take you to another location.*

I manage to kick the guy in front of me in the balls, but the other one is already dragging me toward the car. He's got one hand pulling my hair, ripping strands out. When I manage to bite the palm pressing against my lips, he curses and drags it to my neck.

I don't hesitate one second. I scream.

"Help!! Help!!" Sam's building stands tall at the corner of my eye, and I push my vocal cords past their capacities. "Sam!!! Sam!! Help me!"

I don't give up when I'm thrown to the back of the car through the open door they both came out of. I feel dizzy, the world lopsided as I'm forced to lay down on the back seats.

No, no, no. The driver is ready to go. One hand on the steering wheel, one holding a phone to his ear.

One of the two guys sits in the front passenger seat while the other pushes my legs so he can sit with me and close the door. I don't fucking let him. I kick at him, extend my hands above me and pull at the handle. The door opens, and I put all my strength into going out the other way, but he grabs my legs. And while he does so, the guy who sat at the front comes out, rounds the car, and grabs my hair again. He holds my head in place and a rag in his other hand.

"No!!" I shriek in complete panic. "Help!!"

"No one's coming for you, baby." The guy with the rag chuckles. The next second, it's on my face. "Night-night now."

It's suffocating, disgusting. It burns my lungs and makes me cough as tears fill up my eyes from the asphyxiating fumes.

I try to hold my breath as long as possible. Long enough to hear the driver talk to someone on the phone.

“Yes, it’s her. She’s got the Bianco family tattoo.”

I fight in the men’s hold despite my limbs going numb by the second. The driver turns around, and my eyes grow wide when he talks again. I know him. I know this face it’s...it’s...
“We’ve got the girl who killed your father, Mr. Volkov.”

It’s Aaron Williams, my brain whispers as blackness engulfs me.

After that...It’s a complete blackout.

1

ROSE



Blood - Kloud

16 months later...

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you die. I see it so clearly tonight, as a car hits ours at full speed, that it feels like it's taking me my whole eighteen years of existence to die.

Since I was a little girl, I've wanted to die. It came around nine, when Bianco started abusing me. I hated the pain, but I hated the unfairness more. And I didn't want to live a life that was not fair. Because it reminded me that, had my parents not abandoned my brothers and me as babies, I might not have ended up with a sadistic foster dad who prepared many orphan kids to become his soldiers.

Mateo Bianco trained me for a lot of things. He groomed me so I would grow accustomed to mental abuse and control. He tortured me so I learned to love the pain. He taught me how to live a life as part of the Cosa Nostra.

The Bianco Family was one of the most prominent families in that criminal organization, and Mateo wanted me to become his wife one day. He also taught me how to use a gun. I could shoot with perfect aim by the time I was twelve. And for some reason, the times I shot to kill are what stand out the most as I feel myself slipping away. They're in bright colors, forcing their way in front of my eyes.

Shooting my own brother to escape Bianco.

The day I shot Vladimir Volkov to save said brother.

The rest is blurry, like I'm trying to open my eyes underwater. I still make out moments that have marked me.

The pain Bianco inflicted.

Sam's smile when he laughed.

The pink dress Rachel wore the day I fell in love with her.

My twin giving me a tight hug.

Tattooing my best friends.

And the event that led me here; the day the Bratva kidnapped me as revenge.

I've wanted to die for so long yet never had the courage to do it. It seems tonight, just as I was about to escape the Bratva...someone took the matter into their own hands.

And out of all things, when I finally die, it's Rachel's eyes that I see. She's mad at me for abandoning her again.

"Rose, baby...spread your legs for me..."

Rachel's voice resonates clearly in my head. My legs open on their own accord.

Her tongue plays with my clit, making me writhe on the spot. She pulls away and I buck my hips, attempting to follow.

"Ssh, stay still." She kisses my inner thighs, licks my entrance, and caresses my clit with the delicateness of a soft morning breeze.

"Sunshine," I moan. "More..."

"But what about him? He's waiting for his turn."

Confused, I try to focus on the shadow behind her. A giant is standing tall, looking right at me. I can't make out his face, but the familiarity takes my breath away.

Rachel straightens up from her position in front of me and comes to stand by my side. Whose bed am I lying on?

The stranger's hands grip my thighs tightly—the strength of a titan, the aura of a God. I can't see...but I know it's him.

"Don't," I growl, trying to bring my legs together.

Rachel's hands come to play with my tits. Her thin fingers stroke my nipples as she slips soft words in my ears. "It'll feel good. Just surrender." She pinches my right nipple and rolls it between the pads of her thumb and index fingers.

"No," I moan. "I don't want him."

A low chuckle brings my attention back to the man between my legs. "You've been begging for me your whole life. Don't pretend otherwise now."

His rough hand on my pussy conflicts with Rachel's. One is a weapon, while the other pacifies me. Another moan escapes me when he slaps my exposed pussy. "Why did you make me wait so long for this?"

Rachel brings a hand to my face and traces the outline of my lips. "Because she thought she wanted me."

"I do," I whimper, but it contrasts with the way I start grinding my pussy on his hand.

"You're so wet," he tells me. "Which one of us is it for?"

I go to talk, but Rachel slaps one of my nipples. "Don't lie."

"I don't know!"

"Of course you do," he chuckles. He pushes a finger inside me, and a moan resonates in the room.

Mine.

My breathing accelerates as he starts moving inside me. "W-wait..."

"No more waiting, Rose. You made me wait long enough." His British accent triggers a sharp, emotional pain inside me.

He betrayed me. He pretended he wanted to save me from one evil just to hand me to another.

“I don’t want you,” I cry out as he inserts another finger. “You betrayed me...fuck...” My moans mix with the anger in my voice, taming it down and forcing it to disappear. Elements have allied together to make me forget that I now hate the man who was once my world.

“Ssh.” It’s Rachel again.

Her lips are on mine the next second, her tongue gently passing my lips and entwining with mine. She pulls away only to wrap her lips around my nipples, one after the other. I’m writhing, my body on fire. It’s electrified by a powerful lightning, twisting my insides with pleasure.

“Relax,” Rachel tells me, her eyes locking with mine. “He’ll make it feel good. Right, Sam?”

“I don’t know if she deserves it.” He slams into me with a strength that brings me close to my undoing.

Forget about the man who betrayed me, here is the one who will bring me to Heaven.

I feel as vulnerable as Ariadne. Abandoned by Theseus on a deserted island, losing all hope just to be rescued by Dionysus on the day of her death. Except Sam is both Theseus and the God saving me. If I was parched my whole life, he was the one who had confiscated the water before quenching my thirst. If I couldn’t see, it would be because he had blinded me before giving me a vision as a godly offering.

He pounds into me repeatedly, my body moving up on the bed while Rachel drops angel-like kisses all over my burning skin. One of my hands tangles with her hair, pulling at it and moaning like I am being paid to do so.

“I’m going to come,” I pant as I feel my body falling over the edge.

“No,” Sam snaps. “You’re going to die.”

“What?” I choke.

He pulls away from me. “Your leg...the blood...”

“What blood?” I sit up suddenly, my vision narrowing. There’s a pool of blood on the sheet. “What’s that?” It’s coming from my leg. It burns.

I look up at Rachel, then Sam. “Did you do this?”

He shakes his head. “I wanted to save you. You didn’t let me.”

“No,” I cry out. “You wanted to bring me back to him.”

He looks at me with a disappointment I can’t stand. I look away. “I tried to save you. All you had to do was trust me,” he insists.

I can’t hear his voice clearly anymore. My head is underwater. My ears ring despite trying to focus on his words.

“You just had to trust me.” I think I’m reading it on his lips, because there isn’t a sound anymore.

Nothing but quiet.

Stillness.

Death.

Fuck, it hurts. Fuck, fuck, fuck, it hurts like hell.

The room around me starts to come alive. The smell of the hospital is the first thing that hits me. Then it’s the machine beeping. The soft breathing of someone next to me, they’re touching my arm. I can’t open my eyes. Every time I try to, my eyelids feel too heavy. My retinas burn before I can even see a hint of light.

My mouth feels dry, my jaw tight, my cheeks swollen. I struggle to take a breath in. I’m desperate to make a sound, to shout that I’m alive. Impossible. My lungs are burning, my ribs constricting them tightly.

But the worst...shit, the worst is the pain in my right leg. I can feel it in my thigh. A deep burn that makes me want to scream for help.

Someone groans something, and it takes me a few seconds to realize it's me. I finally manage to move my heavy fingers and make a noise. Straight away, the room comes to life. The presence I feel next to me moves quicker. Their breath is rapid, their movement excited.

Then they leave. Maybe it was Yelena. Maybe she's here to finish the fucking job.

But then why would she let them put me in the compound's clinic? Surely, she would have killed me there and kicked me while I was down. Viktor was gone for less than twenty-four hours when she jumped me.

Presence is felt around the room, voices get loud, and I feel more and more conscious. My brows furrow and someone close to me talks.

“Miss White, can you hear us?”

I groan a low ‘yes’ and shift slightly. My body is feeling more and more alive. The pain in my thigh is getting worse by the second.

Fingers on my eyelids, bright burning light in one eye and then the other. It lasts a split second, but I hiss in pain. I'm slow, but I finally open my eyes. I squint and bring an arm up to block the light in the room. My wrist hurts. Shit, *everything* hurts.

For long seconds, the two people I count around me are faceless shadows. The room is so blurry, I can't even see my own limbs. Then they come into focus. A short Asian woman wearing a white coat is looking intensely at me. She's got a stethoscope plugged in her ears and the other hand against my gown-covered chest.

This isn't Anya. This isn't the compound doctor.

They called me Miss White.

“I'm fine,” I rasp. My throat feels like I swallowed the whole Sahara.

My head is spinning, I don't understand. I don't fucking get it.

She takes off the stethoscope, hooks it around her neck, and then smiles at me.

“Welcome back, Miss White. You’re safe here. We’re going to take good care of you.”

“Back?”

She nods, and that’s when the flashes come.

Yelena’s bodyguard beating the shit out of me. The gun... the bitch shot me. Aaron shooting the guard and grabbing me from the floor. We ran. We ran so fucking fast. There was a car. He put me in there, and he drove away into the night. Like we were free, like we could afford to escape.

Then there were bright lights, a big crash, and nothing.

And now this woman tells me I’m...*safe*.

The next pumping from my heart shoots adrenaline through me. I can feel my limbs shaking and a sort of peace wrapping around me.

I feel a sob constricting my throat. “My...” I almost choke on the word. There’s only so much I can focus on, and one person comes to my mind. “My brother...”

I need to see him. My freedom isn’t going to last, I already know it. With my limited time, I just want to see my twin, the other half of me.

“You must be very confused right now, that’s completely normal. I’m Doctor Fernandez, and you are at the Silver Falls Hospital. Nina, please could you pass Miss White a glass of water, thank you.”

Her voice is calm, reassuring, yet assertive. “Do you remember what happened?” she asks me.

Do I remember what happened? I want to laugh, but it’s too painful. How could I forget?

I grab the cup of water the nurse is handing me and nod when she tells me ‘small sips’.

“Yeah,” is my answer to the doctor. Talking hurts, and I’m not one to ever go into explanations anyway. Waste of my

time. “Does my brother know? Jake. His name is Jake White.”

“Your brother is on his way as we speak. He is traveling from Philadelphia, so he should be here anytime now.”

Philadelphia? He must have been at UPenn.

For some reason, this is what hits me the hardest. What makes it all real. Knowing Jake goes to UPenn. This was his plan before I got taken and he stuck to it. This is real life.

Observing my features closely, the doctor keeps going. “You were in a car accident. You were brought here...” She shakes her head, a lost look on her face. “You’ve been missing for almost two years, Miss White. This is a miracle.”

A miracle. I don’t think so. A mistake, however...most definitely.

It takes a few long minutes for her to explain that I arrived here about four hours ago, that it was pure luck I didn’t end up in a coma. The swelling on my brain is going down at an amazing rate. Broken ribs, a sprained wrist. Hematomas all over my face that she understands are not from the accident that caused my right eye to swell. And the most painful one, was a bullet wound to the thigh.

Hurts like a fucking bitch.

“There are more tests we should conduct now that you’re awake.” Her voice stays assured but warm. It’s not too sweet, but it isn’t rude. “Tests that we couldn’t do without your consent.”

“I wasn’t raped,” I snap a little too quickly.

Even though she can read me, she still stays professional. She nods and throws another attempt. “Even for anything that isn’t recent. A test kit could show if there were tears in the past, any scarring...”

“I just told you I wasn’t raped, Doctor.” My raspy voice is a little darker now.

“And I heard you.” She is not in the slightest way put off by my rudeness. She must have seen it all. “Just know you can change your mind. Two years is a long time with a kidnapper,

Miss White. No matter what steps you're going to go through from now on, you can come to me at any point. I will do my best, medically, to help you."

"When did you say my brother will get here?" I change the subject. I want more information.

"We managed to contact him as soon as we understood who you were. The gentleman who brought you to the hospital explained it all once you were out of surgery. It was only an hour ago."

Right.

"Who was it? The 'gentleman who brought me to the hospital'?"

"Nameless and gone, but we have video surveillance. The police can find him if you think he's your kidnapper."

Every time she says that word, my entire body cringes. *Kidnapper.*

Like I'm some poor little girl who got grabbed on her way to school. Like I'm a naïve victim who never expected this to happen to her.

I grew up with a foster dad who was the head of one of the biggest Italian crime organizations in the U.S. I shot my older brother to escape hell at age fourteen.

I killed Vladimir Volkov.

And then his sons took me as revenge.

They weren't kidnappers and I wasn't a victim. They were criminals settling a vengeance against their enemies.

Collateral damage. That's what I am.

"It wasn't him," I tell her, so she'll stop talking about it. This is all pointless. If Viktor and Aleksei Volkov want me back, they'll come get me. And I'll politely go with them. I just want to see my brother before that happens.

"I won't get into it with you, Miss White. It's not my job, it's the FBI's. My job is to keep you alive. That starts with

asking if you're feeling well enough to see the two officers waiting outside the room and the hospital therapist."

The two officers...shit, this isn't good.

"Sure," I nod. I can't hesitate, it'll look weird.

She administers something for the pain and does some quick tests before letting the agents in.

One man. One woman.

For someone who fucking hates explaining herself, I'm in for a great time. God, I hate officials. I hate suit-wearing people. I hate dickheads who pretend they're here to help and end up letting you down in the shittiest way possible.

Police. Caseworkers. School principals. All that crap.

"Miss White," the woman says. She's got that no-bullshit way about her—the kind women who had to go through hell to get where they are have. "I'm Detective Turner, and this is Special Agent Nelson. How are you feeling? I hope you're recuperating well."

"It's been a few hours, I'm sure you can imagine."

She comes to stand by my side as Agent Nelson takes the chair by the door.

"I must apologize, this is very fast, and it can be difficult. But the fresher your memory is, the better."

She could come back next year, and I would still remember them as plainly as now.

"So, what should we start with?" I ask them. "Should we get straight to the point?"

"Is your throat hurting?" Agent Nelson asks. "We can do this in writing if you wish."

"My voice is always like this. Don't worry about it."

"It's not a...result from the last sixteen months, is it?"

"Nope." I pop the 'p'. "Always been this way."

Nelson smiles and flips his notepad open. He clicks his pen and nods, but it's Detective Turner who talks.

“Viktor Volkov is an extremely dangerous man,” she starts. “He has been on the FBI’s Most Wanted list for a long time. His brother Aleksei too.”

My lack of acknowledgment makes her carry on. She wants to hear me talk; I can feel it.

“Viktor is the eldest brother, is that right?”

“That’s right,” I confirm. As if they didn’t know.

“He’s the head of the family, right?”

“Right.” Sliding a hand under the covers, I pinch myself. This doesn’t feel real. Yesterday, I was at the Bratva compound. Today I’m being interrogated by two cops who think I’m dumb as fuck.

“Which makes Aleksei...what? His right-hand man?”

I shrug like I don’t know. “I would hope you’d have done your homework better than that if you wish to arrest them,” I tell her.

She smiles tightly at me. Her eyes dart to my arm that’s under the covers as if I’m holding a knife there. This woman doesn’t trust me. Her body tells me I’m an accomplice rather than a victim.

“Our ‘homework’,” she quotes me, “has told us Aleksei handles a different side of the business than Viktor. While the eldest brother is the head of everything, there is something he left to Aleksei.” She pauses for effect, or maybe to see if I’ll tell her what it is. “Human trafficking,” she finally adds. “Is that correct?”

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?” I inquire with the same suspicion she has toward me.

“I’m trying to get a picture of which brother you had to deal with,” she explains. “Who would be charged with what... should we find them.” My eyes dart to Special Agent Nelson, scribbling on his notepad like a secretary taking minutes from an important meeting. I look back at Turner. She seems to be waiting for something from me. I give her nothing, forcing her to talk some more.

“See, we know who took you. Our problem is—”

“You don’t know where to find them,” I cut her off. I shift slightly, and my thigh screams painfully despite the meds. “We can cut this short if you want. I don’t know where the Volkov brothers are hiding, either. I don’t know where I was, and I don’t know how to contact them. The Volkovs call themselves wolves. The truth is they are ghosts. Their dad was a ghost and so was their granddaddy. They hide, and they hide well. I can’t help you.” I feel like I have to add, “I’m sorry.” And I even make it sound genuine.

Turner sighs and goes for a different tactic. “I was told you didn’t want to do a rape kit.”

I almost choke on my own spit. She really is trying to get me.

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

Fucking hell, she’s going for blunt now.

“And that’s how you get them to feel safe?” I shake my head. “Believe me, no one hates the fuckers more than I do. I’m just trying to be realistic, if you don’t mind. Finding them is an impossible task. They will show up when they want to be found.”

“And do you think they will likely come for you? To attempt to take you back? To contact you?”

“No,” I lie.

They let the silence stretch for a long time before glancing at each other.

“All right,” Nelson finally says. “We’re going to need any details you can remember.”

Fuck.

It feels like it lasts for hours. The questions, the answers, what do I say, what do I hide, be careful to keep track. I don’t want to defend or protect the Volkov brothers. But I have to protect myself, and also Aaron. I owe him my life. He did save me, after all.

I'm exhausted, my voice is raw, and I want to kiss Doctor Fernandez when she walks into the room and points at her watch.

"She needs rest," she says in her firm voice.

"We still have fifteen minutes," Turner replies in a voice much colder than the one she uses toward me.

"This is my patient, Detective. She woke up from a life-threatening car accident less than twelve hours ago. She was at the hands of a kidnapper for almost two years. I need to run tests and ensure our therapist sees her. My call is that she needs rest, and she needs it now."

Fuck, that was hot. I can't help the smug smile that spreads on my lips.

Turner puts a phone on my bedside table. "A little gift from us. There's an officer posted at your door 24/7," she says as she hands me her card. "Any problem, you go to him first, call me after. Anything you want to share, you call me first and no one else."

I don't reply. I'm gonna throw the card in the trash the second she walks out that door.

As soon as they're gone, the adrenaline runs out. I close my eyes before Doctor Fernandez can even ask me anything.



Mind over matter (acoustic) - PVRIS

Hushed voices.

“I just want to see if she’s okay, double check it’s really her. Let me in.”

“Mr. White, she’s resting, I can’t—Mr. White, come back here!”

Opening my eyes is almost as hard as the first time. I didn’t realize I was in such a deep sleep. I blink a few times before the voices and the faces make sense.

Tears of happiness spring to my eyes and clog my throat. He’s here.

“Jake,” I rasp as I try to sit up. My thigh is killing me, but right now, I don’t care.

As soon as he hears my voice, he’s unstoppable. He goes past the nurse who was desperately trying to hold him back and practically teleports to my bed.

“Oh my god.” His voice breaks, and his eyes shine. “Ozy...”

Nothing else comes out. He takes me in his arms as much as he can in my sitting position. One of his knees ends up on the bed by my leg, and he practically falls onto me. His hug is tight, too tight. I can’t breathe, I’m in pain, and I can taste blood in my mouth.

But fuck, I don't care. I can finally hold my twin in my arms after almost two years. I can finally inhale his scent and hear his voice.

"I can't believe it," he keeps repeating, his face buried in my hair and his arms choking me.

"Hey," is all I can say. The pain of missing him disappears and the pure joy comes out in big, fat tears.

I can't believe that's what it took. After years of my life not shedding a tear, *this* is what it takes.

Happiness.

"Mr. White, she's got broken ribs. You're about to perforate her lungs," the nurse snaps at him.

He's off me in a split second. "Shit...I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," I sniffle, wiping the tears from my bruised face. He does the same. "Stop crying, you fucking idiot. You're making it a big deal."

We both chuckle. It sounds the same; his voice is just as raspy as mine, only a little lower.

Jake and I are fraternal twins, and yet we could not look more identical than we do. Jet-black hair, night-blue eyes, tanned skin, unmatched beauty. He is the exact male version of me. People have always been impressed with it. We just know we're two halves of the same person.

"I can't believe it," he repeats for the twentieth time. However, when he starts to truly observe me, his mouth twists.

"Stop," I huff.

"You're...hurt." His jaw ticks, muscles popping below his ear.

I roll my eyes at him, and it makes me too aware of the bruises on my face. "Of course, I'm hurt, moron. I just got into a car accident trying to escape the Volkov family."

That doesn't even get a pinch of a smile out of him. No, he's all serious right now.

“Where’s Jamie?” I check. “After all the shit you guys put us through, you better still be together.”

Now that gets me a chuckle. “She’s in the hallway. Apparently, she’s not on the list of people who can see you. You have a police officer and a list, Ozy. Could this be more you?”

“What can I say? When my fan club hears I’m back, it’s game over.”

We both laugh, but it feels ephemeral, and a knot forms in my stomach. This isn’t going to last. I’m surprised the Volkov brothers haven’t sent someone to get me yet.

“Chris is on his way,” Jake says as he grabs my hand. “Luke is in L.A., but he’s jumping on his dad’s private jet.”

“Wow, look at you guys. You missed me and shit.”

“That’s a euphemism,” he sighs. “I...I still can’t believe it. We’ve looked for you, Ozy. We never stopped looking. Fuck, Chris spent every cent he owns...”

“Stop it, Jakey. I’m here now.”

“Yeah...I can’t-”

“Believe it. I know. Get Jamie in here.”

“Ozy. Before anyone else comes in.” He gulps, and I already know what’s coming. “Nate—”

“I know,” I cut him off. “Now go get Jamie, I want to see her tiny face.”

He gives me a sorry smile and goes to get her from the hallway. She looks exactly the same as the day I left. Petite, about half Jake’s height. Her chocolate hair is shorter than it used to be, but her green eyes shine with the same cuteness it always has.

“Rose,” she gasps. “You...you’re *here*, you’re—how are you feeling?”

She walks to my bed carefully, as if she could break me if she did it too fast. She doesn’t hug or touch me, too scared to.

“Jamie,” I smile. “You still haven’t grown up *at. All.* Not an inch.”

She explodes laughing, tension releasing from her shoulders. “And you’re still a bitch.”

“No,” I shake my head. “I’m worse now, trust me.”

It makes her giggle as if it was a joke. How I wish it was. Sixteen months with the Volkov organization doesn’t turn you into something sweet. It makes you ruthless and bloodthirsty.

Slowly, the rest of our gang joins us. Jake’s and my foster brother, Chris, barges into the room like a bear in a China shop. His stature and large frame make the big room feel small.

We spent three years with Chris Murray and his wonderful parents. It was after the nightmare years at Bianco’s house.

Chris was my safe haven after Bianco. He was my light in the darkness. I spent three nights a week sleeping in his bed, waiting for him to soothe the nightmares and tell me that hell was over.

If only he had been right.

Our best friend Luke is the last one to arrive. It’s late at night when he finally crosses the door. With five of us in the room, the temperature has risen, and yet I still feel cold. We talk about everything and anything. Anything but my time away. None of them cross that line; none of them ask the questions they’re dying to.

I still read them in their eyes.

‘Where were you?’

‘What have they done to you?’

‘Are you okay? Are you broken?’

I’ve been broken since a young age. Nine years old, to be precise. Viktor Volkov might have been heartless, but he’s not the devil that was Mateo Bianco.

Instead of sulking in my dark thoughts, I enjoy my time with the people I love. The guys can’t seem to keep further

than a step away from me. Luke is sitting on the end of my bed, while Jake pushes me so he can lie down next to me, and Chris is standing right by my side, one hand constantly touching me.

Jamie and Jake are the same as they used to be; exact opposites. They disagree on everything, with love shining bright in their eyes.

Luke Baker is the same fuckboy he's always been. He runs his hands through his pale blond hair as he talks about his conquests like a nice menu in a luxurious restaurant. He tells me how he dropped out of college and is working for his dad. He was never good with his studies, but I'm sure he's an amazing businessman. The Bakers have a multi-national chain of coffee shops that can't seem to stop growing.

Jamie talks about her studies. About the subjects she's dropping and the major she wants to keep next year. She repeats in a stressed voice how hard it'll be to get into medical school.

"It's two years away, Angel. Can you chill for me? Just for one minute?" Jake says in a tone that indicates he repeats this around ten times a day.

My brother mentions an app he's developing for caseworkers to be able to communicate safely with foster kids, and my heart pinches.

"You've made a big softie out of him, Jamie...thank you. I couldn't stand the fucker anymore," I laugh.

It earns me a dark look from him, and had I not been in a hospital bed, probably a punch to the arm.

Chris barely mentions Harvard, and I know why. Had I not disappeared, I would have done the same subjects as him at Duke. We both want to become attorneys. We both want to defend the people that can't defend themselves and put the real bad guys away. Except he got to work on his dream, and mine was taken away from me.

It's Jake that notices my heavy eyelids first. "You need to sleep," he says softly. "You look exhausted."

“You mean like I’ve been in a car accident?” I smile.

“Like you’ve got a twin who will choke you if you don’t get some rest,” he retorts.

“Oh, Jakey. Look at how much you missed me.”

He rolls his eyes, but it’s Luke who replies. “We missed you like a part of us was missing, Rose. You’re never leaving us again. I hope you know that.”

I smile like I agree with him. He needs to believe it because who knows what they’d do to protect me? I know them, they’d put their lives in danger. They’d risk everything.

Chris stays back once everyone has left. He looks at me with those sad eyes he never realizes he gives.

“Chris...” It pains me to see him like this. He thinks he failed me. He thinks he didn’t protect me. “You couldn’t have done anything.”

He shakes his head, words stuck in his throat. “I love you,” he finally says.

“I love you too.”

He grabs my right hand, the one that isn’t covered with a splint, and holds tight. His eyes stay stuck where our fingers interlock.

“Those two years must have been real hard on your hero complex,” I chuckle. There’s no humor in it, no matter how hard I try to lighten the mood. I missed him, and he missed me. We might not be blood-related, but our hearts have always been connected through everything.

He ignores my stupid joke, his brow furrowing gradually.

“What’s that?” His thumb rubs the circled scar that goes around my wrist. He moves my hand to check if it does a full circle and observes how it fades on the inner side.

“If I told you, you’d only get to ask me one question about what happened while I was missing...is that what you choose?”

His hand tightens around mine. “Don’t do this to me, Rose. Don’t be secretive, don’t close in on yourself.”

“There’s nothing to say. Nothing you could take. I’m not doing this for me, I’m doing it for you.”

His gaze drifts for a few seconds, looking at the wall like all the answers are written on it.

“I want to help you. I want you to have a chance at a normal life. Bianco stole your childhood, and the Volkovs stole what was left of your teenage years. Please, let me help you.”

I shrug. “A normal life. I’m not too sure how to achieve that.”

“We’ll start with getting you some rest. When you come out of the hospital, you can go back to Stoneview if you want. To my parents’ house. We’ll enroll you in college, and you’ll catch up. Next year you can go to Duke. You know nothing will stop that brain of yours.”

I chuckle, letting myself imagine for one second. Allowing my thoughts to filter to a simpler version of my life. Chris nudges my shoulder so I shift to the side. He comes to lie down next to me, but his frame is much larger than Jake’s. About half of him is on the bed, and we’re still squished like sardines in a can.

“I’ll keep my question for another time,” he says low. “We’re gonna make this better, Rose. I promise you. It’s your turn to taste happiness.”

I nod at him, but I don’t confirm his plans for me. I just want to enjoy being next to him again. I just want to enjoy his warmth and his love. I’m always cold, and Chris is the perfect human heater. This is precisely what I needed and he knows it.

But what I don’t tell him is, that I don’t want to taste happiness. I want to taste *revenge*.

3

SAM



Comatose – jxdn

I watch her sleep. I've always liked watching Rose sleep. She's so peaceful, so relaxed. When she doesn't have nightmares, she looks like an innocent child who hasn't encountered life's harshness—a delicate flower.

The opposite of who she really is.

Rose is anything but a delicate flower. She's thorny, poisonous.

I had to wait for Chris Murray to leave before I slipped into her room. I had to wait for the cop to get distracted. I should kill that cop for taking a loo break and leaving her unattended. It could have been any of Volkov's men coming into this room.

But they haven't shown up yet. Not Viktor, Aleksei, or any of their little puppies that do their bidding. I'm surprised they haven't tried to take her back.

My heart pinches when I let my gaze observe her too closely. I'm sitting on the only chair in the room, opposite her bed, silently looking at the bruises on her face. My eyes dart to the splint around her left wrist. It goes high enough to hide most of the tattoos I know she has on her forearm.

For the whole of her childhood, I was there for her when Bianco tortured her. I couldn't stop it. No one could. Although I picked up the broken pieces, I took care of her wounds, and I

healed the scars. I controlled her older brother when he would get violent.

Before Rose disappeared, I had one goal in mind. Protect her. I haven't always done a good job at it, but when I failed, I did my best to help her heal.

She didn't always see it. She didn't always notice the small changes I made in her life. The nights I kept her busy so she wouldn't end up at a party doing drugs. The times I kept her close to me so Bianco couldn't get close to her. The men I've killed for her. The ones who touched her, who took advantage of her young age and drugged up states. The ones who had evil intentions without her even realizing. The predators who hid in the dark or behind bright smiles and a lot of money. Keeping an eye on Rose was a challenging and exhausting task. But I did it.

Because I loved her.

I truly did. Despite Nate's disapproval, I cherished our moments like a preacher cherishes their god. I shared my deepest secrets and insecurities with her. I shared my trauma so she would feel comfortable talking about hers. I gave her everything that I was while respecting the boundaries I had created to keep her safe. I showed her the person no one knew, no one ever met.

I never dated Rose, and yet with her, I was whole. I was happy. I had dreams of doing one last job and taking her away to a place where it would be just her and I. I wanted to go back to England with her, show her London, let her grow in a city where no one knew her, and she could become the best version of herself. We would both have become the best versions of ourselves. She used to make me *laugh*. A rare thing. So rare. Only it was genuine, natural with her.

Rose was my Achilles heel, and I let her use it against me. I was stupid, so naïve. It's the last words I would have ever used to describe myself, but for her, I was. I let her steal my heart and stomp on it like I meant nothing to her. The kids around her used to call her the queen of broken hearts. I was not spared. I thought myself special. I thought myself a king in

a world made of Rose's subjects. I was *nothing* special. I learned the hard way that Rose might have stolen hundreds of hearts, but she still doesn't own one.

I run both my hands through my hair, bringing back the strands that have escaped my gelled-back hairstyle. The slow beeping of the machine connected to her fingertip, keeping score of her bpm, is calming. It grounds me.

I slowly rise from my seat, my knees popping like an old man. I'm twenty-two, and I've been on enough missions as an enforcer and a hitman to feel like my body is sixty. I crack my neck as I approach Rose's bed. She's sleeping soundly, and I know it's only because of the meds. She would never be able to sleep that peacefully on her back. That's how much I know her.

I feel like my movements are in slow motion. I have been planning what I would do to her if she ever returned for so long that it's hard to go against it.

I want to kill her. I've wanted to kill her for six months. Except I never thought she'd show her face again. And now that she has, I have to wait. Because I need her. And I hate that I need her.

I run my finger along her long legs, covered by the hospital sheets. I let myself stare at her beautiful face. She's bruised. The purple around her eyes, the swollen cheeks, the bloody lips...it should make her ugly. So why does she still look like a Goddess?

She looks like a warrior who is going to wake up stronger than ever.

Against my own will, my thumb skims her lips, tracing the outline and relishing in the feeling of her skin against mine.

She stirs, her eyes opening but looking through me rather than at me. She's completely drugged from the medication, lost and unaware of what is happening.

She won't remember this, and I use it to my advantage.

"Sam?" she rasps.

“Welcome back, Rose,” I whisper. “Hell has been waiting for you.”

*Mars – Yungblood*

It took four whole weeks for my ribs and wrist to heal. That bullet wound in my thigh still hurts, but it's starting to scar. Four weeks and the people around me still manage not to crack and ask me all the questions they want the answers to. I stayed at the hospital one week and the rest here, at the Murrys.

I love them, but I don't like being here. I feel like each second that ticks puts Hannah and Thomas in more danger than they should ever be. The Wolves are going to come get me. Viktor Volkov is going to shake Heaven and Earth to find me. It's weird that he hasn't yet, but I know he hasn't forgotten about me, and I don't want to be here when his goons destroy everything in their way to bring me back home.

My life is calm. Oddly calm. I've still got that phone Detective Turner gave me, even though they haven't contacted me. No one has my new number, so I'm not really communicating with the world apart from Jake, Chris, and Luke. Sometimes Jamie. I haven't done anything except recover from the accident and there's a hole in the middle of my stomach, swallowing my feelings and replacing them with the anxiety of impending disaster.

I'm bored, aimless, and it's driving me insane.

Chris keeps wanting me to do something, to go to college. What the hell am I gonna do there?

You can go to community college. You're still eighteen. You skipped a grade, it's the right year for you.

You can't throw your dreams away, Rose. You've always wanted to go to law school.

We'll re-apply to Duke next year. They'll understand the extreme circumstances. They'll offer you another scholarship.

Another lacrosse scholarship now that I can't walk properly? I doubt it.

I don't want to go to Silver Falls Community College.

Silver Falls is the closest city to the town that is Stoneview. The two shores are separated by the Silver Snake River. The South is like any other U.S. city. The North Shore, however, is a gang city. And I've got nothing against them. They do what they can in the poverty they've been forced into by a government that failed them. I could have been any of them had I not gotten the chance of being put in a wealthy foster family like the Murrays. However, I've had enough trouble with them, enough sticky situations. Girls who didn't like me, guys with whom I had to escape from tricky situations. My older brother and Sam were too involved with them. And until I know how to get my revenge on him, I don't want to be anywhere near places he could be.

Silver Falls Community College is on the North Shore, and I don't want to see the people there. I don't want to bump into the kids I used to party with. Hushed whispers travel fast there, and I'm not ready to hear them.

Rose White killed Vladimir Volkov, then his sons took her.

Now that she's back, the war between the Bianco Family and the Wolves will start again.

Which side is she on?

And that's the problem, isn't it? The inability of people to understand that I'm on no one's side. I'm on my own side, desperately trying to get out of this shit and live my own life.

I was eight years old when Mateo Bianco became our foster parent. We were dragged into a life of crime because the

psychopath was obsessed with us. He was the head of the Bianco Family and was well on his way to controlling the whole world of criminal organizations when it came to the East Coast. *He* was at war with Volkov. *He* took us down with him.

But I'm the one who shot Vladimir Volkov to death. One quick and perfectly aimed shot. His death for the price of my life. The price of my freedom.

The North Shore has always been divided through its petty gang activities. The North Shore Crew against the Kings of the North Shore, aka the King family.

My life wasn't linked with theirs until Bianco struck a deal with NSC. Their loyalty in exchange for them to be able to carry on with their 'activities' without legal repercussions. But mainly, Bianco promised to eradicate the Kings.

Which never happened since Bianco got sent to jail before he could fulfill his promise. Because of Bianco's downfall, the NSC lost their power on the North Shore, and it is back to being a city broken in half.

So, the question always comes back. Which side are you on?

That shit makes me anxious, and my thoughts become heavy. My brain struggles to stay on the straight path and my coping mechanism kicks in. Lists, and lists, and lists. Of everything I remember, of everything I've seen, I've heard, I've experienced. This time, it's the women I met at the Bratva compound.

Juliette, Luna, Precious, Carla, Lizzie, Mia...

"Knock, knock," Jamie Williams' clear voice resonates in the room.

I watch her walk into my room upside down. I'm lying down on the floor with my hands supporting the back of my neck. My eyes land on her tiny frame and focus on her green

almond eyes. She's a cute, lovable, beautiful half-Filipina. She inherited the Southern Belle tiny size and green eyes from her mom. The tanned skin, deep brown hair, and the sparkles of gold that shine in her eyes are the same I have seen in the pictures of her dad. I never met him. He died before Jake and I moved to Stoneview, but her house was bursting with images of her entire family. The one she had before Volkov Senior had her dad killed and her brother kidnapped.

Just like me.

Aaron Williams.

For a long time, she didn't know if he was dead or missing. He disappeared three years before I did. Nevertheless, she knows now. She knows that he's a Wolf and he's not coming back.

I wasn't meant to come back, either.

My stomach twists with guilt, a rare feeling to cross my body. Fuck, she must be dying to ask me about him.

Was he there? Did you see him? Did you speak? Was he okay?

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

I can see the questions in her eyes; they're like watching a tennis game between mine. She's bursting at the seam with questions. This girl is the most curious person I know. It's a sickness, and she can't help it. That's what got her in trouble with Jake in the first place.

My gaze stops at the gold necklace with a 'J' that Jake had gifted her.

China, Russia, Australia, U.S...

"I see it now." She nods as if finally being in on a secret, her voice ringing with pride.

I raise an eyebrow.

“When you make your lists. Jake and Chris were right, you’ve got a tell! Your lips move slightly, it’s soundless, but it’s there.”

I roll my eyes before moving my body and standing back up on my feet.

“May I ask what it was?”

“Huh?” I ask as I grab the pack of cigarettes sitting on my bed.

“The list?”

“Which one?” I smile at her as I walk to the window and open it. I shouldn’t smoke inside, Hannah would kill me if she knew.

“Oh, there were multiple?” she asks low to herself.

“I thought you knew everything about those lists, Jamie,” I tease her.

She smiles but doesn’t reply, like a kid scared to say the wrong thing.

“Top ten gold-producing countries,” I answer her to ease the tension she thinks is hanging in the air.

“How do you even know that?” she chuckles.

Who fucking knows, it might have been on TV at some point.

“I brought you some clothes.” She points to a box by the door. “So you can have some stuff to wear until you feel ready to go shopping.”

I raise an eyebrow again and her eyes dart to the floor.

“So...how are you feeling?” Her arms start swinging slightly, desperate for a movement to commit to as she looks around the room.

“See, Jake, that would have been believable if only I fitted in Jamie’s clothes. Come out of hiding, will you?”

Jamie shakes her head rapidly. “Jake isn’t here, I—”

“Oh, hey,” Jake cuts her off as he appears in the door frame. “Weird, I was just walking past your room.”

“Yeah. Weird,” I deadpan. “Next time you want to give an excuse for Jamie to ask how I’m feeling so you can spy on me behind the door, why don’t you find a better one than clothes? I’m more than ten inches taller than her. It’s a miracle if I fit in her stuff.”

“I was just trying to help,” Jamie mutters to herself. Jake comes in and puts an arm around her waist.

“You did good, Angel,” he says before dropping a kiss on the top of her head and she melts into him.

“So,” I say as I light up my cigarette. “Any real reason you two are here?”

“You should get out of the house a little,” Jake suggests as he leaves Jamie and sits on my bed. “Why don’t you go buy new clothes? We’ll all go with you.”

I don’t really need clothes. The Murrays have a box of some of my stuff here, and I don’t need more than that. I’m not mad at them for giving away most of my shit. Apparently, their therapist advised them to do so, a fresh step into moving on. They kept the stuff they knew was dear to me. They didn’t move on whatsoever.

“I don’t need new shit,” I rasp back just before breathing out the smoke in my lungs. “And I’ve been out.”

“To buy a pack of cigarettes. Come on, Ozy. Let’s go to the movies or something.” He pauses and turns to Jamie. “Angel,” he says in a softer voice than when he talks to me. “Could you give us a minute?”

She nods and gives me an apologetic smile. That’s all she has done lately. Then she leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

*All 4 U – dandelion hands*

“Look,” my twin says as he gets off the bed and walks to me. “You don’t have to be scared, okay? We’re all gonna go with you, wherever you go. Chris and I will be there, and we won’t let anything happen to you.”

I scoff a laugh. “I’m not scared, Jake. I just don’t feel like doing anything. And why are you still here? It’s been four weeks, you should be back at college by now. Jamie’s been back and forth. Chris has been back and forth. Stop putting your life on hold for me.”

I don’t know why I’m getting worked up. I know he’s trying to help, but shit, I don’t need his help. This is all temporary.

“Are you insane? It’s a family emergency. I’ve been excused, and I’m fine following classes online.”

“For UPenn? You’re not that smart. You’re gonna fail miserably.” God, I’m a bitch.

“I’m smart enough, thank you,” he growls.

“No, you’re not. Smart would be to not treat me like a stupid girl. Smart would be to know that I’ve already figured out your little plan for our birthday tomorrow and that I’m not up for it. Smart would be remembering that you can’t plan shit behind my back because *I, truly*, am smart.”

I chuckle sarcastically as I shake my head.

“Wanting me to go shopping, what’s the fucking idea? Buying me a nice dress for a surprise birthday party where I’m gonna be surrounded by people dying to know what happened to Rose White for almost two years. Fuck, I couldn’t breathe at that fucking school. People were always on my back, always wanting to be my friend, always wanting me to notice them. I don’t want to see them!”

“You’re being a bitch. Stop it.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jake, have you forgotten what Stoneview is like? Whispers and rumors. Bitching and backstabbing. The last thing I want is a welcome back banner on my nineteenth birthday after having been missing for the eighteenth one. I don’t want to see anyone. I don’t want to go out. I just want to be left alone.”

He lets the silence stretch out after my rant. He lets me catch my breath and drag more nicotine out of my cigarette to calm myself. I turn to the window to exhale while he comes and settles right next to me, his left arm brushing my right.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “The surprise party...It was Luke’s idea, and I just went along with it when I should have put a stop to it.”

“It’s your birthday too,” I reply, a little quieter.

“I didn’t celebrate our eighteenth. How could I, without you?”

I did, but I don’t tell him that.

“You should be allowed to have a party. Just, please, don’t expect me to be there.”

“I understand,” he nods. “Though I know you, and I know you need to get back into situations that are familiar to you. Friends, get-togethers, *us* four. That’s your familiarity and your comfort.”

“Not anymore.” The sigh is barely audible as it completely escapes me. I’m vulnerable with only Jake, more willing to let another being take care of me...and those fucking words *escaped*.

I feel him shift next to me, giving himself time to swallow what I just said. It takes a long minute, but the words still hit hard when he speaks.

“Talk to me, Ozy. I beg you.”

I shake my head and close my eyes, unable to reply when my throat gets clogged with emotions.

“If not me, someone. Anyone. The hospital called me, and they said you’re refusing to see the therapist.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “If I needed to see a therapist every time someone tries to kill or abduct me, I wouldn’t be doing anything else with my life.”

I realize the toxicity of my words, but I *am* toxic. It’s so obvious it’s practically become my branding. I *should* be seeing a therapist for all the times someone tried to kill me or abduct me. For all the times Bianco toyed with me, and for the months I spent with the Volkovs. I have no excuses. I simply don’t want to.

“They didn’t *try*, Ozy, they succeeded,” he hisses through gritted teeth. His jaw is ticking, and he runs a hand through his thick, black hair. The same as mine. He sighs, hating himself for snapping at me. “I want you to be okay, not just say you’re okay. *Please*,” he insists. “How are you feeling? Just one word. One emotion.”

“Frustrated,” I snap at him.

At him, at life. There is this grip on my guts, chest, and head. It pulls at my shoulders too. It makes my back heavy and it drags my feet when I try to walk. It makes me grind my teeth at night and makes my jaw lock during the day. Frustration at the need to get back at life for what it put me through. I feel incomplete, empty. I am human, with a functioning body with limbs and organs and the ability to activate a plethora of emotions.

Yet, all I feel is this burning need for revenge flooding my veins, boiling my blood, and yet it keeps my body frozen.

I want my revenge on life. I just don’t know where to start, don’t know how to control myself. I’m ready to snap at

everyone, everything.

So it's better if I'm left alone.

Jake sighs, his eyes reading the suppressed anger in mine. "What do you need from me?"

"I've missed you so much," I reply. I stub my cigarette on the windowsill and throw it out.

"Don't ignore my question. You're so good at acting tough, Ozy. And you *are*. But every time Chris is in Stoneview, you sneak into his room at night for safety. He told me."

I'm about to defend myself, but he cuts me off. "It's not just that. I haven't seen you in two years, and the first thing I notice is that you *still* don't close your door when you're on your own. That's old trauma from before Volkov. That's things you should have healed a long time ago."

"*Almost* two years."

"What?"

"I was gone for sixteen months."

He shakes his head, shocked at my words. "You're hanging onto such small things to be mad about. Fuck, look at you," he tells me in a whispered voice, fogged by the realization of how bad it is. "You're oozing PTSD from every single pore on your body."

I pinch my lips to not shout at him. I hate when he's right.

"You wanna know what I need from you, Jake?" I huff. I turn and face him completely, my gaze going up from our slight height difference. "Time."

"Time?"

"Yeah. Because somehow, at some point, I will crack. I will burst open, and I will let all the emotions flood into the world. I'm gonna need to talk, I'm gonna need to cry, and I'm gonna need you."

"I'll be there, I'm here."

“It won’t be now. It won’t be soon. After running to Nate for help, it took me eight years to tell a single soul what Bianco did to me. I came back to you four weeks ago. Give me time.”

His voice is even raspier when he talks again, heavy with sadness. “After everything we had been through...you didn’t deserve this.”

I shrug. “Or maybe I did. I killed a man.”

“To save Nate’s life.”

“And look at what he did with it,” I chuckle sadly. “Threw it all away.”

“Yeah,” he sighs sadly.

He lets the silence stretch between us again, but this time it’s filled with love rather than misunderstanding.

“I love you, Ozy. I...I just got you back and I know I’m all over you, but it’ll pass. And then we can go back to normal. Whatever that is.”

I look deep into his eyes, our blues clashing in waves of unconditional love and primal need to protect your own. I don’t really think anymore, I just act on pure instinct. My arms wrap around his waist, and I force our bodies to crash together. My head lands on his shoulders and his hands on my back.

We hug for a long while, tightly and silently.

“It’ll be fine,” I finally say as we separate. “Time. It’ll do its job.”

“I’ll leave you alone, although anything you need or want to do...*anything*... you call me. We’ll be at Jamie’s tonight, but I can stay here. You’re my priority, Ozy.”

“I’m fine. I just want to be alone, honestly.”

Pain flashes in his eyes, but he changes the topic. “I don’t want to go to that party without you tomorrow. I would rather it be just the two of us, blowing one candle for two like when we were kids. I don’t need any of them, I just need you.”

“We’ll blow our candle and then I’ll go to bed, and you’ll go party.”

It’s not like I don’t enjoy partying anymore. I still do. I still love putting myself in fucked up states and numbing my brain from life. I simply don’t want to see the hypocritical population of this city.

On the surface, Stoneview shines bright like a diamond. But it has underground rivers of blood and sins running through its heart. We’re all covered in it, and I don’t want that for my birthday.

Jake is by the door when he talks again. “Can I just say... Rachel will be there.”

My heart stops, unhooks itself from its safety net, and plunges into the depths of my body.

Rachel.

My ex-girlfriend, Rachel.

Love of my life, Rachel.

The girl who I was meant to spend my entire future with, Rachel.

Rachel, who was waiting for me the day I got kidnapped.

I never showed up.

I let her down, like I always do.

I have been trying so hard not to think of her since I’ve been back in Stoneview, but it’s like my body knows it’s close to hers. Like my heart can sense her beating one. Questions have been going on in my mind on repeat.

Does she know I’m back? Does she want to see me? Does she hate me? Does she miss me? Does she still love me?

I don’t even realize Jake is gone, too lost in my own thoughts. Rachel was everything to me. I don’t know if I have the strength to see her again. I don’t know if I have the courage to see her after all this time and tell her how hard it was to breathe without her. How difficult it was to open my

eyes every day and force myself to live, knowing I might never see her again.

And tomorrow, I might get that chance. That one thought I would fall asleep to every night comes back to the forefront of my mind.

If I ever get to see Rach again...

Everything crossed my mind. That's how I would find Morpheus—imagining all the things I would say to my lover. All the things I would do to her. How I would cherish her. All the sorry's I owed her.

Can I do it? Can I look her in the eyes and tell her how much I love her? How much I want to be hers again, and her mine?

The next day, I blow out a candle with Jake as promised. We share one like we did at the orphanage when we were kids. The Murrays are here, Chris looking like the happiest foster brother in the universe. Luke and Jamie are here too, singing Happy Birthday and keeping the mood up for everyone. They all try to convince me to go to the party at Luke's, but I can't get myself to see people. So they all offer to cancel and stay with me...I don't want that, either. It's too much, and I feel incapable of keeping the illusion for that long.

I'm back. I should be happy, and yet I feel like a fraud. Every minute of every second, I feel like I'm lying to everyone, pretending to be someone I'm not. In truth, I just don't really know who I am or who I'm meant to be anymore. Too many people fucked with my brain, with my body, with my personality. I've been a puppet for too long, and I don't know what it's like to be myself anymore. No, all I know is that need burning deep inside me.

I made a decision. A selfless choice for once in my life, especially when it comes to my heart. That I will leave Rachel alone. I don't think it would be good for any of us to see each other.

She probably has a life now. Rach was adamant she wouldn't marry Conor McGill. Instead, she must be happy with whatever she's doing or...whoever she's with. I can't just barge into that life and fuck it all up. Because I would. I would break it all apart and mess it all up for her, just so I could have her to myself. She would let me too. Rachel and I share something special. She could not share what we had with anyone else, and she would drop whatever superficial love she has for them for me. She'd leave it all behind the second I showed up. I would expect her to and she would do it, then who knows where that would lead us.

It's better to stay away. For both of us. Hopefully, she left Stoneview like she always dreamt and found a girl who doesn't break up with her whenever she wants to sleep with someone else. Someone who shows her love by being there for her, not by being a possessive bitch. Someone who isn't me. That's the best I could have hoped for her.

It's around 8:30 p.m. when I light up another cigarette by my window. Two doors down, I can hear Luke's house booming with music. I can imagine the people arriving slowly. The girls hanging around Jake, and Jamie's stern face, silently cursing them.

I can imagine Luke chatting to all the Stoneview girls he's never going to call again, bragging about life in L.A. and how he's going to change his dad's company in the best way. Chris is probably drinking silently while keeping a watchful eye on how many shots my twin takes.

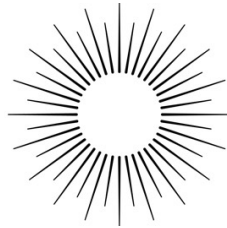
And Rachel is there. On her own or in the arms of another girl. Another woman she showed the dark side of herself to, taking away what was so special about us. Taking away what made *me* special to her.

I no longer feel special to anyone anymore, and I wonder if I'll ever be. I have a universal beauty that everyone loves. I have beautiful traits that have always attracted people. They think it makes me unique, but it's always the same, isn't it? They find me heavenly beautiful, and they fall for me. I take

advantage of them, and we end up sharing nothing but a vague memory of average sex and a hangover.

Except with Rachel. I stub my cigarette on the windowsill and look up at the stars as I blow out smoke into the night air.

My heart accelerates, my stomach tightens, and my lips tingle. *Rachel.*



High Enough – K. Flay

“Here you go.” I fake a smile as I hand Conor a tumbler filled with whiskey and coke.

He practically rips it from me, not caring that he’s spilling most of his drink before it even reaches his mouth.

“Why don’t you drink anything?” he asks. “It’s a party, Rachel. Have fun.”

It takes all of me not to roll my eyes. I’m finding it hard to breathe right now. Drinking and partying aren’t exactly at the top of my list.

“The doctor said I shouldn’t drink while we try to conceive,” I lie.

“His advice is shit. It ain’t working,” he slurs.

How is he already drunk? Surely, he should have a little more tolerance with how much he drinks daily.

“We wouldn’t know if it’s working, Conor. We have to give it a few months.” I feel sick talking about this. It always makes me feel sick, no matter how hard I try to pretend I want it.

“Well, I don’t see a fucking baby in you. Do you?”

“Ssh, will you keep your voice down, please?” I plead as I look around to see if anyone has heard us.

It's not that I'm ashamed we're 'struggling' to have a child. I'm ashamed we're even trying. I'm nineteen. I don't want a baby. I've never wanted one. I never wanted a boyfriend to start with, least of all a fiancé. Especially *not* Conor.

That childhood friend I never wanted to be friends with in the first place. Our parents are close; they're elitists, rich people who don't want to marry out of Stoneview. And they took me down with them. His dad and mine have always worked together, their businesses relying on each other.

Our whole time in high school, Conor kept my secret. He knew I didn't want to follow my parents' plan: don't go to college, do a simple online course to have a diploma, get to know Conor, get married, and have children. They always told me I was too stupid to do anything else.

Conor...He never said he would help me run away with my girlfriend, but he also said he would keep my secret. That he would never tell my parents I was dating Rose White, never tell them I planned on running away with her.

Then Rose got taken.

On the day we were supposed to find our ultimate happiness away from Stoneview, she...disappeared into thin air.

Conor grew more and more possessive. He threatened to spill everything to my parents, to tell them what would undoubtedly bring shame on the family.

Your daughter is a lesbian.

He always calls me a lesbian, like he knows.

I don't even know.

Nonetheless, I do know I hate him with my whole being. And the last thing I want is for people at Jake White's birthday party to know we've been trying to have a child.

Especially now that Rose is back.

"I need another one." His voice brings me back into the room. He's waving his empty tumbler in front of my face, and

this time I do roll my eyes.

“Are you sure?” I huff. “It’s barely midnight, the night is still young.”

“Rachel,” he smiles. He shuffles closer to me and puts strands of my short, blonde hair behind my ear with his free hand. His fingers splay across my cheek, and he tenderly tilts my head up so we can look into each other’s eyes. “Has anyone ever told you, you are much hotter when you don’t talk?”

My mouth falls slack at his words. What a dick. It’s not like he never says these things to me, but his gesture was so loving...

Strings of curse words run through my mind as I smile and nod. “I’ll go get you another one,” I finally reply.

In my head, I’ve stabbed him fifty times, blood is spilling through all the wounds, and he tries to talk but coughs up more blood instead. He asks why as he empties himself of the crimson liquid that was keeping his pathetic life inside his body.

Die, fucker. Die! Die! Die! my demon shouts.

He slaps my ass as I turn around to go to the bar, and embarrassment burns my cheeks. My demon puts other scenarios of Conor dying in my head.

“Another whiskey and coke, please,” I smile at the bartender who’s set up in the living room. He’s standing behind tables that have been covered with white silk tablecloths. He hands me the drink and I down it in one long gulp.

“Another, please.” He tries not to judge me, but his eyes don’t lie. “For my fiancé,” I justify.

I look around the room as I wait for the other drink.

Stop it, Rachel. She’s not here. She didn’t come.

She’s probably tired. Exhausted from being back and adapting to real life again.

I wonder what it was like? Every single night, I have dreamed of her. A beautiful girl with long, ink-black hair, locked in a pitch-black basement. Bruised, bleeding, crying... The only thing lighting up the dark basement is her blue eyes. Every night I wake up sweaty, my heart beating out of my chest.

Where were you, Rose?

“Rach, hey. Are you and Conor having fun?”

I grab the drink from the bartender before turning to Jake. He and Rose look so alike, that it never ceases to amaze me. Especially when he was the only one left, everyone could see her through him.

“Hey, Jake. Happy birthday,” I say as cheerfully as I can muster.

“Thanks.” He runs a hand through his messy hair. “I already got my favorite present. Nothing is going to surpass that, I think.”

I nod, keeping a big, fake smile on my face. “It’s so wonderful that she’s back. I mean, you must be so happy.”

“Understatement,” he chuckles just before ordering himself a drink.

I watch him talk to the bartender, and the words are at the tip of my tongue.

Don’t ask, don’t ask...

He turns back to me.

“So, is she coming tonight?”

So much for not asking.

His smile turns a little sad. No, wait...it’s pity. Great. It’s *that* obvious I’m unhappy in my relationship and dying to see my ex-girlfriend, to finally bring some joy to my miserable life.

“She wasn’t really feeling like partying. I’m sorry. To be completely honest with you, she...” He takes a beat as if testing that he actually wants to share this with me. “...she

hasn't really been herself. I'm trying to give her time to..." This time he pauses to look for the right word. "...*adapt*. And then, you know, I'm sure you can come visit her or something."

"Yeah, yeah, for sure." I try to sound casual. I guess it would have been a little more believable if I hadn't been nodding repeatedly like those little nodding-dogs people put in their car.

An awkward silence settles between us. I love Jake, because he's always been the biggest supporter of my relationship with Rose. And now...well, now he just doesn't know what to do, does he? But if there's one thing I can do with him, it's to be ultimately myself about how much I love Rose.

"Jake, did you tell her I would be here tonight?"

His mouth twists before he nods.

I can't begin to describe the disappointment that weighs on my stomach. She doesn't want to see me. Of course, she doesn't. It was hard enough to keep Rose to myself when we were in high school. She would break up with me so she could sleep with other people. She would break my heart over and over again because I wasn't enough. What was I expecting now that we hadn't seen each other for almost two years?

Jake's gaze focuses on something behind me. The joy that lights up his eyes brings me warmth.

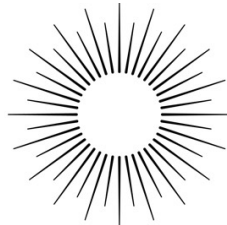
"I told her you'd be here tonight," he confirms again. "And it fucking worked."

"What?"

I snap my head around. I thought Jamie, his girlfriend, was behind me. There was so much love in his gaze.

It's not Jamie.

No. Rose just walked into the living room. And don't we all know when Rose White enters a room?



She calls me daddy – KING MALA

It's like she never left. Time stopped in Stoneview; everyone stayed at this party and waited for her to come back. The same people, the same group of friends, the same personalities and imitators. Everyone is here, accounted for, ready to drug up their evening after downing their glasses. But most of all? The same reaction; all eyes on her. Except when they used to come up and talk to her, now no one makes a move. There are hushed voices that only start once her back is to them, sorry smiles and little waves. Only none of this affects her. She spent her high school years being the name on everyone's lips at Stoneview Prep. This kind of attention doesn't even raise her blood pressure.

No, she walks in like she owns every single soul in this room. Like we should all be bowing at her feet. She doesn't do it on purpose; I know she doesn't. She doesn't hold herself like a queen. No, queens were always in the shadows. Rose holds herself like a king. Like she owns the power, knows it and isn't afraid to wield it.

I'm thrown back to her last birthday we spent together. It was two years ago, one of the best nights of my life. I still touch myself to it when Conor falls asleep. This guy never stood a chance, for Rose had already ruined me for anyone else.

She spots Jake and me and walks toward us.

“One last thing,” he says to me before Rose reaches us. His next words are so rushed I barely catch them. “I didn’t tell her about Conor. Okay, bye, enjoy yourselves.”

One second, he’s talking, the next, he’s gone and Rose is standing right in front of me. I’m not short, standing at five-foot-five, but I had forgotten how tall she is. It’s like I’m rediscovering her all over again.

Her jet-black hair is longer than it used to be, it practically touches her ass now. Her skin still has that Mediterranean golden tan it’s always had, and I know I can safely put away my nightmare of a lightless basement. She looks...healthy. She’s skinny, but she’s always been skinny. She seems so normal. Her dark, blood-red lips, that impossible color no one could compare to, are stuck into half a smile. Always that half smile that makes her look like she knows you’re into her. She’s already figured it out.

I notice she has more tattoos than she used to. She’s wearing sleeves, though I can see one peeking from under the collar of her plain black hoodie and creeping up her neck. Another one leaks onto her hand. She’s the same, yet different.

It’s her eyes...her eyes are not the same. The blue is as dark as it used to be, that midnight blue that sucks your soul in. And the secrets? The trauma? It was already there. But there’s something else in them I couldn’t put a word on. It’s... *wild*. Almost unhinged.

My eyes are reliving her all over again, but my heart hasn’t forgotten anything. It’s beating frantically against my ribcage. It’s dying to feel her own heart beat.

“I’m gonna need you to say something,” she finally whispers.

She’s just as speechless as I am.

“You look taller,” I finally drop in a breathless croak. Tears are pricking my eyes and a slew of emotions are flooding me. I missed her so much, there’s a heaviness in my stomach that is slowly uncoiling, and I don’t know how to react. I want to hug

her, but Conor is somewhere in this room and I don't want him to see my reaction.

"I am taller." She winks at me, and my whole world lights up again. I missed her cheekiness. Those winks she always used to throw my way to put me at ease.

"No way," I giggle. This feels too good. It feels incredible, and I can't believe how easily I've fallen back into being attracted to her, like a teenage girl having her first crush.

"They measured my height at the hospital. I've added a full inch to my collection. Do you like it?" She does a slow turn and smiles.

"I like it, all five-foot-eleven of you."

"I like your new hair," she replies in that low, raspy voice of hers. My whole body lights up with goosebumps at her compliment.

I was always blonde, but I now bleach it practically white. I've shortened it too. It reaches mid-neck, giving me a less innocent look than the one I had in high school.

"Thanks," I smile as I put my hair behind my ears. It makes her grin because she knows. She knows she still has the same effect on me.

"No fucking way." Conor's voice makes me jump out of my Rose bubble. "A ghost," he chuckles as he settles beside me, wrapping his hand around my hip possessively as he shoots Rose a nasty look.

I cut him off before he can make this worse. "Rose, you remember Conor." I gently try to pry his fingers off my hip, but he only tightens his grip and brings me closer to him. I look at Rose. "Conor's my..." Shame engulfs me. This is going to burn my throat coming out. "My boyfriend."

"Fiancé," he corrects. "That's right." He grabs Rose's shoulder like she's his football teammate and shakes her slightly. It makes him look a bit ridiculous since she's taller than him. "You snooze, you lose. Sorry."

Did he just say, ‘you snooze, you lose’ to a girl who’s been kidnapped?

“Conor,” I gasp. “I’m so sorry.” These are the words I repeat every single time we go to a party.

He drinks, says something inappropriate, and I spend my nights apologizing on his behalf.

“So...you guys are together now?” she asks for confirmation. She’s so calm I barely believe she asked the question. Conor says yes again, but she ignores him, her night eyes on me. “*You*. You’re dating a dude...”

I simply nod, my own gaze avoiding hers, eyes darting to the drinks on the table next to us.

Is she going to be mad? I know Rose, she’s incredibly possessive, and if there’s one thing she’s never been capable of sharing...it’s me. No matter how much *I* shared her with others. I take a sip of my drink to avoid giving her an actual answer. She knows now, anyway.

She chuckles. “Shit, Rach, you should have mentioned you haven’t orgasmed in two years. I’m sorry.”

My drink is out of my mouth in record time, spitting my sip on Rose as I desperately try not to choke and laugh at the truth she just dropped. My bruised ribs are killing me, but it feels good to genuinely laugh again. Even if I have to hide it.

“What the fuck,” Conor drunkenly growls. God, he’s so ridiculous.

Rose’s lips twitch as she assesses the drink that’s been spat on her hoodie.

“I’m sorry!” I grab a napkin, and I’m on her in a split second, dabbing at her piece of clothing.

Conor is forced to let go of me as I try to clean her up. My fingers press against her chest, and I don’t even pull away. This all feels a little too natural. When I look up, she’s not even looking at me or the barely visible stains. No, her gaze is drilled into Conor’s. Her smug smile is back and she’s raising an eyebrow at him.

I can almost hear her say, *looks like your fiancée knows exactly who she belongs to.*

When I pull away, Conor grabs me again. “All right, we can’t even see anything. She’s fine.”

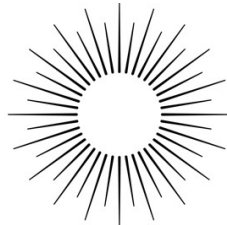
Rose grabs her sweater and pulls it slightly as she looks down to check it out. “He’s right, it’s fine. You just made me a bit,” her eyes come up to me, “*wet.*”

I have to bite my bottom lip to stop myself from smiling.

“Camila is waiting for us at the back. Let’s go,” Conor snaps as he starts dragging me away. I walk with him, slowly, but my eyes can’t leave her.

She’s back and just the same as she was before she disappeared.

Gorgeous, broken, witty...*mine.*

*Goddess – Xana*

On the drive back to our house, Conor grabs my hand gently. We're sitting at the back of our town car, and he puts up the screen that separates us from the driver. All evening, I watched Rose from afar. After the shock of her arrival, people started talking to her. Jake, Chris, and Luke were around her like they're never letting her out of their sights again. They laughed together like she never left, and she let girls and boys hit on her... like she never left.

Every time I stared too long, her gaze would meet mine. She smiled at me like she was happy for me. Why didn't she have that glint of jealousy that used to shine in her eyes? Why didn't she come to me and possessively drag me away from Conor?

I'm boiling, raging with an anger I can't control. And I know Conor can see it, but he doesn't say anything. After everything we've been through, *she's* been through, she is still not ready to have me? To settle down, to—

Oh my god, Rachel, what are you talking about?

I need to snap out of it. I'm with Conor. I hate him and wish he would die in his sleep, but this is what happens when you give up and let your parents control you. I went with what they wanted, and now I'm stuck with him.

But she's back.

That changes everything.

“I watched you all night,” Conor finally snaps. “Staring at her.”

“It was nothing,” I quickly reply, dread starting to spread in my belly. “Pure curiosity because she disappeared for two years.” *Sixteen months exactly.* I rub my thumb against his hand. It’s bad now that Rose is back. Merely touching Conor makes me want to crawl out of my skin. Still, I smile at him.

Instead of accepting my words and gesture, he tightens his fingers around me until it hurts. My joints crack and I wince.

“Conor...”

“The fucking bitch,” he scoffs. “She’s been back two minutes, and she thinks you’re gonna fall into her arms again. But you wouldn’t. Right, babe? You wouldn’t?”

“No,” I yelp as his grip on me bruises my fingers. “I wouldn’t. Ow...Conor.”

“Whoever had her should have fucking finished her.”

“Conor!” I gasp from the pain and shock. “You can’t say that.”

“Oh, please. She and her twin were always involved in the shadiest shit. They should never have lived in Stoneview in the first place. That charity case should have gone to the North Shore of the Falls.”

“Let go of my hand,” I demand, irritated. “You’re hurting me.” I’m not even mad from the pain he’s inflicting on me. I’m used to that. I want to slap him for talking shit about Rose.

He lets go of my hand in a violent push and I bring it close to me, massaging my shaking fingers.

“Suck my dick,” he suddenly drops.

“What?” I choke.

“You know I love my car blow jobs. I think you owe me at least that for the way you looked at that cunt tonight. You were practically eye-fucking her.” He starts unzipping his slacks and bile rises up my throat.

“Come on,” I chuckle a sad laugh. “I’m exhausted. We had a long night.”

“Me too. I could really get my dick sucked.”

“I feel a little sick from all the food I had,” I lie.

“Get on your knees and suck my cock, Rachel.”

“I...” I’m running out of excuses. My next words are barely audible. “Don’t want to.”

His eyes snap to me, and I realize how big of a mistake those words were.

“I mean—”

I’m cut off by his hand in my hair. He grabs me and pushes me to the floor in one move before dragging me between his legs.

“Stop!” My cry of pain doesn’t faze him one bit.

“It’s because she’s back, isn’t it?!” he barks. My lack of answer earns me a slap to the face. “Answer me! You’re still a fucking dyke for the bitch!”

“No.” I shake my head as tears come to my eyes. “I’m just tired, please...”

My stomach twists with disgust when he grabs his dick out of his trousers. “Open.”

I shake my head again, rearing back and trying to untangle his hand from my hair.

“Stop,” I keen. The tears are falling, but he doesn’t care.

He pushes my head down with one hand as the other holds his dick to my mouth. It pushes against my lips, wet from the tears. I keep my mouth closed, but the grip tightens, growing more painful, and he pulls on my hair harder.

“Open, Rachel, before I dislocate your jaw.”

I open my mouth, taking the deep breath I was holding, and he pushes in. My whimper is choked by his half-limp dick pushing as deep as he can. I retch against him and he pulls out, pulling me away from him at the same time.

“You’re fucking disgusting!” he shouts. He shoves me hard enough that I hit the seats opposite his.

I take in a ragged breath, trembling and trying to stop the tears. I can’t stop shaking because I know what comes after I can’t perform. I know what sexual frustration brings out of him. “Please, Conor,” I beg, putting my hands in front of me.

“You wanna know your problem, Rachel? Why we can’t give your parents the kid they fucking want?” He doesn’t even get up from his seat. The kick to my already painful ribs comes harshly and swiftly.

A second and third kick follow.

I grunt in pain as I curl in on myself. “Please...stop,” I suffocate in pain.

“Your problem is you’re a fucking lesbo who is in love with a girl who played her for years before disappearing. And now that she’s back, you think she’s gonna take boring, plain Rachel back, don’t you?” He cackles loudly. “You’re so fucking pathetic.”

He kicks me again and I can’t even beg him to stop anymore. Every time I open my mouth, a cry of pain is accompanied by spit. My words are a string of gargles I can’t make sense of.

He lowers himself above me and grabs my hair again, dragging my face to his. “You’re gonna give me that kid whether you want it or not, you got that? I want your daddy’s company, and he wants that grandchild. All you have to do is get fucked. Can’t you even do that?!”

He presses my cheek to the floor. I don’t even resist anymore. It’ll be over soon.

“When we get home, you’re gonna have a shower and spread your legs.” I squeeze my eyes shut.

It’ll be over soon. It’ll be over soon.

“You hear me?!” he shouts as he presses harder on my head.

“Y-yes,” I sniffle.

He finally lets go. He zips up his pants and taps the seat next to his. “Get off the floor. You look fucking ridiculous.”

I’m shaking like a leaf when I finally manage to sit next to him. It’s so painful to breathe, I can barely take full breaths. He offers me his pocket square by dangling it in front of my face.

“Enough crying now. I barely touched you.”

When we open the door to the villa his parents gifted us, he lets me in first. He locks it behind us and helps me take my coat off.

“Go shower,” he says while he hangs it. “Oh, and Rachel?” He stops me in my tracks. I turn back to show I’m listening. “If I see you near Rose White, I promise you...I *promise* you, baby, I will kill you with my bare hands.”

I promise you, baby, I will kill you with my bare hands.

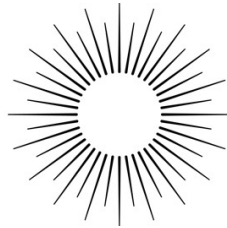
I promise you, baby, I will kill you with my bare hands.

I promise you, baby.

*I will **kill** you with my bare hands.*

I repeat it, I chant it, I tattoo it on my brain. I whisper it and say it loudly...and yet, it doesn’t stop me from sneaking out of our bed at 4 a.m. and hopping in a taxi. No, if anything, it encourages me. I might be forced to stay with Conor. The weight of our families, the fear of him killing me if I try to leave...it’s heavy on my shoulders.

But I am cursed to love Rose forever. That’s what he doesn’t understand. You can’t run away when a demon possesses you. You can’t evade when you’re haunted. That’s what Rose does to me. There is no escaping. Not even the threat of death can stop me from going to her right now.

*I want to – Rosenfeld*

The Murrays have the same code to pass their gates as they've always had. I learned it by heart when we were in high school so I could come see Rose. I make my way up their long driveway that goes up a hill, and I sneak to the side of the house to reach the pool house. That's where Rose and Jake used to live. A beautiful guest house for themselves. And there is no describing the disappointment when no one answers my knocks. I try the door...locked. They never used to lock it, though I wouldn't blame Rose if she doesn't feel safe anymore.

My shoulders slack when I let out a long huff. I should have asked for her number. I should have texted her so she'd expect me. Did I genuinely think after two years, we would just pick up where we left off? What if she left the party with another girl?

"Looking for someone, Sunshine?"

I spin around so fast the night sky tilts above me.

"Rose," I sigh. Hearing the nickname she's always used for me is like a prayer—a call for worship.

She's sitting on a garden chair by the pool, wearing nothing but an oversized sweater. Her long bare legs are splayed in front of her, and her beautiful smile lights up the night. She slowly gets up and walks to me.

I don't wait for her to reach me. I run and purposely fall into her arms.

And like I expected her to, she catches me. Because no matter what happens, Rose will always catch me. I know that. And no matter what happens, when she does catch me, she makes me hers.

Her lips crash onto mine before I can find my balance again, her hands slipping down my ass until she grabs the back of my thighs and pulls me up. I wrap my legs around her waist, and she walks until she's pushing me against the wall of the pool house. I groan into her mouth when my back hits the wall.

She's so violent, so possessive. So herself.

"My bedroom's in the house now," she smiles against my lips when she takes a break from devouring me.

"So, what were you doing in the backyard?" I pant. I'm so obsessed with the spark in her eyes, lighting up her whole face that I almost don't hear her answer.

"Waiting for you."

Confusion must be written all over my face because she brings a hand to my cheek and runs her thumb between my brows. She pushes her hips forward to keep me balanced and tight against her now that she's holding me with one arm.

"My beautiful Sunshine, letting dark thoughts eat you up like you always do." She doesn't give me time to reply. She kisses me again, forcing her tongue into my mouth like she missed me. Like she missed possessing my entire body.

We barely pull away to take breaths, but between lingering kisses, I manage to slip the words that crowd my thoughts.

"You ignored me all night," I admit with disappointment.

I kiss her again, and she wraps a hand around my throat in her calming and domineering manner.

"You were with your fiancé," she whispers in her gravelly voice.

That feeling of sickness comes back quicker than it had left. My body hurts everywhere just thinking about him. About what he did in the car and at home.

I look away, focusing my gaze on the stars in the sky rather than the galaxy in her eyes.

“Why didn’t you do anything? Why didn’t you...tell him something.”

Her silence makes me look back at her just to watch the incomprehension on her face.

Oh my god, what am I doing?

Did I really just snap at her for not being jealous and possessive?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I-I can’t believe I just said that.”

“You’re worried I don’t want you anymore?”

I shake my head and unwrap my legs, forcing her to put me down. “I am so out of line. I’m sorry.” I run a hand through my hair then rearrange it. “I shouldn’t have come. This...this is a mistake.”

I can barely take a step away from her before she grabs my wrist.

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

My brows furrow. I’m so confused.

“Think you’d be here if I didn’t want you to be?”

I don’t even want to wipe that smug smile off her face right now. I can’t help but rejoice in it.

“You ignored me all night in the hope I would sneak out of my house to come and find you here?”

“Oh, Sunshine,” she chuckles. “I didn’t hope. I just knew.” She closes the gap I had put between us and grabs my hips tightly, pulling me to her. “You didn’t think I was gonna let you replace me, did you?” Her forehead falls on mine, our mouths practically touching.

“I haven’t replaced you,” I tell her in a whisper.

“Just temporarily substituted me.”

“You were gone.”

“And now I’m back.”

I put up no fight whatsoever when she pulls at my arm and drags me to the house. I let her guide me to the stairs and her room. She’s slow, taking her time to drag her prey toward her lair. Why would she need to hurry when she knows I will follow anyway? When she knows she’s got me and I’m not going anywhere.

She locks the door of her bedroom and I’m already on her, kissing her neck from behind and wrapping my arms around her to unbutton her jeans.

“Do you have any idea how much I missed you?” I murmur in her ear, my voice dropping from the lust flooding my veins.

She turns around and grabs my jaw in one mighty hand. “Do you have any idea what I’ve been dreaming of doing to you if I saw you again?”

I can’t shake my head. She’s holding me too tightly.

“Show me,” I tell her.

My whole body is buzzing with anticipation, my pussy already wet and desperate for her touch. I haven’t felt this in so long, it’s foreign to me.

I don’t register the push. My back hits the bed and she’s on her knees in front of me. She pushes my skirt up and pulls my thong down. Her hands rub my thighs as she spreads my legs and hooks one over her shoulder.

“Rose...” I say with enough eagerness to make her chuckle.

“What makes you so wet, Sunshine?”

She kneads my inner thighs with her artful fingers, and I release a needy sigh. With her right hand, she is digging into the tattoo she had given me when we were in high school.

Property of Rose White written at the apex of my thigh.

“Is it our reunion?”

She drops a kiss where her hands are. She trails my tendon with her tongue and breathes against my skin.

“Is it the forbidden?”

She kisses the apex of my thigh, and I shift my hips, desperate for her to touch my pussy.

“Or is it the knowledge that you will be coming all over my tongue in less than two minutes?”

“Oh God...” I moan. She hasn’t touched my clit, and she already has me moaning for her.

“Praying won’t save you now, Sunshine. Just embrace the sin.”

She licks from my entrance to my clit, and my breath stays stuck in my throat. My whole world stops, and my heart skips enough beats to declare me dead.

Rose is here and my body is back with its rightful owner.

“What does he think of it?” she says as she rubs my tattoo again. “When he’s in this position in front of you and sees that you’re mine, what does he think?”

I don’t tell her that Conor would never go down on me. Although he has seen the tattoo many times.

“He hates it,” I pant. “He hates you.”

I feel her smile against me. “Good.”

Her tongue plays with my clit in a game that lacks rules. My spine tingles, my lower belly tightens, and my pussy begs for release.

Rose rears back, forcing a whine out of me. She blows on my weeping pussy, and I shiver in a butterfly effect.

The flap of this butterfly creates a tornado of pleasure in me.

“I want you to scream my name, baby,” she whispers against my needy core. “Show me how much you missed me.”

She crashes against my pussy, pushing a finger in me as she sucks my clit between her lips. I'm moaning and shifting on the bed, bucking my hips. She inserts another finger as my body lights up on fire. I can feel her tightly inside me. I can feel her rubbing against me and curling her fingers to bring me amounts of pleasure I never thought I'd feel again. To bring me to heights I thought I would never reach anymore.

"Rose," I shriek as I explode against her. I doubt this can be described as an orgasm anymore. This is dying and being brought back to life. This is what one feels when they're seconds away from being declared dead and finally wake up to the shock of the defibrillator.

Rose is my lifeline. She brings me joy and desire. She brings me so much heartbreak that her love is palpable. I fell in love with her tonight like I had met her for the first time.

Rose White left to come back to me harder, and now I'm coming for her like she never left.

She laps me up like she hadn't been fed while away. She drains me until my voice is raw and my throat painful.

You should have said you haven't orgasmed in almost two years.

If only she knew how much I needed the climax she just brought me.

She lets go of my leg and stands in front of me. We used to spend nights giving each other orgasms, but it's been so long that one has already shattered me.

Not that she cares.

She rids me of my dress, and I'm thankful we kept the lights off because then she can't see the bruises on my skin. She grabs my hips to flip me around so I'm bent over the bed with my cheek against the sheets that smell exactly like her. I can't believe I used to hate it. That scent of lilac, violet, and geranium. I missed it so much that I rub my nose against the bedding and moan against it.

The next second, Rose is dropping kisses on my back that quickly turn into biting and sucking.

“Honey, I’m home,” she rasps in my ear, making my entire body shiver for her. Her thigh is between my legs, rubbing at my oversensitive clit while she kisses my neck and my back. While she pinches my ass cheeks and bruises me in the exact way I love.

Not like Conor’s bruises.

No. I don’t want to think of him right now. I don’t want to think of the nightmares he puts me through, the—

“Ah!” I scream in pleasure when her teeth find my neck. “Rose,” I moan.

That’s what’s perfect with Rose. I can’t think of anything else, only that I need it, *her*.

“Sunshine, it feels so good to hear my name on your lips.”

I hear her shuffle behind me before she slides her hand against my back. I take a look at her to see she’s undressed. She is breathtakingly beautiful. Dozens and dozens of small tattoos cover her arms, ribs, and stomach. She’s got one just under her left boob, and I’m dying to run my tongue all over it. The tattoo I could see creeping up her neck at the party is the only big one. It starts on the side of her shoulder, flooding low onto her collarbone, where it disappears behind her back and reappears on her neck on the same side. I can’t quite see the details in the dark.

I’m starting to wonder what she’s been up to for the last two years, but I can’t think straight for long. Her hand lands between my legs and collects the wetness that’s been running down my thighs as a pleased growl escapes her lips. She bends over me and the feeling of her breasts against my bare back makes me shudder.

“Tell me, Sunshine. Who do you think of when he fucks you? Who do you imagine pounding into you and stealing your screams?”

Her fingers tap at my clit, then go in and out of me as she spreads wetness all over my pussy to make me aware of how much I want her. She moans at how easily she can come in and out and adds a third finger.

“You,” I let out in a breathy voice. “Oh my god, it’s you, Rose...”

“I know,” she whispers against my cheek. “Rachel, if you ever think I’d let you come for someone else...” She chuckles against my skin and her warm breath, mixed with her dexterous fingers, brings me to the edge again. “If you ever think I’d let you forget me...” Her fingers pick up the pace, the sound of my wetness resonating in the room with a ridiculous loudness. “Baby, you’d be so, *so*,” her sentence is cut off by one of my loud moans and harsh breathing, “wrong.”

I whine loudly, close enough to the edge that I could just let myself fall and crash.

It’s pathetic how desperate I am to come again; how close she got me in a couple of minutes and a few dirty words. I’m pushing my hips against her, meeting her hand with a force that hurts me in the best way.

“Now show me how right I am.”

I explode. The lack of shame is laughable.

She doesn’t even stop. She keeps pounding into me. I should care about her hand and arm getting tired. I should pay her back. I should turn around, grab her, and pin her to the bed. Hurt her like I know she loves. But instead, I rejoice in the overstimulation.

“I’ve destroyed you for other people, Sunshine. You better never forget it.”

“Yes,” I sob from the overwhelming pleasure.

“Someone owns this body and it’s not that fucking fiancé of yours.”

“No.”

“Say it. Say I own you.” Her pace gets a little angrier, and that possessiveness of hers comes back tenfold. “Say,” she growls. “Rose, you own me.”

“Rose...” I pant, desperately trying to tell her what she wants to hear but choking on my moans.

“I can’t hear you, baby. Is someone becoming a little dumb from the fucking?”

I feel her lifting off my back and angling herself, so I can feel her deeper inside me. I’m drooling against her bed and wetting her sheets from the pleasure. My pussy is leaking for her.

“I’m waiting.” She slaps my ass and I shriek.

“Ro...Rose, you...” She fucks me harder, pushing me against the bed. The three fingers in me are burning and I never want her to stop.

“Start again.”

“Rose, you own me!” I scream just before it turns into screams of pleasure as she brings a third orgasm out of me.

She finally lets me take a breath as she withdraws her fingers. I turn around just to watch her lick every single one of them while she stares at my swollen pussy.

“Wasn’t so hard, was it?” she smiles at me.

My whole world flips on its axis. That’s what happens when Rose smiles at me.

“Now, let the real fun begin.”

My eyes widen when I understand she means it.

“You just killed me,” I blurt out. “Give me time to get back to life.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so.” She climbs on the bed and grabs a pillow. She kisses me deeply as her hand wraps around the back of my head and she slides the pillow under me. My face is slightly angled, and I wonder what she’s doing until she moves up...and up...and up. I lick my lips when her glistening pussy hovers right over my face.

I haven’t done this in so long. For a second, I’m scared I won’t know what to do or how to do it. But the intense need to bury my face into her pussy takes over. I grab her hips so quickly she almost loses balance. One hand grips my hair to

stay still as well as angle my face. At the same time, I pull her to my mouth.

I don't hesitate for one second before making out with her pussy. She's so wet all over me that I lose track of where I'm licking. It doesn't matter because she rises on her knees slightly so she can take control and ride my face. My lips open and close around her clit, and she rides me so hard I feel her wetness on my nose and cheeks.

When she comes, her legs tighten against my head and her broken scream resonates everywhere in my body. She falls to my side, and I wrap a hand around her throat, turning around and going on top of her. I kiss her, licking her lips until she lets me in. I cover her entire mouth with her slickness and force her to taste herself. She moans around my lips, and I swallow it, keeping it for myself like a precious gift. It's a golden music note reserved for only the most skillful musicians.

I let myself hit the mattress, letting go of her throat. I lay on my side, keeping one hand on her, the need to touch her burning at my fingertips. I try to calm my trembling body as her pants slow down.

My hand roams along her breasts and my heart picks up at the small curves against my palms. The insanity of how much I missed her makes me lightheaded. Her eyes are closed and it makes me grin. She always falls asleep after sex. She's so peaceful and satisfied. Her nightmares chased away long enough for her to find sleep.

That's when it hits me. She is *exactly* the same as before. The same reactions, the same wittiness about her. She fucks me like she never left. Her orgasms sound the same, her smell, her shape. The difference is drastic in me because I'm not happy. I hate my life; I hate the man who thinks of me as his. And it shows. It shows now more than ever when the woman I've always loved has given me the best fuck I've had in almost two years. And her? She gave me the exact same fuck she used to. The kind where I know I belong to her, and I know I'm one among others. Nothing feels *off* because Rose has been herself for the last two years. I just know it. I can *feel* it.

The realization creates a hole in my stomach where all my happiness goes and hides.

There's a long silence while I caress her arm, her throat, and go back down to her breasts. I prop myself on my left elbow while my right hand keeps exploring her. I circle her dark, golden nipples with one finger, watching her skin rise into goosebumps as I do.

"Where were you?" I whisper, like I'm too ashamed to ask the question. She's asleep, but even if she were awake, she wouldn't answer.

Her eyes snap open. I'm so surprised I jolt back slightly. Her hand grabs mine, and she brings both back to her breast. I squeeze her while she squeezes my hand. It's a soft but determined hold. I read it as a sign to keep going with my instigation.

"Where were you?" I repeat.

Maybe she didn't mean for me to insist. It's a risky move. I know Rose, she hates sharing things that might make her appear weak, things that might make it all seem a bit too real. When she's with me, she likes using me as an escape from reality. If I remind her of the outside world, of the real problems, she shuts off.

I'm about to apologize for asking, for being nosy, when she surprises me with something I can already tell is the truth.

"I'm not sure," she tells me. That's all I need.

I sit up so quickly she jumps in surprise. "Do you..." I hesitate. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about," she chuckles, as if I was a silly girl getting worked up over nothing.

"Can I ask questions?" It might sound like an insane thing to say out loud. But Rose always had one rule, no questions about her or her past. If she wanted to share something, she would. Like the fact that the door should never be closed if she's left alone in a room. As soon as I noticed, she confirmed it to me. She never said why, though.

She shrugs and stretches. “Sure.”

This is all I’ve ever wanted. Since I’ve known Rose, all I’ve wished for is answers to all my questions. Only now that she’s here, naked with me in bed, ready to open herself up to me, I’m not sure what to ask anymore.

“Are you...” It’s hard to swallow, I’m just too scared of the answer to the question I’m about to ask. “Okay?”

Time stops when her eyes lock with mine.

Ignorance is bliss. Did you know?

The thing is, I never realized Rose was never protecting herself when she used to keep things from me. She was protecting me. And I never truly grasped how much until the next word crosses her lips.

“No.”

It’s so short and simple. It’s straight to the point, no bullshit, no sugarcoating, and it puts a spike right through my heart. It’s the most Rose answer I’ve ever heard.

And do you know why it’s heartbreaking?

Because I know it’s true, just like I know the sky is blue.

“Why?” I ask. My hands are getting clammy from the anxiety pouring through my veins. Rose was never okay.

She wasn’t before I met. I was a Freshman and she was in eighth grade, when she and her twin moved to Stoneview. She wasn’t okay through all of high school, and she is not okay now. But she’s always put up a strong face, tough and confident, and that made it easy to pretend she was okay. It made it easy for me to believe it.

It’s easier on my conscience to think that Rose is an overconfident nymphomaniac with a bitchy personality and a god complex. I could let her use me. I could love her despite it all.

But she’s not like that. In fact, she’s not at all, and now I’m the one feeling her weaknesses and the need to cry by her side.

“Why?” I repeat when she doesn’t reply.

She looks confused, like it's the last thing she thought she'd hear.

"That's not what you should say when someone tells you they're not fine."

"What should I say?" I press her shoulders against the bed and climb her. I can't help it. Straddling her waist is simply where I should be.

"People usually say 'it'll get better'," she tells me in all honesty. I know she means it. Rose has been neglected her whole life. The children's home, the caseworkers, the lawyers, the police. That's likely what they all said to her.

"How am I meant to know it'll get better if I don't know what's wrong?"

I laugh when her eyebrows furrow and she looks at me completely speechless. No one ever asked her what was wrong.

"That's a good point," she chuckles. Her hands land on my thighs and she kneads my flesh until her gaze lands on the tattoo again.

"*Property of Rose White*," she reads. She probably can't discern the letters, but she knows what's written there anyway. "This tattoo turns me on, Sunshine," she whispers in a low rasp.

"Does it?" I tease back. "Because being your property makes me soaking wet."

I grab the hand on my thigh and bring it to my wet pussy. She doesn't understand what it's like to need her the way I do. I can only try to show her.

I press two of her fingers against my entrance and moan as they slide inside me easily.

"Fuck," she gasps. I go on my knees as I bring my hand under me to tease her clit.

"Can you feel how much I love you?" I murmur as I keep her hand tight against my pussy while my other starts going in and out of her slowly.

“Yeah...” she moans as her eyes close, and her head falls back.

“Eyes on me, Doll,” I snap.

Her eyes snap open at the sound of her nickname. The one I only use when I control her wholly. The one that means I’m taking over, and she is mine to play with.

“I’m gonna fuck myself on your beautiful fingers, and then you’re going to lick me clean. Is that clear?”

She nods.

“Words.”

“Y-yeah,” she stutters with need.

“Look at your fingers inside me,” I order her. “Look closely because they’re not gonna touch any other girl, Doll. You’re back, and you’re all mine.”

Her nodding accelerates at the same time as my fingers move inside her. As I fuck myself on her hand.

“I’m going to abuse that little pussy of yours until you’re too satisfied to even think of anyone else,” I growl.

My words bring her over the edge and her cries of pleasure bring me to climax.

I stay true to my promise and straddle her face until she’s made me come a second time and licked it all off me.

We’re still panting when I cover her whole body with mine and put the covers over us.

“Tell me,” I finally say once we’ve calmed down. “Tell me what’s in that head of yours, Rose?”

She’s silent for so long that I think she’ll never reply, until her hoarse voice reaches deep inside my soul and brings me closer to her than I’ve ever been.

“Demons.”

ROSE



Beauty - Layto

I thought Silver Falls Community College was meant to be human size. I've been walking along the hallways long enough that I know I won't make it to my class on time. I take a turn I'm pretty sure I already took five minutes ago and fall against the same door that isn't the room I'm meant to be in.

"For fuck's sake," I mutter as I let my forehead fall against the door. "This is shit."

"Lost, maybe?" a voice resonates behind me. It's beautiful. Smooth and delicate. Low and comforting.

I turn around to face a guy about my height. His delicately picked fashion is the first thing that hits me. This man spends time choosing his style and it shows. His ears are pierced with multiple golden rings, and another one is on his nostril. The gold contrasts beautifully with his dark skin. He's got layers of necklaces around his neck. Shorter ones are tight against his skin and a longer one locks with an actual padlock falling against his light brown oversized tee. He's wearing dark green cargo pants that I'm sure must hug his ass nicely at the back. But what kick starts my heart into an unsteady rhythm is his smile.

As soon as his lips tip up and perfect, pearly teeth show their faces, something melts in me.

"Are you?"

“What?” I mumble quietly as my eyes snap back to his deep brown ones.

“Are you lost?” he chuckles, clearly having caught me ogling him.

I adjust the bag on my shoulder and nod. “Yeah. This campus makes no sense, and there was no logic put into building it whatsoever.”

“Welcome to the North Shore.” Damn, that voice and that smile are a dangerous combo. “What class are you going to?”

“Introduction to American History,” I say, reading my paper as if I don’t remember it. I just need to not look at him for a second.

“Well, isn’t today your lucky day. It’s exactly where I’m going.”

“Except you have no excuse for being late,” I smile.

“I’ve got plenty of them,” he says before we start moving. “What’s your name?”

“Rose,” I nod.

“Lik,” he says, offering his hand. I take it and reluctantly let it go.

Rows and rows of students in an overcrowded room. Everyone is in a semicircle, facing a professor who looks like he just recently completed his doctorate. The background noise fades as he starts writing some chapter titles on the board.

Professor Mattock looks like he belongs in a gang, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he used to. My suspicions are quickly confirmed when he pulls up his sleeves before he looks for something in his bag. There’s a dagger tattooed on his left forearm. On this side of the Falls, that means he belongs to the North Shore Crew.

Did I really expect anything else? This job is probably his second chance at life after his teenage years of petty crimes.

I look around at all the students in the room. I have to turn around to look at them. Lik is sitting far from me. We both arrived late, and he took the last space on the back benches, so I ended up a couple of rows from the front. It's weird being here. Like I've come home but not quite. This isn't Stoneview, but I still recognize some faces from my high school years and even one girl I slept with a couple of times.

This whole situation makes me feel uncomfortable. I've just spent two years on constant adrenaline, and doing something as simple as going to classes makes everything around me seem dull and unexciting. I've become addicted to being on edge and on high alert.

I turn back to look forward and run my hands over my face before sliding them through my hair.

"What the fuck am I doing here," I mutter to myself.

Why did I listen to Chris? This guy has a way of getting inside my head and making me believe his shit ideas are awesome, to begin with.

What is the point of attending any classes when I know I don't have any future here?

I grab the bag I hadn't even opened and get up swiftly, except when I raise my gaze, I come face-to-face with Mattock.

"Going anywhere interesting?" he smiles kindly. His personality doesn't fit his image, I can already tell. I bet he's all 'I used to deal drugs and beat up people, but I've found the light now, and I make myself feel better by teaching North Shore kids there's a better, more legal life outside their gangs.'

When I don't respond to him and attempt to get past some girl to my right, he insists. He walks back to his desk and looks down at a sheet of paper, skimming over it.

"What's your name?"

"Rose White," I mumble.

He keeps reading until I assume he finds my name at the bottom. He finally nods and peers up.

“Well, Rose, why don’t you give me this hour and then feel free to go home?”

The girls to my left and right don’t look in the mood to get out of the way—North Shore bitches—and Mattock’s eyes are burning fucking holes in my head.

“Fine,” I huff as I sit back down. Got nowhere to be, anyway.

American History is an interesting class, and Mattock makes it even more so. I guess his hot ass has a lot to do with it. Most of our class is female and I’m starting to understand why.

Since I was sitting towards the front, I’m one of the last ones to leave. I’m in the doorway when he calls out to me.

“Rose!” I slowly turn around and raise an eyebrow to show I’m listening, yet not that interested in what he has to say. It doesn’t seem to stop him. “Could you stay back? I’d love to have a chat and see if I’ve convinced you to keep taking my class.”

The last girl who was leaving walks past me and winks at me. She’s a redhead with a glint of flirt in her eyes. “Lucky,” she whispers with a cheeky smile.

“Me or him?” I smirk. It makes her giggle, and her eyes linger as she walks away.

Mattock waits by his desk, and I walk back down the stairs that lead to him. It’s a huge lecture hall and I wonder how the people at the back heard anything.

“So,” he tells me. “What do you think of American History?”

“Yeah,” I huff. “It was alright.”

He leans against his desk and crosses his arms in front of himself.

“What about me?”

“You?” I readjust the strap on my shoulder to be able to slip my hands into my slacks.

“Yeah, what did you think of me?”

Is he really hitting on me after his first class? I’m not complaining; the guy is eye candy, but we just met an hour ago and I’m his new student.

“You’re great at teaching,” I answer. “Doesn’t pay as well as the North Shore Crew, but it was the right career choice.”

His eyebrows rise, his jaw clenches slightly and his crossed arms get a little tighter. Surely, he can’t be that surprised. It’s written all over him. *Literally*. Still, he is surprised I know about it.

“You’re not from the North Shore.”

“No, but I know the area.”

He observes me, my features, and my body for what seems like forever. I don’t move. He’s not unsettling me. Instead, I observe him back. He reminds me of Sam somewhat. The rough look, the calmness, the hair, the tattoos. Like a cheap version of him.

“I should go to my next class,” I finally say, already turning away.

“I hope I’ll see you in my class again,” he tells me back.

I’ve barely closed the door to the room when a voice catches my attention.

“He hits on every new girl.” Lik is leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and watching me.

“Thanks,” I throw back. “I do love to feel special.”

He walks toward me, stopping close enough that I can feel his breath on my lips when he chuckles. I’m guessing the mint smell is from the gum he’s obsessively chewing. Goosebumps break out over my skin and I can feel my brows furrow. He has a weird effect on me. I’m not sure if it’s good or bad, but it feels nice.

“You attract a lot of attention, don’t you?” he asks, his eyes narrowing on me.

“It’s the height,” I answer. “Freakishly tall.”

“Right,” he scoffs. “That must be it.”

His fingers play with the ring around his nose, like a thinking gesture. Then he runs them through his hair. Tight brown curls that he obviously takes time to moisturize and take care of. They come to just above his ears and a strand has landed on his forehead. My hand itches to push it away; instead, I take a step back.

“Did you wait for me to take me to my next class?” I gasp in a dramatic gesture. “Aw, am I your new school crush?”

He cackles a laugh. “I’ve never played on your team, babe. But feel free to try and make me change my mind.”

That makes me raise an eyebrow. I pride myself in being a walking advertisement that screams *Sexuality is fluid!* And meeting someone who openly feels the same way as I do feels nice.

“I wanted to invite you to a North Shore party tonight. Ever been to one of those?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “Why don’t you ask the girls around? I’m sure they’ll tell you if they remember me.”

“Do you often pride yourself in being a Casanova?” he asks me in the most profound way.

“Yes.” I take a step forward and angle my head so I’m talking right into his ear. “But I prefer to call myself a slut. It’s got a better ring to it. Don’t you think?”

I don’t know if he truly is unphased by my behavior or hides it very well, but he doesn’t have any reaction.

“You’re fun,” he simply says. He grabs the phone I’m currently holding and taps his number on it. Then he calls himself. “I’ll text you the address for tonight. You should really come.”

He does text me the address. And I want to go. But when 11 p.m. comes, and I’m facing the house that’s booming with bass, I don’t go in. This house belongs to the North Shore Crew. To Billie Scott, more specifically, and I’ve got bad

blood with her. I wouldn't mind being here with friends, but I don't think showing up alone will earn me a welcoming banner and fireworks.

I grab a cigarette, light it up, and call Rachel, like I've tried every single day since my birthday. And she's been ignoring me every time.

My heart kicks when I recognize she's picking up. When she finally talks, her voice is cheery.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Mom?" I rasp, confused.

"Of course! Wait, let me check if I have what I need in the fridge. I made pancakes yesterday morning, so I might be out of milk. Honey, I'll be back in a minute."

I can hear Conor's grunt in the background. Steps, doors opening and closing. Finally, she's talking to me again.

"You need to stop calling me," she hisses through the phone. *"This isn't a game, Rose. I'm engaged."*

"What?" My confusion makes me feel dumb. That never happens.

"I know..." She huffs, and I can imagine the way she runs her hand through her hair and scratches her scalp like she does when she's thinking. *"I know what you're thinking. Now that you're back, we can pick it up where we had left it—"*

"Of course. What else," I growl.

"I can't. I'm with Conor."

"Yeah, who cares? Leave him."

"I can't, Rose."

I can't help but break into a laugh. This is ridiculous. "You don't love him. You're not even attracted to him."

"You weren't here for two years. And I don't expect you to understand, but I need you to accept my choice. It doesn't mean I don't want to see you. You know I do. I just..."

“You what?” I scoff. “Want to play the role of the housewife? And what does that make me? Your little secret?”

Her silence says it all.

“I can’t fucking believe you,” I seethe.

“I’ve shared you the entire time we were in high school. So don’t be a hypocrite. It’s your turn.”

“I’m not playing the role of the secret lover while Conor gets you every day,” I growl.

“For now, it’s that or nothing. You choose.”

“Don’t fucking do this to me. Don’t give me an ultimatum.”

“What? You mean like the exact same thing you used to do to me? ‘Love me but let me break up with you when I want to see another girl. And make sure to wait for me for when I want you back.’”

“That’s not how I talk,” I tell her, having no other point to argue with. I can imagine her shaking her head at me. “Fine,” I spit. “For now. Just for. Now. Alright?”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

And she hangs up on me before I can even add anything else.

I finish my cigarette, angry and jealous of Conor, who gets to keep her close. I send her a text, telling her that this won’t last. She probably won’t even see it.

Then I make my way back to one of the Murrays’ cars that I’ve been using. Not exactly a genius idea to bring a Mercedes GLS to the North Shore, but I’m glad it’s still here by the time I come back to it.

A car drives toward me slowly until it stops right next to mine. I crack my neck, trying to ignore the anxiety brewing in my stomach. The window goes down, and Lik’s smile is pure perfection as the opening reveals his face.

“Don’t tell me you’re already ditching my party.”

“Is it your party? Or Billie’s?” I grumble as I grab another cigarette.

“Same difference. She’s my stepsister.”

“Lovely,” I murmur bitterly as I search for my lighter. “I’m not in a mood to party, and Billie and I aren’t exactly besties. Thanks for the invite, though.”

He nods to himself, watching me light up my cigarette. “Okay. What are you in the mood for, then?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. The truth? Rachel. I tell him something different. “Fries.”

He looks at me in surprise, then bites his lip to avoid laughing. How can someone be so cute and handsome? “I’m not gonna lie,” he tells me. “You don’t exactly look like a girl who loves eating.”

I’m aware of how skinny I am. Of all the comments I ever received.

You’re too skinny, Rose. Eat something.

You’re anorexic.

I can see your ribs.

Put some meat on those bones.

When was the last time you ate?

I don’t think any of them had ever experienced what it feels like to be hit repetitively with a stiff ruler while lying on your stomach. I learned quickly that if I didn’t want to be sick on myself, it was better not to eat too much or too often. I have memories of Bianco hurting me and vomiting on his desk after he’d left me alone and told me not to move. How he’d make me clean it afterward and humiliate me further.

I don’t like eating. I don’t appreciate food. I don’t get hungry. And yeah, I’m skinny. But I’ve always been, and I’m still fucking alive, so I do appreciate it when people keep their comments to themselves.

“Congratulations,” I deadpan. “You know how to use your eyes. I haven’t had anything all day and I’m hungry.”

“Okay,” he shrugs. “Fries it is.” He leans over and opens the passenger side.

Before I get in, I check my phone. Rachel didn’t reply to me. What else am I going to do anyway?

He drives us to the nearest drive-thru, and we end up eating in his car in the middle of a random parking lot. The night is starless, the sky black and gray as the moon reflects on the clouds. Lik’s brown eyes are dark and seem to absorb his car’s yellow light.

“So,” he says, chewing around a bite of his burger. “Where are you from?”

“Stoneview,” I tell him, staring at the small bag of fries on my lap. I push it to the side and grab a cigarette instead.

“No smoking in this car.” He stops me. “You said you wanted fries. You better eat them.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Fine.” I grab a single one and bite the tiniest bit of it, looking right into his eyes. It makes him snigger.

“You’re such a brat,” he cackles. At the word, a shiver crosses my entire body. I grab another few fries and stuff them into my mouth, not trusting what I’d say next. Why can’t I stop myself from hitting on anyone who shows the slightest interest in me?

“Stoneview,” he repeats. “Why would a rich girl like you come to our shitty community college?”

Laying back on the seat, I take a deep breath through my nose, trying not to choke on the fries. I take my time to swallow. “I’ve been away for a couple of years. Didn’t really know what to do, so I just went to the first college that accepted me.”

He nods but doesn’t ask more about that. “Did you like Stoneview?”

“It’s a horrible town. A place for the rich who constantly get richer. A nest of bitchy girls and spoiled boys who can’t

take no for an answer. But, I had a great family and even greater friends.”

I only realize how true those words are after they pass my lips. I miss my old life. Everything was simple. It used to balance the dark thoughts in my head.

“Stoneview is a myth for us here,” he tells me. “Some guys like to say they’ve seen what’s under your nice uniforms. But the rich girls weren’t exactly my type.”

“Rich girls? Or just girls?” I smile before putting more fries into my mouth.

“Touché,” he chuckles.

“What about you? Are you from here?”

He nods. “My parents both immigrated from Maghreb, but I’m North Shore, born and bred.”

“NSC.” I don’t have to ask him. If he’s Billie’s stepbrother, he has to be the North Shore Crew.

“Yeah,” he huffs. “I’m sure our petty gang shit is not as interesting as the Stoneview gossip, though.”

“Girls at my school used to drool over guys from the North Shore. They loved a bad boy.”

“Did they now?” He bites into his burger again and grabs a napkin when some ketchup drips on his chin.

“Yeah, as long as they didn’t marry them. They loved the thrill. They wouldn’t risk their inheritance though.”

“Of course not,” he nods.

My hand twitches as I try to stop myself from grabbing my pack of cigarettes. He notices, his eyes darting to the pack on the dashboard.

“You’re addicted,” he tells me earnestly. “That’s not very nice.”

I shrug, but he can’t carry on since his phone is cutting us off. “It’s Billie,” he tells me after reading the screen. “Still not feeling like partying?”

I shake my head. “Just drop me anywhere. I can walk to my car.”

“You haven’t finished your fries.”

“All this kindness could be mistaken for flirting, you know?”

His eyes stay on mine, and his lips tip up. “Would that be so bad?”

Outside, the night is calm and cold. In the car, the air is buzzing with excitement and the temperature is rising. His phone rings again, taking us away from our odd moment. My breathing is uneven and I roll down the window, attempting to breathe in some fresh air.

He doesn’t pick up his phone, but he does start the car. “I’ll drop you by your car,” he tells me, his voice a little more serious than it was a second ago. “I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

His words sound like the behavior he has been portraying until now. Sweet, casual, kind. His tone? It makes it seem like something bad will, undeniably, happen to me.

ROSE



Devil Devil – MILCK

Lik and I sit together in our American History class without fault for the following two weeks. We're becoming friends, I guess. His behavior is ambiguous. Flirtatious, yet setting boundaries whenever he can. He reminds me of...me. Except I give myself to people way more easily. Rachel finally replied to me, only to say she couldn't see me this week, but she would try another time. She is planning her engagement party. How fucking wonderful for her.

I can't help but feel Conor must have insisted on having it now that I'm back. Some kind of point he's making as if it changes anything to me.

Looking at my phone, I make sure to reply exactly with what she wants to hear.

Rose: Do you enjoy refusing me, Sunshine? Don't you need someone to make you come?

"That your girl?" Lik whispers next to me.

I put my phone on the table in front of me and glare at him. "Rude," I tell him. "Mind your own business."

My phone vibrates and he looks down, a smile appearing on his beautiful face. "Seems like she does want you to make her come."

I glance down, the message from Rachel leaving nothing to the imagination. And yet, she tells me again that she still can't see me this week.

Jealousy flares up in me, making my blood boil and giving me very clear ideas about how to get rid of Conor.

"Someone's got feelings," he tells me.

"Yeah," I huff. "And they're meant to be reciprocated."

"You kind of left for two years. The girl is allowed to move on."

No, she's not. And he sees my answer in my eyes because he laughs. "Possessive much?"

"It's different, okay?" I explain. "Rachel and I have always been on and off, but we know we always come back to each other. We're special. Once in a lifetime kind of thing. I'm not gonna let her try and move on. She won't be happy with that guy. I just need to show it to her."

"Why, because she forgot how good you make her come?" he mockingly refers to my text.

I smile at him. "Don't sound so jealous. Because if she ever did forget, I'll make her come enough times that she doesn't even remember her boyfriend's name."

"Fiancé, apparently," he says, his eyes darting to my phone to show he'd seen more than my last text in our conversation.

"Don't fucking care," I mumble more to myself. "I was the only person she'd ever slept with before that fucker came into her life. He can't compare."

"Wow, she really did love you."

"Like I said, what we have is special."

"And toxic as fuck," he challenges me. "What's so special about her?"

I pause. No one has asked me that before and yet the answer crosses my lips without a need for thoughts. "She makes me feel like life is worth living."

There's a silence between us, and he nods. "Fair," he finally says. He grabs his phone, indicating the conversation is over and I mull over the words I just said, realizing how true they are.

People around us start getting up, and Lik and I both notice we haven't followed the end of our lesson whatsoever.

"Well done," he says, his voice faking annoyance. "I'm going to fail my pristine college degree because of you."

My chortle is cut short by Mattock calling for me. He's been asking me to stay after every single lesson, and I wouldn't be surprised if he's out of a job very soon. I'm pretty sure student/professor flirting shouldn't be a thing if he wants to keep his job.

"I'll see you later," I tell Lik as he exits.

"Enjoy yourself." He sounds so disgusted by the situation that I can't help but tease him some more.

"Don't be so jealous. You're next in line."

"Tell that to your girlfriend."

Clearly, having heard our conversation, Mattock doesn't waste time as he settles next to me and closes the door to the room.

"So...you're into girls then?"

God, he is so openly hitting on me.

I've been back for two months, and for the second time, I feel that kick of adrenaline. The first one was finding Rachel again. Mainly finding out she's engaged.

It's a strange feeling knowing I won't be having her to myself entirely ever again. Is this how she's always felt with me? Every time I'd escape her to be with someone else?

We can't resist each other, but it's the first time that I know she won't stay for me. No, now she'll always go back to Conor. It's something I've still yet to process. But getting that adrenaline kick again, finding something that doesn't make me feel numb, helps. It helps with feeding the need my body has

to *feel* something. It helps with forgetting that nothing here is the same as when I left.

His expectant look brings me back. Oh yeah, do I only like girls?

“Nope,” I shake my head.

I hate explaining who I sleep with or why. I love sex and anyone who can make me feel good. Women are the most beautiful creatures ever created. Men who know how to use their dicks are a gift from God. Everyone in-between I’m longing to explore.

“Cool.” He shrugs, clearly not caring as long as I could be into his dick. “When do you finish?”

“I don’t know.” I dig my blue gaze so hard into his brown one, I can practically see my reflection. “How quick can you make me?”

He tries to fight off the dirty smile spreading on his lips, to no avail. He runs a hand across his face and behind his neck. “I’d show you now, but I kind of like my job.”

“Then why do you hit on your students?”

“Hard not to when you’re the student. I can’t really remember the last time I saw someone as beautiful as you.”

It’s so strange, the numbness I go through when someone calls me beautiful. I’m so used to it that it doesn’t even raise my heartbeat or, least of all, make me blush.

“I know,” I nod. “Quite a sight.” It makes him chuckle, as if I was pretending to know I’m beautiful.

“Alright, Miss Beautiful, do you want my address, or should I pick you up?”

Fuck, he is such a dick. I like it.

“Not even gonna buy me a drink first?” I mock him. I’m making this way too easy for him.

“You can drink plenty at my house where no one from the faculty can see us.”

That makes me snicker.

“I’ll think about it,” I say before leaving.

My phone rings as I light up a cigarette. I showed up twenty minutes late, and I’ve been waiting for the asshole for ten minutes. I don’t know why I’m still here. It’s not the thrill of fucking someone older; I’ve done that too many times to count. Maybe the teacher thing? I never had sex with a teacher while we were at Stoneview Prep. Is it because I’m still bitter about Rachel? Because I hate when she doesn’t make time for me?

Or maybe it’s just that I’m a sucker for attention. I rarely refuse someone if it’s the first time they’re giving me attention. It’s when they come back that I struggle. I blame it on the parents abandoning me and all that shit. Surely that’s what fucked me up.

Or it could be because that big, tall guy, covered with tattoos, reminds me of someone I wish I had fucked. With his black, styled-back hair and dark eyes, it’s too hard not to think of the guy I’ve spent my life fantasizing about. Sam. So yeah, I’m still waiting for Mr. Replacement. And I’ll let him fuck me how he wants while I imagine it’s my childhood hero. While I close my eyes and see him as the guy I now hate.

On the last ring, I take my phone out of my pocket. My breath steams in the cold night when I pick up.

“Hey, Chris.”

“How is college treating you?”

I can hear some music and chatter behind him. “Don’t call me when you’re at a party,” I huff. “Enjoy yourself, for fuck’s sake.”

“I will. As soon as I hear about my best friend’s freshman experience.”

“Wonderful,” I deadpan.

“Please, don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

“I go to all my classes. Are you happy, *daddy?*”

He hisses with annoyance. *“Don’t call me that.”*

I laugh at his reaction and almost choke on the smoke from my cigarette. “Fuck, sorry. I forgot that makes you hard.”

“Not when it comes from you. Can we go back to your day?” he huffs.

“It’s all going fine,” I reassure him. “So much information even *I* don’t think I’ll be able to remember it all.”

“Wait until next year,” he chuckles. *“What are you doing now?”*

“Waiting for you to hang up so I can go back to reading my book.”

“Funny that. I didn’t know you read your books outside on a busy street now. I can hear you’re outside, Rose.”

I roll my eyes at how observant he is. That’s annoying. “I’m using our call time to buy a pack of cigarettes. Want me to share my location or something? Or should I just implant myself with a tracking device?”

That gets me another huff, and I feel a bit bad. I know he’s just trying to protect me. I just don’t really want to be protected.

“Alright, I get it,” he finally gives up. *“You do whatever you want. Have fun, just...you know the people you meet on the North Shore aren’t exactly the sweetest, so please be careful.”*

“Of course,” I reassure him. “I can handle my own, you know that. Now can you go and enjoy whatever Harvard secret society party you’re meant to be at?”

“It’s just a normal party,” he laughs.

“Or so you say. Love you.”

I hang up before he can reply. I don’t need to hear it back. Plus, I think that’s the asshole’s car approaching me.

Mattock rolls down his window and winks at me. “Sorry, had shit to deal with.”

“Don’t care,” I reply as I open the door and settle beside him.

He smiles at the no-hassle conversation and starts driving. Soon enough, we’re leaving the North Shore through the other side of town.

“Do you not live in NSF?” I ask.

“Nah,” he shakes his head. “I left as soon as I had enough money to.”

“The North Shore Crew must be upset...”

He laughs. “I haven’t worked for them in a very long time. Tattoo removal is too painful, that’s it.”

He puts a hand on my left thigh as he drives, and I lower myself in my seat until it’s close to where I need it. He squeezes and gives me a look before focusing on the road again.

“I thought it’d be more difficult to get you back to my house,” he admits.

“Are you saying I’m easy?” I tease him.

“Just that girls who look like you don’t usually give me the time of day.”

“Do you know many girls who look like me?”

His eyes dart to me as if double-checking how beautiful I am. “No,” he snickers.

“I’m not too worried for you. Your class isn’t eighty percent girls for no reason.”

He hums a vague agreement and I turn to look out of the window. When did we completely leave the city? We’re on a road surrounded by tall trees.

“Dude, where do you live?” I hate not knowing where I’m going. It triggers something deep inside me, and it doesn’t feel good.

“*Dude?*” he laughs. “Is that what you call your professor?”

I ignore his complaints. “You know I would have settled for a car fuck, right? No need to go deep into the woods.”

“That’s where I live,” he shrugs.

“I swear to God, if I don’t see a house appearing soon...” I stop when he takes a right turn onto a dirt road. At the end of it stands a large, luxurious cabin lost in the middle of the woods.

I wasn’t aware my heart had started to dance to the rhythm of fear, but I sense when it starts calming down. Okay...he lives in the woods. Fair enough.

He chuckles as he parks in front of his house. “You should have seen your face.”

I roll my eyes at him but let a smile spread on my lips. Maybe I overreacted. “That was creepy as fuck, and you know it.”

“Alright, maybe I was teasing you a little. You’re cute when you’re scared.”

“I wasn’t scared. It was just a shit joke,” I growl.

“Okay, no more jokes. Not even about how no one can hear you scream out here.”

I punch his shoulder playfully, and it makes him cackle a laugh. His brown eyes dance between mine and he puts a flat hand on my cheek. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he murmurs as the air thickens with sexual tension.

“And I’m a good fuck too,” I tease.

“Only one way to find that out.”

He gets out and opens my door. He holds my hand as he leads me inside his cabin, and I’m practically laughing at myself.

Really, Rose? Following a stranger into a lost cabin in the woods for a bit of attention? Just because he looks like Sam? You have fallen very low, girl.

The interior is made of wood and stones. Faux-fur rugs and comfortable furniture accompany the rustic feeling. There's a fire burning in the stone fireplace, and some antiques are settled on a shelf on top of it. The lighting is dimmed, and we settle on a cozy sofa covered with soft, plaid throws. Instead of facing a TV or other furniture, the sofa faces a floor-to-ceiling window that leads to a porch with an amazing view of a lake and the rest of the forest.

“Wait, is that Stoneview Lake?” I ask. It's hard to see in the dark of the night.

He seems to hesitate for a moment before he nods. “Yeah, that's it.”

I get up from the sofa and walk to the tall window. With the low light inside, I can faintly see the lake and, far away, is the other shore, aka Stoneview. I can see the glints from the lights inside what I know are luxurious lake houses.

I feel him before I see his reflection in the window. He grabs my hips and pulls me into him. My back crashes against his chest and his lips fall to my neck. He's so imposing, so big and strong. If I close my eyes, I can truly imagine it's Sam. And if I focus, he kind of smells like him. A top note of grapefruit mixed with the base notes of patchouli and cedar. A strong cologne Sam uses to hide the scent of cigarettes. His tongue traces from the base of my neck to my ear, and I sigh as I roll my head to the side to give him more access. His hand slides under my top and reaches my uncovered nipples. I rarely wear bras. Considering the size of my boobs, it's not exactly necessary.

“Not even gonna offer me a drink?” I joke. He suddenly seems in a rush.

His other hand unbuttons my slacks and slips under my thong. He presses a finger against my entrance, and I shudder.

“Why? You seem all ready to proceed. Such a wet girl.” He's wrong, I'm really not that wet, and the fact that he thinks I am portrays a lack of experience. Or simply a very macho selfism.

His finger slides inside, not easily.

“So tight,” he hisses.

I wince slightly and grab his wrist. “Slow down...” Maybe I went into this a little too quickly. It was easier to have reckless sex before escaping the Volkovs. A lot of drugs and alcohol would always relax me. Since I left their compound, I’m all clean, and my thoughts get a little too loud.

He presses harder against my back and pushes me into the window. Fuck, why is he in such a rush suddenly?

“Relax,” he tells me, his breath against my ear.

Is that how Sam would fuck me? Yeah, I think so. He would push me against the window harshly, put a hand around my throat, and order me to relax. The only taste I ever got of Sam was the day I got taken. Before they found me, I was with him. He kissed me for the first time in my life, and the world disappeared for a minute. It was everything I thought it would be and more. All I’ve been left with is imagining what would have happened if he hadn’t been such a coward.

I hate him. Fuck, I hate him so much for leaving me that day. For pushing me away, for rejecting me. For choosing someone else over me when all I had ever wanted from him was to choose *me*.

He abandoned me, like everyone always does. And now I’m left with a hatred pulsing in me like a dull ache. Always there at the back of my mind. An old injury you never forget. That is really all I have left. That, and imagining other men to be him.

But sometimes, even that doesn’t work.

“Wait,” I rasp when he tries to insert another finger way too early. I’m not fucking ready, so I try to stall him a little. “You didn’t even tell me your name. What is it? I only know your last name.”

“Why does it matter? He isn’t me.”

That voice... I recognize it all too well. The British accent, the undertone of American that, desperately, tries to sneak

behind his tongue. Confusion and surprise make me freeze.
Why is Sam here?

ROSE



Blood on Your Hands – Veda, Adam Arcadia

Mattock and I both jump out of our current position. We flip around, and I fumble with my zipper for a few seconds before looking up.

My heart doesn't skip a beat, but it does skip about twelve.

My head is spinning from seeing him after so long, and I put a hand on the window next to me. Okay, I can work this one out. I can. I just need to think. I met a guy who clearly used to be in a gang. He brought me to a lost cabin; Sam was waiting here for us.

“Aw,” I drawl, pretending I'm not entirely overthrown by the situation. “A little set-up just for me? Sam, you shouldn't have. I'm honored.”

Mattock's demeanor has changed completely. A second ago, he was all over me, and now he's taken so many steps back that one would wonder if we ever met before. I roll my eyes at how scared he is of Sam. Everyone is afraid of Sam, and it annoys me. Mattock had his finger deep inside my pussy a second ago, now is not the time to pretend he didn't do anything wrong.

“What can I say,” Sam bites back. “It's so easy to set you up. All I had to do was use someone who looks like me. I sprayed him with my cologne. Did you like that little touch?”

The fucking bastard. I pretend he didn't wholly fool me and go to grab the jacket I left on the sofa.

“You found out I have a type. Nice one,” I say casually as I shrug on my leather jacket.

I have to leave. I know how dangerous it is to stay within close proximity of Sam. My brain only functions for so long. After that, it melts and turns me into an idiot who can't figure out what's good for herself. I'm dying to know why he wanted to see me, but I despise him too much to give him the satisfaction of knowing.

But obviously, when someone goes through the trouble of setting you up, they're not about to let you leave so easily. It was worth a try.

Sam grabs my arm tightly when I walk past him. “You can leave us now, Mattock.”

The professor is about to say something, but I cut him off. “He's hot, isn't he?” I say to Sam, knowing it's going to rile him up. “Is that the boyfriend you so cowardly abandoned me for?”

A hatred for Mattock starts to warm up my chest. I don't think it's him, but I still want confirmation.

My words earn me zero reaction from Sam, but when Mattock tries to talk again—I assume to reveal that I've got a gun tucked at the back of my pants—Sam is annoyed enough not to let him speak.

“Leave,” he orders before Mattock can say anything.

I give Mattock a sickly-sweet smile as he leaves.

Fucker.

“Alright.” I violently shrug my arm out of Sam's hold. “Make it quick. Your face makes me sick.”

He scoffs a sarcastic laugh that makes me uneasy, and I take another step away from him. I have a bad feeling and I can't shake it off. I hate Sam for multiple very valid reasons. But I know he hates me back, and I don't think him having bothered to set this all up means anything good.

“Why make it quick when I know this is about to hurt?” He indicates to an armchair by the fireplace. “Please, do take a

seat.”

“You’ve got one minute. You don’t deserve another second of my time.” I try to keep as calm as possible.

There’s no point playing a game of who will snap first with Sam. He has control, and I don’t. Simple as that. I’m a person who fucks everything up when she’s angry, and he’s a skilled killer. His greatest weapon? Silence.

“What’s wrong? In a rush to go back to your owner?”

“Shut up,” I growl. I can’t believe he’s already getting to me.

He lets a smile slowly spread on his lips, knowing he said the exact thing that would rile me up.

“Sit.” His order is so simple, yet I just can’t get myself to listen to him. Not even if it meant this conversation would go down peacefully.

I don’t want peace with Sam. I want a motherfucking war that will destroy him completely.

He doesn’t even give me time to say no. His hand shoots for my neck and his strong fingers grab the entirety of it without a struggle. He squeezes hard enough that my knees buckle slightly. I put both hands on his forearm to catch myself, and when I find a little more balance, I try to kick him in the balls. He manages to avoid the hit without breaking a sweat and tightens his grip. It makes me cough instantly and I feel my blood attempting to rush to my head.

“Sam,” I try to say, but it only forces another cough out of me. This isn’t how I ever imagined him choking me.

I used to fantasize about it when I saw the state of men leaving him the morning after a fuck. They’d have dotted bruises on their neck and bite marks on their collarbone. This isn’t it. This is him trying to fucking end me.

“Don’t tell me a smart girl like you didn’t think I’d show up the second you reappeared?” He smiles.

His thumb brushes my frantic pulse beating out of my neck, and his grin widens. “My, my, am I still affecting you

that much? Is it the fear? Or are you still in love with me?"

My jaw locks, teeth grinding. If he doesn't let go, I'm going to die...and that's what gives me control over this situation. Sam wants the same thing everyone does, and he thinks I can give it to him.

"Here's what's going to happen. You're going to sit down and you're going to listen. I know how hard that is for you, but surely you can try for me."

My vision becomes blurry, but I don't fight him anymore.

He bends down and hisses his next words in my ear. "If you want to fucking breathe again, you better nod your agreement."

I don't, and I know what he's thinking. I can read it in his eyes like a magnifying glass pointed at an open book. *'The bitch is so stubborn she would rather die here and now than listen to me.'*

My eyelids grow heavy, and my chest stops heaving as I start passing out.

"*Fuck,*" he snaps as he lets go and takes a step back.

My legs fail me, and I fall to the floor, heaving. I press both palms on the fluffy rug and grab strands of it to ground me.

God, I was stupid not to see this was his place. The furniture, the coziness, it screams Sam. He loves his comfort. He loves being isolated. He's like an old man who's had enough of the world and all the people in it. That's what happens when all you see is the sick side of society. He used to live in a penthouse in Silver Falls. I guess he's killed enough people to afford a beautiful cabin in the woods now.

When I can finally look up without seeing white dots, I offer him my smuggest smile. He's watching me with all the disgust he can muster. He knows he fucked up.

"Uh oh, look at that. I didn't nod and I'm still breathing." My mocking voice turns darkly serious as I stand back up.

“Never make threats you can’t follow through with. I think you’re the one who taught me that.”

I massage my sore neck as he combs back his already gelled hair. “I know what you want, Sam.” Expecting his silence. I keep going. “Why are you looking for them?” I ask. “Except for the obvious jealousy emanating from you right now.”

He chuckles as he shakes his head. Usually, Sam never talks. It’s his coping mechanism from the traumatizing things he’s seen in his life. His dad used to work for Mateo Bianco, my ex-guardian and head of one of the most powerful Cosa Nostra families. Sam’s dad was *fucked. Up*. He was the deadliest enforcer who ever walked this planet. He’s gone now. Mateo had him killed when we were younger. Still, Sam has seen shit that has always kept him silent.

But with me? He used to talk. We used to laugh and share secrets and gossip. We used to chill and pretend life wasn’t a big fuckery. He is not the kind to spit poison.

So seeing him doing that to me right now? That hurts more than his hand around my neck. I shouldn’t care because I hate him. So, I’ll keep pretending I don’t care.

Sam ignores the mockery I made out of him and crosses his arms. “Tell me where to find the Volkov brothers, Rose.”

“Since when do you put yourself in the category of people who can tell me what to do?” I seethe. The list is short, and he was never on it, or maybe that’s what I’ve made myself believe in the last two years.

“You’re not going to like what happens next.”

It’s a threat, but it almost sounds like a warning that he doesn’t want to hurt me. And that’s like the old Sam. The one from before the Volkovs took me.

That’s when it hits me. Sam doesn’t want to find the Volkov brothers to hurt *me*. He wants to find them for himself.

“You’ve got a contract on them,” I huff the truth. “Who wants them dead? How much are they paying you?”

“I’m not sharing any details with you. And I know what you’re thinking. I hate you. So don’t get any ideas.”

Hating someone you once loved is complicated. You can read each other too easily.

“Details,” I snort. “You think you’re the only person who’s been hired to kill the Volkov brothers? Don’t be so naïve. Why do you think they’re so good at hiding?”

The Wolves are masters at hiding. The Volkov family has enough enemies that they rarely venture outside of their compound. The last time Vladimir Volkov left the comfort of his home, I killed him. It wasn’t planned, but I still managed to murder the head of their family to protect mine. It got me in a lot more trouble than I had bargained for.

“Rose—”

“I don’t know where they are,” I cut him off. I can see it pisses him off. Sam doesn’t talk often, but when he does, people tend to listen to him. “I haven’t been out of their kingdom since I was forced into it.”

“Then you’re going to find them for me,” he tells me simply. His British consonants clip like a hit to the face. His behavior goes back to a confidence that makes me feel uneasy. He’s got something up his sleeve, I’m just not sure what. “You’re going to do many things for me, actually.”

I scoff, barely able to believe the nerve he’s got. When did he start growing a pair of balls around me? Lovesick puppy, that’s what he used to be. Now he’s just a piece of shit who betrayed me.

“Watch my lips, Sam. In case you haven’t noticed, I would rather die than do anything for you. I would rather *die* than let you take any control over my life.”

My words were supposed to hit him hard, especially because of their truth. Instead, he smiles at me.

“Good thing your life isn’t worth shit, then. Isn’t it?”

He turns toward the stairs and shouts to someone upstairs, “Come down!”

But I hear more than one set of footsteps coming down the stairs. It's one set and another struggling one. It's muffled squeals and insults. And even if I can't see the person yet, I recognize the restricted voice. I feel the presence in my bones.

“Maybe her life is worth a little more to you?”

My blood freezes when I recognize the man who walks into the room. His dark skin, curly brown hair, and chocolate eyes. His North African features, with long lashes and a glow that I know makes most girls fall at his feet.

Lik.

ROSE



Head Like A Hole – Sam Tinnesz

“You fucking–”

Sam cuts off my rage straight away. “Let’s skip the part where you tell me how much of a bastard I am.”

“Are you out of your damn mind? Let her fucking go!” My voice breaks as it goes higher than it should. It makes my order sound too weak.

“You know Lik, right?”

Flashes that make everything so clear come before me. The questions Lik asked about me, the interest out of nowhere. He didn’t get anything he could use against me. Not until today, when I told him about Rachel.

Then Sam used Mattock.

They played me like a fucking rookie, and I fell right into it. Sam is taking this to another level and I’m not about to let him.

But then I look at Rachel. Her wrists are bound behind her back, and they’ve gagged her with a cloth that’s digging far into her mouth and pulling her lips back, leaving her with a mouth half open.

I watch helplessly as Sam snatches her from Lik. The movement is violent to scare me, but the way he looks at him...it’s *him*.

The dick who stole Sam from me. His fucking boyfriend. The man he supposedly fell in love with. Hard enough to push me away. No one had ever put themselves between us before.

Sam and I might have never been together, and back then, we might have never kissed or expressed our attraction with words, but we knew. We knew we were in love with each other, and we knew no one could take that away from us. Even my love for Rachel never separated us. Then he found *Lik*. It seems two years later, they're still together.

My blood boils with an anger I can't control. Not only did Lik use me...not only is Sam taunting me with the man who became what I never could, but now they are threatening me with hurting the woman I love?

I'm glad I didn't pull my gun out before. This is the perfect time.

As soon as Rachel is out of Lik's hold and into Sam's, I pull out my weapon and aim it directly at the oh-so-special love of his life.

"So, *you're* the boyfriend," I snarl. Lik smiles as he puts his hands up slowly. As soon as they're up, I can see the dagger tattooed on his underarm. It goes from his wrist to his elbow. I don't miss the letters on the handle: NSC. At least he didn't lie about that.

My shock slowed me down. I didn't expect Sam to pull out a knife that quickly. He's holding it to Rachel's throat before I can do anything, and a chill runs down my spine. My eyes are on them only for a split second.

"Let her go," I growl at him, going back to looking at my target. I'm not very close to them, the sofa separates me from the three, but it's a perfect distance for a great shot.

"Didn't exactly plan on her having a gun," Lik says softly. His voice is like honey. It slowly slithers to you and, had it not been such a fucked-up situation, it would have calmed me down straight away. "I always find girls holding guns super cute. Careful not to hurt yourself, princess."

It takes a lot for me to ignore the princess comment. It's the nickname I hate the most in the world, and it makes me wonder if Sam told him to use it to disarm me. I turn it to my advantage. I like men underestimating me. Sam should have warned him that I'm lethal, especially with a gun between my hands, but this will play to my advantage.

"I just escaped the Wolves. Walking around without a gun would make me downright stupid." I narrow my eyes at him, analyzing how quickly I can put a bullet between his eyes.

"Playing a game with me makes you downright stupid," Sam jumps in, undoing my focus. "Put the gun away."

"You know I plan on killing you at some point, Sam. You did betray me after all. I guess I can kill Lik first."

Rachel squeals something behind her gag, but I can't look at her. If I see her state of distress, I'll lose focus. If I lose focus, I could lose her. That's not a fucking option.

"Don't underestimate how much I hate you, Rose." I sense Sam readjusting himself and it makes Rachel groan in pain. "She'll hurt. You won't have time to shoot, she'll already be dead."

My heartbeat doubles. I can't fucking breathe. That's okay, I don't need to breathe to shoot. In fact, I can feel the usual sweat coating my back. That's my focus coming back. I caress the trigger to prompt my muscle memory—one hand under the gun, one tight around the handle.

"You're forgetting how good I am with a gun, Sam," I jeer.

"And you're forgetting I kill people for a living." His voice is hard this time, and when I hear Rachel's pained whimper calling my name, I can't stop my body from turning to them slightly.

Her hair is completely disheveled, and she's got a red scratch on her face. Her eyes are the worst. They're wide and darting all around the room in fear.

So. Much. Fear.

She finally settles her gaze on me just before her eyes squeeze shut from the pain. Sam has pushed the blade of his knife slightly into her neck and I can see drops of blood starting to roll down.

“You’re such a fucker...” My voice is weakening as Rachel trembles under his knife.

I look at Lik again, he hasn’t moved. My gun is still pointed at him, but he could have moved while I was looking away. He could have attacked me. He didn’t, and from the look on his face I understand it’s because he knows they already got me.

No, no, no. There must be a way. I am not folding to Samuel fucking Thomas. Not to the guy who pretended to protect me my whole life just to let me down when I needed him the most. Not to the guy I swore I would never let into my life again.

Lik chuckles, and it brings focus to my eyes again. He puts his hand into the red slacks he’s wearing, relaxed. “Put the gun down, princess. It’s over.”

I shake my head, even though my throat is tightening from the fear. I hate that word. Fuck, I really hate that nickname.

“You have two choices,” Sam explains slowly. Rachel winces when he moves the blade slightly. She is so tight against his body, they’re practically one. “Put the gun down and surrender. Or you can *try* to shoot Lik and watch the girl you love bleed out at your feet.”

The image sends a shudder through my body. I feel fucking sick. My jaw is locked so tightly that my face muscles hurt. My thoughts are tangled, and my coping mechanism kicks in.

Burj Khalifa, Shanghai Tower, KXJB-TV Tower...

“Now is not the time to lose yourself in your fucking lists,” Sam seethes. “This is my last warning, Rose. *Fold.*”

“Remember,” Lik taunts me. “She’s the reason you think life is worth living.” He throws the words I trusted him with right back in my face. Not only making sure I know he fooled me, but also that I’m fucking stuck. Cornered. My back against the wall and left with no choice.

Another whimper escapes Rachel’s throat, and my arm falls by my side without asking for my permission.

“Drop it.”

The safety clicks back on and the gun drops from my hand. I refuse to admit it is me who lets it go.

“Slide it to Lik.”

I can’t pretend it’s not me that pushes the gun with my foot and slides it to the side of the sofa where Lik is. It’s not the defeat that hurts the most, it’s the sigh of relief that escapes Rachel. As if, until now, she wasn’t sure I was going to choose her over my pride.

“See? Not so hard to follow orders, is it?”

“Let her go,” I growl. I can feel my hands tightening into fists. My body is so tense I’m going to have muscle pain tomorrow.

Lik grabs the gun and Sam lets go of Rachel, only for his boyfriend to grab her arm and aim my weapon at her.

“I did what you wanted. Let her fucking go, Sam,” I rage.

His laugh sends acid up my throat. “Don’t be naïve, we’re only getting started.” He slowly rounds the sofa and approaches me until he’s towering right over me.

He grabs the waistband of my pants with a mighty hand and pulls me toward him aggressively. I have to put two hands on his chest to avoid crashing into him completely.

Goosebumps rise all over my skin. I can’t be this close to him.

His scent invades me, his warmth burning through my clothes.

He runs his hand all around my waist, making sure I don't have another gun hidden there.

“Do you have any idea how much I hate you?” he rasps. A hint of humanity crosses his black eyes, disappearing just as fast as it came.

Six months ago, Sam almost died because of me. It was my fault. I made that decision for a reason. I just never thought I'd have to put up with the consequences. Now, there's a rage in his eyes. A thirsty vengeance he's dying to quench.

My throat is dry when I answer him. “I can only imagine it's almost as much as I hate you.” My entire body is trembling with an anger that has no outlet.

I observe his tall, large frame. He's wearing his usual black tee and black jeans. His tattoos are peeking anywhere they can. He's covered in them. They creep up from under his shirt on his arms, hands, and fingers. His neck is covered and so are the sides of his head. The tattoos are visible through the short, shaven hair. He looks exactly like he did the day I got taken.

His whole life, he's had the same style, the same haircut with his short sides and slicked-back, longer hair at the top. It's black, like mine. It's the only thing we have in common. His eyes are black holes, while mine are a dark ocean. His skin is pale in contrast to my golden one. His thick muscles could break my skinny frame so effortlessly.

His fingers splay between my shoulders while his other hand runs between my breasts. Couldn't hide anything there even if I tried. His face twitches when he realizes I'm not wearing a bra.

It's only when he's done that it clicks: I didn't even try to stop him.

He pushes me away and my hands go back into fists. As soon as I'm out of his orbit, Rachel reappears in my line of vision.

My nails are leaving crescents on my palms and I've got a headache building at the back of my eyes. For the first time in my life, I tell myself that I prefer Sam when he is silent. When

he keeps his dark thoughts to himself. I never heard those kinds of words from him. I always heard them out of Mateo, out of my older brother. But not Sam, never Sam.

He was my savior, my one and only growing up. When the darkness grew too thick, when the pain was too much, he was always there. Holding my hand, making me laugh, promising it would be okay. And now here he is, ordering me around and blackmailing me like all the monsters around me used to.

“Where are the Volkovs?” he asks like I haven’t already told him I didn’t know.

“I have no idea,” I grit. “Sam, let her go,” I try to reason with him.

I can’t fucking focus when there’s a gun to her head. When that idiot could shoot her by accident. What would I become then? My life would mean nothing without Rachel in it. I’m fucking willing to be her dirty secret while she marries someone else. Nothing can come between this woman and me.

I shake my head, trying not to spiral down the worst-case scenario. “Let her go, and we can talk. I’ll tell you everything I know, but it doesn’t include where they hide because that I *don’t* know.”

I’m hoping he can see honesty in my eyes. I try as hard as I can to keep my gaze on the black marbles staring at me, but I just can’t help getting lost in Rachel’s baby blue eyes. They’re so pure, so undeserving of the evil surrounding her right now.

“At least put the fucking gun down.” I hate myself right now. I hate the sound of my voice. I hate the weakness emanating from my body.

He takes another step toward me, and I have to dig more strength from Rachel’s eyes to stay still. For the first time in my life, I see what everyone else sees in Sam.

He is *terrifying*.

“You don’t know where they are?” He fakes a pout. “Well, you and I are going to have a lot of fun looking for them then, aren’t we?” He smiles like he’s thinking of all the things he’ll do to them when he finds them. “This is a huge contract. I’ll

kill them for the money. Then I'll kill you, just because I hate you."

I wish I were the kind of person who can bend to one's will. I wish I could take threats seriously and know what's best for me. It would have kept me out of much trouble in my life. I would probably be dumb and happy.

But I can't.

No, when someone tries to take control, my brain refuses to accept it. My body rebels, my nerves set on fire, and I just want to *fight*.

I take a step toward him, too, challenging him when I know it's the most stupid thing I've ever done. We're so close I can feel his warmth against my cold skin. I used to love that about him just like I love it about Rachel. They're so warm.

His cologne of grapefruit, patchouli, and cedar invades my nostrils and I curse myself for enjoying it so much. The hint of cigarettes behind it makes me want to give into my own addiction to nicotine. Worse, deep down, it makes me want to give into my addiction to Sam.

"Tell me," I fume. "Why would I help you with anything if I know you'll just end up killing me when you're done with me?"

He shakes his head like a parent disappointed with their brainless progenitor. "You just don't know when to give up, do you? That was always your problem, you just don't process danger. You don't get when you've lost. Your pride will be the end of you one day. Today, it might just be the end of Rachel."

At those words, he turns around, grabs Rachel by the hair, and brings her to the floor. She screams in pain when her chin hits the wooden floor. She's face down, her head turned toward me, tears prickling at her eyes.

"Stop!" I shout at him. This time it's an order without fear. I am raging so deeply it shakes my bones.

I go to stop him, to fight my battle in this violent war he's starting between us, but he's already got the gun from Lik. He points it at her from his standing position.

“Get on your knees,” he orders me.

His body is facing mine, his arm elongating toward Rachel and his eyes on me. I don't move. I simply can't. He shakes his head again.

And without looking at her, he shoots.

ROSE



Houdin – Layto

The scream that tears from my lungs resonates throughout the house. My eyes dart from Sam to his boyfriend. Refusing to look at the woman I love. A smile pulls at Lik's lips, and I follow his gaze to the floor.

Rachel is crying, trembling so hard that her shoes are tapping against the floor. But she's untouched. The bullet is lodged in the wood right next to her head. Splinters are covering her short, bleached hair—a sandalwood color mixing with the white instead of the blood that could have covered it.

My heart can't calm down, my brain thinking a million thoughts simultaneously.

“Stop. Sam, stop this.” I put my shaking hands in front of me, palms toward him in an appeasing gesture. “I know you're angry. I know you're mad at me and hate me for what happened, but this has nothing to do with her. Stop...” It only takes one look at Rachel's shaking form on the floor to say the word I hate the most in the entire dictionary. “Please, *please*, let her go.”

Defeat tastes bitter on my tongue. That's what he wanted, wasn't it? Me to plead for his mercy.

“Get. On. Your. Knees.” is his only response.

My legs are shaking, but I follow the command.

“Hands behind your head.”

I comply, my gaze on Rachel as I do so. How could I let it get this bad? My precious Sunshine is trapped in a world I have been trying to escape for as long as I can remember.

He walks toward me and puts the gun under my chin before forcing me to tilt my head up.

“Stop looking at her. Look at me. You look at me for orders. You look at me for your next move, for your next thought. You don’t take your next breath until I allow it.”

“Sam,” my voice trembles. “Don’t do this to me.”

That makes him chuckle. “Remember when *I* said those words? The *exact* same ones. What did you say then?”

Memories of that day six months ago flood my brain. A dam breaking and forcing colors, sounds, and horrible words into my consciousness. I shake my head.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. That’s what’s so magical about you. You remember *everything*.”

“I...”

“What did you say, Rose?” he grits. My own gun goes from under my chin to my forehead.

I shake my head, ashamed of myself, of the words I said. I hated him, I still do, and I had my reasons, but I should not have left him to die as I did. Not if these were the consequences.

“*Your life doesn’t matter to me anymore,*” he repeats the exact words I spat at him then. With the same coldness as well. “That’s what you said.”

My eyes squeeze shut and open again. I catch Rachel’s disappointment, and it breaks me.

“They changed location after I found you. Where did they take you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did they take you, Rose,” he insists, pushing the gun against my forehead and making me rear back.

“I don’t know! I was fucking drugged and unconscious when we moved.” My jaw tightens. “I don’t know,” I repeat in a lower voice.

“Contact them, then. And ask them.”

“I don’t know how to contact them,” I rasp. So many ‘I don’t know’s’. So many times forcing me to admit I was just a pawn. I can’t lift my eyes to him anymore. If I watch the look of victory on his face, I might try to fight him again. “I don’t know anything.”

Why do I feel so ashamed of it?

It’s a good thing. I force the words into my thoughts.

“Don’t worry,” he finally nods. “I’ve got my own leads. I did find them once, after all, when I was looking for you. I can do it again.” His British accent cuts through me like a knife.

I shake my head in defeat. My arms are hurting from keeping my hands behind my head. I feel like a criminal caught robbing a bank. I feel stupid and conquered. Although what tastes the worst is that I would have never imagined the person to make me feel this way would be Samuel Thomas.

“Friday. Lik will pick you up after his classes. You two will go to the Vue Club to get some info for me. Dress the part.”

His arm falls by his side and my eyebrows raise in surprise. That’s it? That’s all he wants from me? Fine. I can go to that fucking club. He won’t find anything there anyway.

He takes his attention away from me, grabs his knife again, and squats by Rachel’s side.

“Sam,” I panic. I don’t move, too afraid he’ll do something irreparable if I do.

All he does is cut the rope holding Rachel’s wrists together.

“Get out,” he orders both of us.

I practically jump on her as I help her undo the gag around her head. I grab her by the waist, helping her up, and hold her

close to me.

She's crying so hard I can't make out her words, only desperate sobs are making it past her lips. I still discern the desperate four letters she weeps on repeat. It's the name of a flower, though she's making it sound like a poisonous plant. It's a name that was always meant to sound magical from her lips. Something that should be murmured and moaned from a beautiful girl like her. Never spoken with that kind of despair.

"It's okay, baby. I got you," I whisper, trying to use the last of my strength to keep the both of us afloat.

"Mattock will drive you home."

It's all I need to leave the house. I'm walking toward the door, holding Rachel tightly against my heart and attempting to soothe her when he calls me again.

"Rose." His voice is so cold that I stop dead in my tracks. "Don't even think of going to Jake. I have a long list of people I can kill to keep you in line."

I leave a beat before I walk again, but I don't reply.

SAM



War – Sum 41

I need a PI. Call a detective, call the fucking FBI because I have no idea where the calm and patience I'm typically known for have disappeared. Silent me retired the second Rose refused to listen to me. I knew she wouldn't, and I still lost it.

My eyes are glued to the door as she closes it behind her. The last thing I see is a wave of long, black hair. My hand itches to wrap it around my fist and bring her back here, kicking and screaming. Not because she so stubbornly stood up to me tonight. I expected nothing less from her. Rose was forced to obey against her will too many times in her life. If she can fight, she will with everything she has. And I know she's not done fighting.

No, it wasn't because she fought me that I want to drag her back and torture her for hours on end. And it wasn't because she threatened to kill my boyfriend.

It was for what I saw in her eyes when she looked at Rachel. That look. When authors and poets need inspiration for it, when painters look for the color of it, when sculptors put a shape to it...they must look at what I saw in Rose's eyes tonight.

Love.

She's captivated by her, adores her with every single cell that makes her who she is. So much so that I could feel it

vibrate in my own body. It took every ounce of control I could grab to shoot *next* to Rachel's head and not right at the back of her neck.

I need Rose to find the Volkov brothers, and I need Rachel alive to control Rose. They should both be dead—one for never loving me like she should have, the other for receiving that love I deserved.

“That went pretty much according to plan.” Lik's relaxed voice cuts through my thoughts and I turn to him. I adore his voice. It's as good as warm whiskey on a cold night; it's as sweet as honey and makes me want to lick him all over.

His eyes are narrowed on the bullet lodged into the hardwood floor. “Except that, maybe.”

“I told you she'd have a gun,” I reply calmly.

“Never said you'd be the one firing it,” he mumbles.

He rubs a hand against his chest and crinkles his nose. If I wasn't still fuming from the ocean-eyed, cursed siren that just left my house, I would find it soothing enough to forget about all this. How can a man so temperamental be so cute?

“So, she doesn't like being told what to do,” he nods. “I see it now. You did try to warn me. And you said she was good with a gun, but she didn't shoot me.”

He walks to me as soon as I sit on the sofa. I put the safety in place on Rose's gun, but I can't get myself to put it away. It's warm, and I want to keep imagining it's because of how tight she was holding it.

Lik stands between my legs. He grabs the gun and puts it on the table before running his fingers through my hair, messing up my gelled-back style.

“She's beautiful,” he admits. “You didn't mention that.”

Lik has been pretending to be friends with Rose for two weeks, and it's the first time he mentions it. He's been taking his task seriously. To find something we could use against her. I always knew about Rachel, I just never realized how deep it was. Not until he texted me about it today. I didn't waste a

second. I found where she lived and got her as soon as she crossed her front door.

My boyfriend is right. Rose is beautiful, and I didn't mention it to him.

She is as beautiful as a sunset. You see it every day, you know it's coming, and you can expect it all you want, yet it still touches your heart. It forces you to appreciate its beauty. It surprises you differently every time. It brings emotions out of you, but you're not even sure why.

Some people spend their lives photographing the sunset every evening, observing how the minor differences and shifts affect everything around it. The colors, the shadows, the light in your eyes blinding you just enough to forget about yourself but not enough to push you away. The sort of light you want to look at until you're burning up. Some people are so passionate about the sunset, they chase it all their lives just to come back empty-handed. You can't catch it; for you can't capture such beauty.

And the thing with the sunset? It affects every single soul on this planet—even my boyfriend, who has never touched a woman in his life.

"I should have known," he carries on. Not much can stop Lik when he starts unweaving his thoughts. He's a chatterbox. Someone has to make conversation in our relationship.

Hands still in my hair, he brings my face to his warm chest and keeps playing with the strands while he talks above me. "I should have known because her twin is the most beautiful man I've ever seen."

It makes me growl against his chest, but I still don't say anything. Jake White is identical to Rose, only the male version. Lik has met him before, though he'd never met Rose. I know he's always found him attractive, and he would have chosen him over me any day of the week, if only Jake were gay.

"You know her well, Sam. There are many things you can use against her. I can already see that she hates being in a

weak position. She clearly doesn't like being saved; we can use that to our advantage because she won't go to anyone for help. This is your revenge, and you deserve it."

He got that one right. If there's one thing Rose hates, it's being saved. She resents being seen as a victim, as someone needing help from a kind soul. She doesn't beg; she doesn't fold. She would rather die out of stubbornness than call for help. One day, it'll be her demise, brought in by yours truly.

She didn't let me help her when I found her. Six months later, I still can't sleep at night wondering about the lies Viktor Volkov must have told her to keep her. The head of the Volkov family is smart, cunning. The worst is...she listened. She almost had me killed, and for that, I want to kill her. If I didn't need her to find the brothers, I would have her warm, barely beating heart in the palm of my hand. I would watch it desperately try to take its last beat, and laugh in her face that she should have loved me. That she should have chosen me and not them.

Lik is talking above me, and I can hear his heartbeat accelerating as he gets worked up for me. I can feel his soft hands running up and down my neck, messing up my hair. My big arms are curled around his smaller frame. He's not skinny in the slightest, but he looks small next to me. He talks, and he talks, but my thoughts drift to something else.

Rose didn't have an ounce of emotion in her voice when she understood I had a contract on the Volkov brothers. I didn't try to keep it a secret, because the bloody genius would have figured it out one way or another. She can't be just a pretty face. No, she also has to have a brain that works in the most complicated way I've ever seen.

She wasn't affected by the fact that I've been hired to kill them. I never knew her relationship with Aleksei.

But I know she chose Viktor over me.

And I want to know why she was hiding her emotions. Is she mad? Is she afraid for Viktor? Of him? Does she want to protect him? Or does she want to get her revenge on the man

who held her hostage for almost two years? Who fucking knows how it works in that head of hers.

“Sam...Sam!”

I realize Lik has been trying to get me out of my thoughts, but I’m not sure for how long. I look up to him and his hands slide out of my hair, I can feel strands tickling my ears and I know he’s made a mess, as usual.

“You’ve gone silent again,” he sighs.

Lik grew up with one brother before their dad passed away, and they are both completely crazy. There is never a second of silence at their house, especially since their mom remarried and they now have two stepsisters. They’re loud, happy, and a little deranged, making them a great family.

I grew up with a murderer for a dad who worked for a dangerous man. Silence has always been my biggest ally, my support, my comfort. In doubt, always stay silent.

And doubt is clouding my mind right now. Confusion, anger, longing for a simpler life. It’s all there, keeping me quiet until it all subsides.

“That floor cost you a fortune,” he says, and I understand he’s repeating his trail of thoughts. “I can’t believe you ruined it because of the princess.”

“Stop calling her that,” I say as I get up. I walk to the fireplace and grab my pack of cigarettes resting on the shelf above it. “She hates it.”

“I know.”

We both pause. Me mid-pulling a cigarette out of the pack, him on his way to me. He raises an eyebrow and shows me his dimple with half a smile. I run my knuckles along my jaw as we both process what we said.

How does he know?

Why do I care that she hates it?

“Why do you care?” he asks.

“How do you know?” I deflect.

“Billie told me. They happen to not be besties, so she wasn’t the happiest to hear that she’s back and going to Silver Falls Community College.”

Billie is his stepsister. Her dad married Lik’s mom. Her dad is also the head of their gang, the North Shore Crew.

I nod, appreciating his honesty.

“Your turn, my sweet honey pie,” he smiles. He knows I hate pet names, and he takes pleasure in finding the most ridiculous ones.

“I don’t care. I just don’t want her angry.”

“I’m sorry,” he chuckles. “If we don’t want her angry, what was all that for? She seemed pretty pissed to me.” He points behind him with his thumb as if they were still there.

“*That* was me trying to get under her skin. We don’t want her angry, because angry Rose gets out of control. We want control, and for that, we want her *weak*, not angry.”

“Looks like you’ve got your master plan all figured out, baby.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Just don’t let the princess get under *your* skin. Because every time I look at that bullet on our beautiful floor, I—”

“Malik.” My voice grows darker, and the use of his full name makes him stop talking right away. I put my pack of cigarettes back down, take one step toward him and watch him gulp. “I said stop calling her that.” He nods and takes a step back. “What’s wrong?” My menacing smile makes him twist his hands together and drop his gaze. “Someone’s gone awfully *silent*.”

He looks up and back down right away. I walk to him slowly. There’s no need to rush when I know I already got him right where I want him. I put a hand on his cheek, the tip of my fingers skimming his ear and my thumb on his lips. I run it across the top, then the bottom, and watch him shudder.

“Why do I need to tell you not to use that nickname *twice*?” I pull his bottom lip down with my thumb. “What happens when you don’t listen, Lik?” I run my thumb against his lip again. “Tell me,” I order.

“I...” His voice is trembling slightly, and it goes right to my dick.

“I can’t hear you.”

“I get...um. I get pinned to the floor and...fucked.”

“You forgot something,” I insist.

His eyes come up, locking with mine. “Raw,” he breathes out weakly.

“That’s right.” I grab his already erect dick through his pants and squeeze. He grunts and his hands come up to grip my chest. “So do you want to go to the floor willingly, or should I help?”

He doesn’t move, because he loves it too much when I force him. So, I grab the back of his neck and push him to the floor. Lik is a strong man—he doesn’t go down easy, especially when it comes to his alter ego, *Kill*—but when it comes to me, he can’t compare. He crumbles like a house of cards and ends up on all fours.

“Did you do it on purpose?” I ask as I grab his red slacks and pull them down in one harsh movement. I didn’t bother unbuttoning them, making the button pop and the zipper rip. He’ll hate me for it later; Lik loves his clothes. He’s got a style for everything.

“No,” he pants as I kneel behind him and grab his dick from behind. I let go quickly to undo my jeans and pull my cock out before grabbing him again.

“Look what you’re doing to us,” I growl as I grip his dark, curled hair with my other hand. He hisses as I pull back. “We have dinner with your family in half an hour. This is going to be rushed and painful. Is that what you wanted?” I squeeze his cock so tightly he lets out a strangled moan, but fuck, he’s so hard.

“Fuck me,” he growls. “Fuck me with your hand on my dick.”

I let go of his dick and spread his ass cheeks. “No.” I spit on his crack and watch it roll all the way to his asshole. I

knead his cheeks as I spit again. “You’re going to take me, and I’m not going to touch you. Neither are you.”

“No,” he moans as I start pressing my thumb against his hole. “Sam...”

“Maybe you’ll come without being touched,” I whisper in his ear. “I love it when you do that.”

“You *have* to touch me,” he grumbles.

“Only boys who listen get my hand around their dicks.” My words make him tremble.

I insert my thumb and start circling. He’s used to me, but it will always be tight. I’m huge and he knows it. Actually, he loves it.

“Fuck,” he moans as I play with his asshole. I spread my spit anywhere I can reach and watch him relax and open up to me. We say raw, but we never really do raw, just less lubrication. Safety first.

Letting go of his hair, I bring my other hand to his mouth and pry his jaw open. I put my fingers in his mouth and to the back of his throat, creating a thick spit in his mouth. “Give me. I need to wet my dick.” Once he’s spat on my hand, I smear my cock with it and bite my lip to not moan too loudly.

I replace my thumb with the tip of my dick, and he hisses. “Shit...Sir.” He falls back into his submissive role so beautifully.

“If only you’d been a good boy, we would have used proper lube.”

Showing mercy, I take my time to go in and out with my tip only. I spit on my hand and wet my dick some more before trying again. The ring of muscle relaxes, and he finally lets me in as a long moan erupts from his chest. I start slow, giving him more time to adjust, but as soon as one of his hands leaves the floor to try and grab his own dick, I push in hard.

“Aah...” he grunts.

I slap his hand away, press a hand between his shoulders, and force him flat on the floor. He moans a complaint and I

grab his wrists, pinning them to the floor on each side of his head. I push myself in and out with more force, and the pleasure that overtakes me makes me hiss.

“Fuck, baby,” I huff. “You feel so good.”

His body hits the floor hard with every thrust I take, and I can feel myself losing control over the pleasure. I keep up the pace, making us both pant loving words at each other. I can't remember why I was mad at him, overwhelmed by the pleasure of his tight walls around my cock.

“This ass was made for me,” I growl. “Say ‘yes, Sir’.”

“Yes, Sir,” he pants. “It was made for you.”

A second later, I'm coming inside him.

It takes me a minute to slow down the pace and finally stop. I pull out slowly, careful not to hurt him.

I grab his hips, flip him around and smile when I see he's come all over his stomach without either of us touching him.

“Dirty boy,” I murmur.

He's still panting, eyes closed, and a look of frustration crossing his face.

“Did your orgasm get ruined, my love?” I ask him low.

His eyes squeeze tighter, and he gives me a curt nod. Before he opens them, I lower myself and wrap my lips around his cock. He jumps in surprise, his hand shooting to my hair.

“Sir...”

I lick the cum off his softening dick, taking him deep and pulling back out.

“You taste like someone who took his punishment beautifully.” I pat his head and stand back up. “Clean up. We're meeting everyone soon.”

SAM



Bells – The Unlikely Candidates

We both go upstairs to our ensuite to clean up. He takes longer than me, meticulously picking a new outfit while mumbling about me being a careless monster who doesn't care about fashion.

He adds a short, fake pearl necklace to the gold *Chai* necklace he already wears around his neck. He also has a chain locked with a small padlock that he can't take off because I have the key to it. No one knows that 'Sir's toy' is engraved on the side that rests against his skin. He picks a silk, dark blue shirt out of the walk-in closet, comes back into the bedroom, and looks into his jewelry box on his vanity, ignoring the fact that I'm waiting for him on the bed.

"Almost ready?" I raise an eyebrow as I stare at his boxers.

"Yep," he mindlessly replies without looking at me, his focus on all the jewels he owns.

"You're not wearing any trousers, Lik," I huff.

"Pants," he corrects me. It's not like I don't know; I choose not to lose my British side. "Have you seen my red bracelet with my Hamsa hand?"

A small smile pulls at my lips. Lik is big on being protected from the evil eye. He doesn't understand that he has nothing to fear when the evil sleeps in his bed and fucks him regularly.

“No, love,” I tell him as I stretch and get up. My back cracks and my knees feel the weight of my body. “Just grab another color and hurry up.” He has about ten of those things.

“No, I need the red one,” he grumbles back. “I think I lost it last time Kill visited us.”

“You mean last time you went on a killing rampage,” I scoff. He shoots me a threatening look, and it makes me laugh.

He likes to believe *Kill* is his alter ego. He likes forgetting that it’s just him completely losing control and letting his anger take over. Lik is an outgoing, bubbly, and funny gay guy who loves fashion and being dominated by strong men. Kill is a killing machine. A tornado that destroys everything in its way.

He’s never had the means to see a doctor about it and get diagnosed with anything, and even if I’ve now offered to pay for him to, he prefers denial. He prefers his superstitions, astrology, and religions, and that’s okay with me. He can deal with his mind however he wants, as long as I can be there to help when he needs it.

I get a text from Mattock saying he’s arriving here and put my phone back in my pocket. “I’ll wait downstairs,” I tell Lik.

Mattock fucked up, and he’s on my shit list. It’s not a very long list. It usually goes between zero and one...then back to zero.

I meet Mattock by my front door and go out on the porch instead of letting him in. He carries himself like a weak man facing a strong one. His face is twisted with regret, his gaze never daring to reach mine. He wipes his hands on his t-shirt before letting them hang by his side, his fingers tapping against his worn-out jeans.

“Are you not letting me in, man?”

Man. The fact that he thinks he can address me as a friend makes me want to crush his windpipes in a one-handed grip.

When I don’t reply or make any gesture indicating I would let him inside my house, he lets out an awkward, scared chuckle.

“Look, I know it wasn’t the deal, but it’s not like I fucked your trust or anything.”

As if I would ever put my trust in him. I put a cigarette between my lips and focus my gaze on the tip as I light it up. My silence makes him uncomfortable.

“Sam, man, let’s sort this out.” He reaches for my shoulder, attempting to pat it like I’m his mate. I avoid his touch and look back at him as I inhale smoke and put my lighter back in my pocket. I grab my cigarette between my index and middle fingers. My gaze is locked on his so hard that he shrinks before me.

“I-I shouldn’t have touched her, man,” he stutters. “You said not to. I shouldn’t have. I didn’t realize it was a deal-breaker.”

I inhale and exhale smoke a few times, watching him struggle to stand on his own two legs.

“She’s quite irresistible, isn’t she?” I finally say.

Visions of him behind Rose, blocking her between the window and his body with his hand down her jeans, flash in front of my eyes. Her choked whimper when he touched her resonates in my ears.

“She is, man, she is. You can understand why I fucked with the plan. You see it too.”

My mother used to tell me something to help me understand the world, to help me understand my dad’s actions, and why nothing made sense in my life.

Paint our gray world with your multicolored life.

She was an artist, and she only spoke in painting metaphors. It was her way of saying that our life depended on our choices, no matter the cards we’d been dealt.

I’m sorry, Mum, but all I can paint when I think of someone else’s hand on Rose is bright *fucking* red.

I put my cigarette between my lips, and before he can even think of what he’s going to say next, my hand flies to the side

of his head. I grab a handful of his short hair and smash his face against my beautiful, varnished post.

When he screams and cries like the little bitch he is, I smash it again. And again.

And. Again.

Until his eyes roll to the back of his head. Then I let him go and watch him fall to the floor. I squat in front of him and give him a little slap to bring him back.

“Hey, hey,” I say in a fake reassuring voice, my lips moving while still holding the cigarette and making me mumble. “Don’t leave me so quickly.”

He tries to say something but ends up gurgling spit and choking on his words. I inhale on my death stick and take it out of my mouth.

“That’s some bad concussion you’ve got here, mate,” I tell him, blowing smoke on him as I watch the blood pour out of his temple and a purple bump grow on the side of his head.

Tears flow down his face as his body starts convulsing. I press my cigarette bud to his cheek, making him screech in pain. I catch the time on my watch as I do so.

“Shit,” I murmur. “We need to cut this short.”

I stand up and push his shoulder with my foot, rolling him onto his back. He’s too unwell to move. Well, he’s not about to get any better. I lift my leg and crash my foot on his chest. His breath catches the first time. The second time, I feel his ribs crack. The third, they cave in as he coughs up blood. On the fourth hit, he’s dead.

I hear the sound of my front door closing behind me and turn around.

“Someone’s done a bit of exercise,” Lik huffs as his gaze goes from dead Mattock to me. “What’s gotten into you?” He rearranges the cuffs of his forest green suit jacket.

He added green slacks to his outfit and popped open the first few buttons of his shirt to show his multiple necklaces. He found his red Hamsa hand bracelet, which makes his outfit

pop and fit with his red loafers. Yeah, Lik is the complete opposite of me. So into his fashion...and I'm so into him.

I bite my bottom lip as I watch his beautiful fingers, decorated with a few golden rings, arrange his navy belt around his narrow hips and tight abs. He's barely bothered by the dead body at my feet, just making sure to be ready for family dinner.

"Right, I'm ready," he finally says. "You can call Xi on the way. You know, to get rid of Mister unalive and his car."

I nod and put an arm around his waist as he walks past me. We walk the few steps down together and to the car.

"You're hot," I tell him as I open the door for him.

He grabs the back of my neck, pulling me down slightly to leave a wet kiss on my lips.

"You're lethal," he replies. I have to crack my neck and adjust my jeans before sitting down in the driver's seat of my white Range Rover.

As we drive away, I watch Mattock's dead body disappear in my rearview mirror. Just like that, my shit list has gone back to zero and my body relaxes.

Except it's not back to zero.

I shake my head, trying to deny my thoughts. Rose White isn't on my shit list. She's on my hit list. I will destroy her.

But just the thought of her being the dead body instead of Mattock. The thought of taking the life out of her...it fucking *bothers* me.

SAM



I Don't Mind – FNKHOUSER

I don't love meeting with Lik's family, but I love Lik, and he loves them. He's a social guy. He loves being surrounded by those he loves, and their weekly family dinner is not something I would ever stop him from attending. He wants me there, so I'm there.

"Shalom, Assalamu alaikum," Lik's mom practically shouts at us as we cross the door. She jumps on her son, kissing him four times on the cheeks and I'm next.

Aisha ought to be one of my favorite people on the planet. She was born Muslim Algerian, and her husband, Lik's late father, was Jewish Moroccan. Lik told me that when Moshe was alive, they bickered over anything and everything. They never agreed on anything apart from how much they loved each other. But funnily enough, since Moshe passed, Aisha has done everything to both Jewish and Muslim standards, which always brings a smile to my face. How I wish my parents had loved each other that much.

"Shalom, Wa alaikum as-salam, Mama," Lik says back as he wipes his cheeks.

She gets a nod from me and seems happy with it. Aisha made peace with my silence a while ago.

She drags Lik to the small living room, and I follow. His stepsisters, Billie and Emma, are already there, watching TV with their dad on the sofa.

“Lik!” Emma shouts with excitement. He gives her a hug while I grab a chair and put it next to the sofa. I nod at all of them, sit on the chair I pulled, and cross my arms. They know I’ll be there until someone tries to make conversation with me. Hopefully never.

“I see Sam is as excited to be here as ever,” Emma jokes as she sits on the sofa again.

I don’t say anything, I just watch Lik settle next to her. I smile at the slight wince when his ass touches the sofa. It sends a thrill of pleasure all the way from my heart to my dick and unwinds me. I love leaving my mark on him. Sometimes, it’s a discreet pain he has to spend the day with. Sometimes, it’s bruises and bite marks he has no choice but to show everyone.

Emma looks like the typical North Shore girl. Her hair is bleached with long extensions bringing it to her hips. She wears pink lip gloss all the time, her gray eyes are darkened with a glittery blue eyeshadow, and her fake nails are pointy enough to scratch a bitch’s eyes out if needed.

She doesn’t seem like it in her girly outfits made of pink faux-leather skirts and low-cut tops that show her colored tattoos and NSC dagger, but at twenty-two, Emma has become the leader of the North Shore Crew. Her dad tries as much as he can to sit back and watch her rule them with strength and agility.

“Where is Ziad?” Aisha screams from the kitchen.

“Don’t know, *Mama*,” Lik screams back, lying with ease. Moving around to speak to the other is not a thing in this household.

“Why is he so late?” she insists, her voice carrying over the TV despite being in another room.

“Don’t know,” Lik repeats his lie.

“When was the last time you spoke to your brother, Malik?” The hint of worry edging at her voice makes Lik twist his mouth.

The problem with living on the North Shore, where two crews always fight for power, is that dead bodies often appear. That's worrying for a normal parent. I tend to forget about that. But Lik's brother is fine, he's simply getting rid of Mattock's body for me.

"I saw him yesterday, Ms. Scott," I reply quietly. She shouldn't hear me in the kitchen, but people always pipe down when I open my mouth. Except for one stupid harpy that can't seem to understand the meaning of shutting up, but I'm not about to go down the Rose White rabbit hole right now.

"Samuel," she says as she appears in the living room with a wooden spoon and a big smile. "I told you to call me Aisha." Her Arabic accent makes everything she says sound like a poem, and I could listen to her talk all day long. Good thing she never shuts up.

"I don't like this American last name anyway. Moshe must be turning around in his grave, giving us middle fingers from up there every time he hears it." She waves the wooden spoon at the ceiling to point to Heaven. That place where I'll never set foot.

That makes everyone laugh. Even her new husband, Austin.

We're all eating when Xi finally makes an appearance. Lik's older brother is my age, with half my patience and an attitude that makes Lik's volatile personality seem tame. Unsurprisingly, his knuckles are covered in blood, and he has a bleeding nose.

"Ziad!" his mother snaps. "Is this a decent time to show up? And covered in blood!"

"Hi, *Mama*," he sniffles some blood and runs his hand under his nose.

She's about to say something else, but Austin puts a calming hand on hers. "It's okay, honey. He's fine."

"Got caught up with—"

"Wash your hands, *ya hmar*," Aisha cuts him off in one last order, making sure to call him a donkey. Her own cute way of

being angry. “No business at the table or watch the *treha* to your face.” She lifts her hand, very clear that *treha* is the slap he will get if he doesn’t listen. Xi drops a kiss on her forehead before disappearing to the kitchen.

She serves us Moroccan meatballs, and, as she requested, their family talks about anything but the North Shore Crew and their war against the Kings.

It’s late when I smoke my nth cigarette on their small patio, and Austin comes out to join me. Everyone is playing Monopoly inside and I can hear their arguments from here. They’re all so good at cheating, that their games turn violent quickly.

“Sam,” Austin says as I offer him a cigarette. My silence is an encouragement for him to keep going. “I need a favor from you.”

I exhale the smoke, letting my body relax to its hourly dose of nicotine.

“It’s about Billie.”

I pull at my cigarette again, and he settles beside me, his elbows resting on the moldy wooden balustrade.

Austin is an old, fat dad who loves his daughters and is sick of the gang life. He’s tired but too proud to let it go. His kids are enrolled, his stepkids are soldiers, and he loves his crew too much to ever give up on them. But he’s not the man he used to be. His hands are shakier than they used to be, his aim not precise. He can’t fight and protect his daughters like he wishes he could. I can already tell he wants to put the responsibility on me.

“She doesn’t want to talk about it with her old man, but I can see she’s got issues with one of the Kings. She’s out of her depth, and I’m worried for her.”

If Nate could see me now, getting mixed up with petty gangs when he had world domination on his mind. My best friend would die of embarrassment for me, not before taking

the absolute piss out of me. Fuck, I wish he was here. But then, he would kill me for what I plan on doing to his little sister. He would never let me go through with it. He would annihilate me before I could even get close to Rose.

“Look, I can pay you. I know your contracts are more than I can afford, but I will give you all I have. I want this kid out of my daughter’s life.”

I give my cigarette a small nudge with my thumb, watching ash disappear into the dead of the night.

“Billie is a strong girl,” I finally say. “She can hold her own.”

I watch his hands tighten around the balustrade. It’s wet and covered in moss and other fungi. His fat fingers are red from the cold out here, and the cigarette he was holding falls out of his hands.

“Is that the kind of thing you’d say to someone who hires you? Don’t doubt my judgment,” he grits. “I know my little girl. I know when she’s not well. This is a business transaction. I’m not asking you for your input.”

I turn to him as I pull more smoke from my now tiny stick. “If this were a business transaction, I would tell you I’m already on a big contract, and I only take one at a time.”

He runs a hand through his thinning brown hair and scratches his head. “I know she’s in danger, but she won’t let me help her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t need your help.”

His gaze drops to the ground, and he watches his foot tap against the rotten floorboard. “I think something happened to her. Something a girl wouldn’t share with her dad.”

Billie has been quieter than usual lately. She’s not the kind of girl who keeps her thoughts to herself. But I’m not a savior. I kill people because the money is worth it and because that’s all I know. I don’t do it to save my boyfriend’s stepsister.

Sadly, Austin Scott isn’t going to fucking drop this, and when Lik appears in the doorway that leads to their kitchen, I

know he's going to get involved. Unlike me, Lik would put his life at risk for Billie. And I'm in love with that little fucker. Him dying is not exactly on my agenda.

I run my knuckles against my jaw. "Which King?" I huff.

"Caden, The youngest son."

"So, we're not talking about some random guy in their crew. We're talking about the *actual* King family."

He stays silent, and so does Lik, who probably already knows what we're talking about.

After a minute of me staring at Austin, and him trying to find any point he can behind me to avoid my gaze, he talks again. "The money I got... I think it might be enough to make it worth your time."

"Keep your money." I take the last drag out of my cigarette, pinching it between my thumb and forefinger, and throw it out onto their neighbor's shitty backyard. "I'll scare him. I'm not getting involved in your feud with a bloody murder."

Lik moves out of the way when I direct myself toward the kitchen. "Say bye, we're leaving," I tell him as I step inside.

I've been waiting in the car for five minutes when he finally sits down and closes the door.

"Are you mad at me?" he asks. "Austin asked me, and I told him to talk to you. I should have just said no."

I start the car, not replying. This conversation is pointless; I said I'd scare Caden King. I will.

I'm about to pull out onto the road when a hand lands on my window. I brake hard and don't even look. Survival instinct kicks in, and my right hand shoots for my gun in the center console.

Lik's fingers wrap around my wrist, his multiple thick rings cold against my skin. "It's Billie."

I lower the window and let out a short huff. Are they not done with me yet?

“What did he say?” she pants slightly. She ran to our car at the last minute. At my lack of response, she insists. “Sam. What did my dad ask you to do?” Is that panic in her eyes?

I turn to Lik, waiting for him to explain. Clearly, she wasn't aware of their little plan.

Billie is the opposite of her older sister, physically. Where Emma puts a lot of effort into her appearance, Billie is simpler. Her brown hair is usually in a high ponytail and her clothes are plain, walking around in jeans and tank tops most of the time. She has an innocent look about her, given by her huge, brown, doe eyes. She's anything but. Billie is a semi-professional boxer who is used to kicking ass, and she is the last person I would have ever thought I'd need to help.

“Lik, what did my dad tell you? I'm fine.”

“Bil's—” Lik's soft voice tries to be reassuring.

“I'm fine!” Her trembling hands rest on my windowsill, and my head falls against the headrest. This evening is taking much longer than I thought it would.

“We're just trying to help,” Lik responds. His thumb is going back and forth on my inner wrist, rubbing against my tattoo of a hand-drawn heart. It's a child's drawing. Rose's, to be precise.

“I don't need anyone's help.”

Her attitude reminds me of another girl who never asks for help. Who would rather get in risky situations than call for support.

“What's wrong with you girls and being too proud to get the help you need?” I snap.

They both stay silent for a few seconds.

“Damn, Sam,” Billie chuckles. “Rose White has been back for how long? And look at you, losing your patience and all.”

I close my eyes for a few seconds to calm down. I fucking hate hearing her name on other people's lips. I fucking hate *her*.

“Speaking of her, I want the bitch out of my town. There's something you can help with.”

I remember exactly when Rose and Billie started hating each other. It was at some party on the North Shore a few years ago. Billie called her Bianco's princess. Rose lost her shit and humiliated Billie in front of a few people. Too many for Billie to forget.

“Stay away from Rose,” I order calmly. “Let me handle her.”

“Does he know she's back?”

I know she's not talking about Bianco, but I don't bite. My fingers tap on the steering wheel, already knowing she's not going to get an answer from me. Caught in a tricky situation? Silence is your best friend.

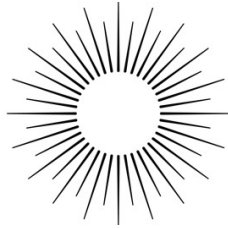
I don't even say bye. I roll up my window, earning myself a shocked ‘hey’ out of Billie, and drive away.

“That wasn't very nice,” Lik mumbles.

“Warm up your wrists.” I give him a look and watch his face fall. “Have you counted your mistakes tonight? Cause I have, and you're getting tied up, my love. Try to figure out how long the canning will last and see how nice you find that.”

And finally, the only thing that fills the car after that is *silence*.

RACHEL



Stay – girl in red

“Rach, you’ll have to say something at some point.” Rose runs a hand through her hair, tangling her fingers with the knots that have formed in it.

I sit on the kitchen bar of the Murray’s pool house, my feet dangling, my hands on either side of me, and my gaze lost behind Rose.

She didn’t know where to bring me, so she brought me here. She carried me to her old room and bed, but I didn’t stay. I paced, texted Conor to tell him I was out late, locked myself in the bathroom, and now I’m perched here. But I still haven’t said anything. I haven’t let her touch me for more than one second and now that I’m sitting in front of her, with her body between my legs, she keeps grabbing me and looking for injuries.

“Baby, please...” she begs.

I haven’t been able to process what happened. I haven’t run through what the men said, what they wanted Rose to do, the things they did. All I can think of is the ringing in my head and the feeling of the floor trembling next to me—the splinters in my hair, the *fear*.

Rose grabs my chin softly and turns my head to one side, then to the other. She’s given me water already, but my throat feels sore, and my lips chapped from the rag they gagged me with. She runs a finger on the scratch I can feel from the corner of my lips to my ear. The guy called Lik hurt me with

one of his rings when he wrapped the gag around my head. I was kicking and screaming; I was fighting back. Maybe I shouldn't have.

"My ears are ringing," I finally say. My voice is barely audible.

Rose nods, her brows furrowed, anger and frustration twisting her beautiful features. She's so beautiful. "That would be the gun. It'll pass, Sunshine."

She's not worried about what I said.

She knows what happens when a gun is fired.

She's fired a gun before.

She said she was good with a gun.

Her hands keep running over my body and I wince when they skim my ribs. She freezes and looks into my eyes.

"What did they do?"

"Nothin—"

She fiddles with the top button of the cream blouse I'm wearing.

"Rose, stop," I complain weakly.

"Did they hit you?" Her voice is so low and raspy, the possession in it burning her vocal cords. I usually love it, but I need her to give me space right now. I need to be able to process what happened.

She already dabbed the superficial cut on my neck with cotton and antiseptic, but my blouse was ruined anyway.

I push her hand away from the buttons, although she's already midway through undoing them.

"Stop," I whine again. I never thought I'd think this in my life, but I need her off me.

But it's Rose we're talking about. She doesn't hear me. In a fit of rage and a desperate need to take back control, she rips the blouse open, buttons popping off.

"Rose!" I fume. "Stop this!"

I push both her shoulders before I say my next words. “They told me, you know! They told me how they got you into that house.” I try to get off the counter, but she grabs my waist and pushes me back.

“Don’t,” she growls.

“I know you followed that guy. You thought you were gonna have sex with him,” I rage.

I struggle to get away from her, but she doesn’t allow me. I always wonder how a skinny girl like her can have such strength. “I ask you to wait for a little bit, and you run to get fucked by your professor. *Fuck you!*”

I’m not sure what I expected from her. She’s so like before she disappeared. I should have known that hadn’t changed either.

“How do you expect me to take us seriously? You have a *fucking fiancé*, Rachel! I’ve been begging to see you for two weeks and you won’t let me.”

Because I was waiting for the bruises to fade! I want to scream at her. I can’t, she would kill Conor.

I try to push her away again, but she grabs my wrist with one hand and pushes the blouse open with the other.

I know it’s too late when she freezes in shock. I stop fighting, there’s no point now. Her mouth hangs open as she takes in the state of my waist, my abdomen, and my ribs.

Her eyes narrow, and a thunder of anger builds up at the back of her throat. I can hear it in the way her voice resonates.

“Sam is a dead man walking,” she hisses. “He’s dead. He’s *fucking* dead.”

I don’t understand why she mentions him and not Lik. He was there, he held the gun, he held *me*. It doesn’t matter anyway. My silence made her assume it was them, and I don’t dare to tell the truth.

She shouts something else in anger, but I’ve stopped listening.

“Baby.” Her hands palm my cheeks, and her forehead falls onto mine. “I’m not gonna let ’em get away with it.”

Her words shorten, the speed of her speech quickens like she’s a mad woman. “They’re gonna fucking pay.” I don’t think she realizes she’s pushing me back with her head. She’s pressing against me with such force I can barely stop myself from falling backwards.

“I want to know, Rose,” I whisper so quietly I doubt she heard me.

She takes a huge breath, and her exhale blows some hair out of my face.

“Rose,” I say more firmly. “I want to know.”

She squeezes her eyes and shakes her head, like she refuses to hear me, refuses to admit that everything she’s ever kept from me is catching up with her. With *us*.

“You have to.” I don’t relent. “You have to tell me about your past now.”

She rubs her eyes with the heels of her hands and shakes her head again. “I can’t,” she pushes through gritted teeth.

“You can.” My voice doesn’t falter as it used to when I tried to pry information from her. I don’t feel the guilt. I don’t feel the fear that she’ll snap and walk away. No, after the humiliation and the fear of death I endured today, she owes me at least the truth.

“You can and you will,” I say with a finality that leaves her no choice.

“Rach...” her voice breaks into a plea. Her hands are tight around my waist like her fingertips from one are trying to reach the others. She’s attempting to suffocate the curiosity out of me, but she won’t this time.

“I almost died today, Rose. I want to know why. You know I had my questions about Sam before...you know...before you disappeared.”

She grunts and pushes away from me.

“You never answered them!” I shout at her. I’ve always been too nice to her, trying to gently coax out her past without forcing her to relive her traumas. It never worked. Rose only functions when there’s violence and shouting involved.

“I told you before!” she snaps back. “I told you we grew up together. His dad knew my old foster dad. What else do you want?”

She paces around the small living room she hasn’t lived in since being kidnapped and Jake left for college. We all thought Stoneview would freeze in time when the White twins left. How I wish it had.

“I want to know who he is. I want to know what he wants with you!”

“He’s a hitman with too much time on his hands. That’s who he fucking is. Don’t play dumb, you understood what he wants.”

“Can you hear yourself?” I scoff. “You talk about a hitman like it’s the most casual thing in the world, and you want to tell me that’s all there is to the story?”

She goes completely silent, rubbing her eyes again and clenching her jaw. She looks away from me to the door, and I can feel her hesitate. After a minute or so, she walks toward it with determination. She opens it and turns to me.

“You should leave.”

I shake my head slowly, disappointed with her but at least not with myself for having the courage to confront her.

I get off the bar, and she looks away from me as I walk toward her.

“If I leave, you will never see me again, Rose.”

She nods at the truth in my voice, but she’s still looking to the side of me, not crossing my gaze. “Good, you should give your marriage a chance.”

Fear and disgust twist in my stomach like a poisonous cocktail.

I let silence fill the room before I say my last words. “You know what the worst thing is?” I pause, waiting for a reaction. Nothing. “I waited for you that day.” There’s a twitch on her face, but she doesn’t reply. “And I hated you for it.”

I shake my head, trying to chase away the memories of the worst day of my life. “I hated you because you always did that. You always disappeared and never told me where you were. All you were capable of were secrets and lies.”

I struggle to swallow everything that wants to come out of my chest—all the love, the passion, and the hate—and I keep to simple words. “I hated you while you were being kidnapped, and I told myself I wouldn’t chase after you. It took me days to understand that something was wrong. It took until Jake’s call. Do you realize what you did to us? The day you disappeared, I decided to move on from you instead of knowing something was wrong.”

Her gaze has gone from the side of my face to the floor, shame flooding her.

But she doesn’t say anything.

It’s hard to keep the tears at bay, but I manage. Because no matter what happens to me, Rose White will never change. She will never open up to me and will only bring me trouble. I already have a monster in my life, but at least I can manage Conor because I hate him and what he does only hurts physically. Rose breaks my heart repeatedly.

I take one step outside.

That’s when I feel her hand wrap around my wrist. My heart explodes in my ribcage exactly the way I forbid it to. She drags me back and wraps me in a hug from behind.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers in my ear. “Rachel...I’m sorry.” My wrist is still in her hand, she’s holding it tight against my chest, and my free hand comes to rest on her other arm around my waist. “The truth will break your heart more than I ever did. But if you want it, it’s yours.”

I nod, the back of my head hitting her neck as she holds me tighter. I don’t know why I always thought it would go

differently. I thought we would sit down somewhere—in my imagination, it was on her bed—and hold hands. We would share tears and cry together. Because no matter what, I know it's bad.

But no, she just holds me tightly, my back to her front, her grip vice-like, and her hoarse voice just above me. She's tall enough that her chin rests on the top of my head. The door is open in front of me and the cold wraps us in a blanket of dread.

Goosebumps rise on both our arms. The moon enhances my pale skin against her tanned one. The wind whistles in my ear until her broken words replace it.

ROSE



Bleach - Call Me Karizma

9 years old

“Rose, mia bella rosa,” Mateo whispers. “Ms. Hobbcomb is here. She’s reviewing your case. It’s our one-year review. You know what that means?” He’s standing in front of me in his office while I sit on the desk, dangling my feet into emptiness. I take another lick of the chocolate ice cream he gave me and nod. I hate when he watches me eat, but I also love chocolate ice cream. It’s a fight I was happy to lose.

“She’s going to see if you’re a good dad.”

“I’m not your dad,” he corrects. Tomato, to-mah-to. I hope he adopts us soon. That’s why I keep telling him he’s my dad. “But we’ll be family one day, if we all behave.” He shifts slightly closer to put a strand of my wild, black hair behind my ear.

I always liked Mateo’s cologne. He smells clean and robust. My favorite time to hug him is after he shaves in the morning. His face is smooth against my cheeks, and he smells of comfiness. He takes time out of his busy schedule to come and wake me up with a hug every. Single. Morning. I wonder if he does this with all the other kids; I like to think he doesn’t and I’m his favorite.

If I’m his favorite, he’ll adopt me and have to adopt Jake and Nate too. Maybe I can convince him to take in Sam? I don’t like Sam’s dad and I never met his mom.

A smile pulls at the corner of my lips, thinking of all our futures together. If Mateo finds a mom for me, we'll be the perfect family. I can't wait.

"She's early," I say in-between two licks. "It hasn't been a year."

"You're so observant, aren't you, my little princess?"

I nod hard. I love it when he calls me his princess. And I am observant. Our at-home teacher, Ms. Johns, says I'm really smart. I'm glad he noticed it too.

"Ms. Hobbcomb is doing me a favor because I'll be away for business soon. So, she came a little early. It's better we keep that to ourselves. Capisci?"

"Capito," I reply excitedly. I always get giddy when he talks in Italian, and I understand it. I want him to teach me more. He says I look like an Italian Princess. I think I do too, I'm very beautiful and tanned like him.

"Behave, okay?" he finally says. "You're always so good, don't change now. Promise?"

I nod. "Yes."

My ice cream disappears mid-lick, and I gasp.

"Rose?" He holds the ice cream away from me.

I don't roll my eyes because I know he hates it. "Yes, Sir," I huff, insisting on the Sir. Soon, it'll be 'dad', and nothing can stop that.

"I don't understand," I shriek as Mateo pushes me to the floor. My hands go in front of me to avoid crashing too hard against the unforgiving parquet. Still, my palms rub painfully against the old, red Persian rug, and my knees hurt when they hit the floor.

I'm lost. The yearly review went perfectly. Ms. Hobbcomb said she was happy for us to stay here. I was good, like I promised. I didn't even mention that the review was a month early. Mateo seemed so happy; he had that look in his eyes he

always gets when he talks about adopting us. They shine with pride and love.

So why did he grab me by the arm so tightly as soon as our lovely caseworker left? Why did he drag me to his office like I had done something wrong? And why did he just push me to the floor with such violence?

“Stay on the floor.” His voice is so much meaner than usual, bringing tears to my eyes. I haven’t cried since the children’s home. Mateo is always happy and that makes me happy.

Right now, he’s not happy.

I sit back on my haunches, my hands by my side, and look up at him. “Why did you do that?” I ask, sadness coating my voice and making it a little raspier. “My knees hurt.”

“Quiet, princess.” He walks around his huge desk and looks for something in one of the drawers.

I get up from the floor and walk to his desk. “Did I do something wrong?” I don’t want him to be mad at me. What if he gets so mad, he sends us back? What if the next time Ms. Hobbcomb comes, we have to leave with her?

When he doesn’t respond, panic grips my stomach and twists painfully. I put two hands on the desk to try and get his attention. “I’m sorry, I thought I was doing good. She looked pleased.”

He ignores me, still looking for something. “Please, look at me,” I beg. Tears are burning my eyes and I know they’re going to fall in a second. I can feel it because my throat is tight and hurts, and my voice is wobbly. “Mateo—Sir,” I correct myself straight away. “Please, don’t be mad. Please, I want to make you happy.”

He stops so suddenly I fear I said too much. He did say to be quiet. My eyes stay on an iron stick on his desk, so I don’t look straight at him. It’s not usually here. I’m not sure what it is.

“You want to make me happy, mia rosa?”

“Yes, Sir.” I grip the edge of his desk tightly and find the courage to look up. His eyes are boring into me. They’ve never been so dark.

“Then why did you get up when I told you to stay on the floor?” He’s not shouting and doesn’t sound violent, but his calm words scare me, and I understand I should have never gotten up.

I jump back to where he had pushed me and sit on the carpet. I don’t understand why, but I don’t care. He keeps looking for something and I look around the room. The fireplace is crackling and illuminating his beautiful library. He said I could borrow whichever book I wanted from his collection. Many of them have the word ‘rose’ in them, in English or Italian, and it always brings a smile to my face.

“Can I tell you a secret, my princess? Un segreto?” He finally found what he was looking for. I’m not sure what it is. He also grabs the metal stick I saw on his desk.

I’m a little apprehensive now, but his voice is back to being sweet. Maybe he’s not mad anymore. So, I nod.

He squats in front of me, bringing himself to my level. He starts screwing whatever he found to the stick, it’s long and sturdy.

“Promise not to tell anyone?” His eyes keep darting from me to whatever he’s holding.

I become more hesitant with every turn he makes with his hand, screwing the object a little tighter. Still, I nod again.

“Of all the kids I look after...you’re my favorite,” he finally says with a big smile.

My heart soars, relief flooding me. He’s not mad, he’s not. I always hoped to be his favorite, and to hear it from him is a better feeling than Christmas morning.

“You’re my little princess. You know you are, right?”

“Yes. Yes, I do!” I squeal.

“Buono. Lie on the floor for me, princess.”

I don't think twice about it. Maybe it's a new game. I trust Mateo, and whatever he's got in mind, it'll be fun. Because I'm his favorite.

Flat on my stomach, hands under my right cheek, I look at him from the floor as he walks to the fireplace.

And I don't get it.

With a smile on my face, I watch him put the weird metal baton into the fire.

And I don't get it.

I tap my feet on the floor to a happy rhythm as he tells me to close my eyes.

And I don't get it.

"Sir?" I ask, my eyes tightly closed. "Did you notice how happy Ms. Hobbcomb was? I think soon, you'll be my dad."

"I noticed," he replies. "I'm not your dad, mia rosa, but we'll be family one day." He lifts my long hair from the back of my neck.

Ms. Johns always says I'm smart for a girl my age... and yet, still, I don't get it.

We, humans, can never imagine the worst. It's impossible. Denial is a way of protecting ourselves.

But when the searing, burning pain finally reaches my nerves and the stench of burned flesh reaches my nostrils, I scream. I cry. I don't fight back because it hurts too much.

But I get it.

As I fall into unconsciousness from the pain, I finally get it.

That I should have wished for Ms. Hobbcomb to take my brothers and me back with her today.

11 years old

"What the fuck, Rose," Mateo seethes as he grabs a handful of my hair.

“Mi dispiace!” I whimper, my knees wobbling under the strength of his pull. “I thought you weren’t home.” No, stupid answer.

Too late.

He drags me down the stairs with him and I struggle to keep up. I was hanging out with Sam. We were so sure his dad and Mateo were out... A while ago, I had told Sam I preferred my hair down, and he said he did too. He told me it was safe as long as Mateo wasn’t here. And he wasn’t meant to be here today.

Mateo shoves me into his office, and I have to wait for him to let go of my hair to grab the hair tie around my wrist and put it up in a high ponytail. I’m used to doing it at the speed of light now. It’s tight, pulling at my skull, exactly how he loves it.

My hair is done before I even hear the click of the lock. A chill runs down my spine at the known sound.

He grabs the back of my neck, pulling me into his chest, and runs his fingers along the letters he branded on me.

M.B.

Who thought it would be so simple to become Mateo Bianco’s property?

I can feel him relax, releasing a contented sigh when he traces the scars for the third time.

“Don’t make me angry, Rose. I only want to be in a good mood when I see you.”

I nod against his chest, his cologne making me feel sick. It’s so strong, it always makes me nauseous. It smells of roughness and pain. Sam’s cologne smells of giggles and warmth.

He looks down and grabs my chin to make me peer up. I’m taller than the average eleven-year-old, but Mateo is much taller than me.

“You’re so beautiful, princess, you know that?”

I don't say anything. I know I'm beautiful. He says it all the time.

His hand leaves my chin, and he grabs my upper arm instead. I'm only in a tank top, and his fingers feel warm against my cold skin. He presses harder...tighter...

"Mateo," I hiss in pain, and he smiles. I don't try to step away, it only makes it worse.

"A little longer," he announces.

It's not just a little longer, it's also a lot harsher. I can already feel my skin bruising under his grip. I can feel the blood rushing to the spot.

I can't hold it in. "It hurts," I whimper. The problem is, I never know if it'll encourage him or make him stop. He loves hearing I'm hurting. Sometimes it's so satisfying, it'll make him stop. Sometimes, he loves it so much he wants more.

"No more," I say through clenched teeth, but his fingers keep digging into my arm. "Mateo...stop."

He finally lets go and steps away. He runs a hand across his face, and our eyes meet as I try to take a deep breath. I don't touch where he did; he'll want to see the bruise forming. I know the rules and I'm not about to break them.

That's what Sam advised. Respect the rules when I'm with Mateo, and run to him right after so he can take care of me.

But fear courses through my body when my foster dad's eyes light up. He's a drug addict who just had a taste of his favorite hit. He wants more. I can see it shining brightly: the ultimate need to hurt me.

"No," I whisper. "I've got homework. And-and I wanted to read in Italian. I thought you'd like that. We can read together." Anything. Please, anything but the pain.

"Bend over the desk."

"Please," I plead. "I'm exhausted." Yesterday, he spent an hour pinching every inch of skin on my stomach. I'm so bruised, I can't take a breath without the reminder of his hands all over me. It took Sam forever to rub soothing cream all over.

“On the desk, mia rosa,” he sing-songs. He grabs the wooden ruler he keeps on there and settles himself with a hip against the desk as he waits for me to take my top off. I don’t need to wear bras, but I started wearing thick sport bralettes to make sure he doesn’t ever see under them. He’s never asked me to take them off, and I can only pray he never will.

Mateo focuses on the pain; he doesn’t care about me as a woman.

I bend over the desk, squeezing my eyes shut and wincing at the hard wood against the bruises on my stomach.

“I want you to cry and scream, okay?” he tells me. “Can you do this for me?”

“Yes, Sir,” I gulp. There’s anger boiling inside me, but I can’t let any of it show. Mateo would kill me. A slow, painful death.

“One day, you’ll like it, princess. I promise.”

The ruler lands between my shoulders. Once, twice... After six, I stop counting in my head. I scream and cry, just like I said I would, and he enjoys every second of it. I list things in my head to escape. Things I’ve read in books or watched on TV, and learned with my teacher. Like the states.

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut...

It goes on forever. Enough time to do every state and their capitals. And when he’s done, he steps away, turns the light off and locks me in here. He always says the same thing, ‘Think about what you did.’ Then he leaves me all alone in the dark while I attempt to calm the sobs. I try to imagine Sam’s voice reassuring me. That’s what he always does. But he’s not here right now.

No, I’m all alone.

13 years old

I hold my hand to my cheekbone, pain making its way through my entire face. I don't think anything is broken. My brother Nate just wanted to bruise me.

I'm starting to notice when he does it. When he and Jake are forced to leave me alone at the house with Mateo. When Jake has to go fight in Mateo's underground rings. Nate knows our foster dad hates seeing even a scratch on my face. It puts a dent in my beauty, and I'm not worth hurting if I'm already damaged. When that happens, he leaves me alone.

My brothers are already out the door by the time I manage to see straight again.

Mateo wants me to see him in his office, and I can only hope my face looks terrible enough it'll disgust him.

I knock on the door, and he beckons me to come in right away.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

He nods, looking at some paperwork on his desk. "Lock the door and take a seat."

I roll my shoulders back, stretch my neck, and run a hand through my ponytail. Then I lock the door with shaky fingers and take a seat before him.

When he looks up, his eyes darken with anger. "What happened to your face?"

My eyes widen with fear. What if this time it makes him angrier and it brings more pain?

"I—"

"Did Nate do this?" When I don't reply, his fist crashes on his desk. "Answer me, Rose!"

"Y-yeah," I stutter.

"Yes, Sir," he orders low.

"Yes, Sir," I repeat.

“That little bastard. Stop pissin’ him off, will you? Give your brother some respect.”

I nod, too tired to pretend it’s my fault and not his. I’m glad he thinks Nate hits me because we don’t get along.

“You look disgusting,” he lies. A bruise on my face doesn’t take away any of my beauty, but it does take away the perfect image he wants of me. Mateo only gives me bruises I can hide, so others can’t see. He likes the privilege. He likes knowing a secret they don’t.

He gets up, walks around his desk. and settles against it right in front of me.

He pokes the bruise on my cheekbone and smiles when I wince in pain, as well as the sharp electricity it sends down my body. I watch with masochism how it brings joy to his face.

“You’re starting to like it, aren’t you?” he asks with that sick smile.

I look at my thighs. My hands grab my legs just above my knees and I squeeze tight. I watch my fingers whiten from the grip and release. Then I do it again, captivated. The escape begins. As I grow up, the lists become more complicated; they’re things ordinary people wouldn’t remember.

Nile, Amazon, Mississippi-Missouri-Red Rock, Chang Jiang...

“The pain. You’re starting to like it, princess, aren’t you?”

I shake my head, lying. “I hate it.” But something in me is starting to switch every time he hurts me. A sort of release I can’t explain.

He calmly reaches for my ponytail, wraps it around his fist and pulls until I have to get up and put myself close to him. He angles my head to the left and puts his lips against my ear.

“I want my wife to enjoy pain, Rose.”

My entire body freezes.

No.

Shivers after shivers run through my spine, and I start to tremble.

“You do understand, don’t you?”

“You’re my legal guardian,” I choke out. Surely even he couldn’t get away with that. You can’t marry your foster kid. You can’t...

Mateo always gets what he wants. He’s got the Cosa Nostra behind him. He’s got money and power. He’s got politicians and judges in his pocket.

“I won’t be your legal guardian when you turn eighteen. Why do you think I never adopted you and your pathetic brothers?”

My heart is beating so fast that my brain is flooded with all sorts of chemicals that make me dizzy.

“Mateo. You can’t do this. My life...it can’t be this.”

He pushes his thumb against my lips to shut me up. It works. The fear is drilled too deeply to do anything else but listen.

“You are such a smart girl. Can you hear the way you talk? The way you think?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to keep his words at bay.

“So beautiful, so smart. And all mine.” He tugs at my ponytail again and runs his fingers against the letters at the back of my neck. “Soon, we’ll be a family, you and me.”

The words he used to tell me as a kid come back, haunting me. I used to wish he was my dad, and his answer was always the same. ‘I’m not your dad, but we’ll be family one day.’ He always knew it would be as husband and wife.

He branded me, he groomed me, he made me like the pain. He broke me for everyone else, just so I would be perfect for him.

When I leave his office, I run back to my room. Sam is waiting on my bed. I jump in his arms, falling on him, and we both crash against the mattress. He's sixteen, and his muscles are developing at an unstoppable rate. His big arms crush me against him, and I cry into his chest.

"He wants to marry me," I choke on my sobs. "He can't do that! You have to tell him he can't do that!"

His hand slips into my hair and he slowly undoes my ponytail.

"You have to do something, Sam."

"We'll get you out of here, I promise, lovebug."

The familiar nickname calms my heart and stills my fears. Something electrifying yet reassuring lights up in me every time he says it. It feels warm and comfortable. Like pulling the covers up to your chin on a cold night. It gives me the strength to ask for what I never have before.

"I want to leave now. When you go home tonight, take me with you."

"I can't," he admits. "My dad..."

"Your dad can't be worse than Mateo."

There's a long silence as he rubs circles over my back. "It doesn't matter who's worse. They're both monsters. You can't leave one for another."

I push away from him and kneel on my bed, right next to his face. "Then let's both leave."

"You're hurt and scared, and you're forgetting about your brothers."

I shake my head violently. "They'll join us. The four of us..." I stop when I realize how ridiculous my idea is. "He'll find us," I admit. "He'll always find us."

"Not if he's dead."

"Would you do it? Would you kill Mateo for me?"

He sits up and grabs my hands. His dark gaze settles on me. I like the way Sam looks at me, it always makes me feel warm inside. It always makes me ache to touch him. He squeezes my hand in his and gives me a curt nod. "I'd do anything for you, lovebug."

ROSE



@ *my worst* - blackbear

Today

We're still in the same spot, but we dropped to the floor at some point. I'm behind Rachel, holding her close to me, her hands in mine. I direct one of her hands behind my neck and guide her over the scars.

M.B.

It's not a tattoo or anything else that could be altered. No, it's branded on me in a way I could never forget.

I don't have the strength to calm down Rachel's sobs. She wanted my story. She got it—at least the part before we moved to the Murrays.

"How did you leave?" she rasps. "How did you end up at the Murrays?"

Dread overcomes my body because this is the part I never wanted her to know.

"I did something bad."

"What?" She tries to turn around, but I keep my grip on her firm. I can't look in her eyes while I admit what I did.

"I shot Nate."

She stills, but I already sense her forgiving nature warming up the air around us.

“And I don’t want you to excuse my actions because you know he’s still alive. I don’t want you to lie to yourself thinking I didn’t really kill him. Because, believe me, back then, I intended to. When we met, Sunshine, I truly thought I had killed my own brother and felt free from it. The guilt only came later.”

She tenses, and I know she’s scared of me. I hear it in her voice. “Wh-why? Why did you shoot him?”

“Because he was getting in the way of my freedom. And I will always eliminate anyone who gets in the way of my freedom.”

I’m ready to hear, ‘but he’s your brother’ or ‘there must have been another way’. She surprises me, instead.

“How did it happen?”

Fuck, I really hate going down memory lane. But I do it for her.

“Jake and I kept complaining about Bianco, but he had a lot of care workers in his pocket. One of them took pity on us and did as much as she could. She put our file forward to a family. It was the Murrays. They insisted on taking us in, but Bianco threatened the case worker. He told her to not allow any transfer if it wasn’t the three kids. It was all of us or nothing.”

Rachel relaxes against me as I feel her back heavier on my chest. My legs are splayed out, so she is sitting in between them.

“Bianco knew Nate would never agree to leave. The moment Jake and I knew the Murrays wanted us, we fought Nate every day to try and convince him. One of our arguments got heated. He was always against us. Always getting in the way. I learned too late in life why he was doing it. Back then, I had a hatred against him I couldn’t describe.”

I bring a hand to Rachel’s hair, playing with some strands to stay grounded and not fall into the darkness.

“Nate beat up Jake real bad that day. Bianco sided with him, two on one.”

I still remember Bianco's laugh and my twin's grunts of pain.

"Bianco's gun was on the table. Nate was the first one to notice I'd grabbed it. Probably because I was pointing it at him."

His voice is loud in my head.

"Ozy, what the fuck are you doing. Have you gone insane? Put the gun down."

Bianco follows. At least they left Jake alone. "Princess, give me the gun. You'll regret it if you don't."

I don't. My hands are shaking, my heartbeat painful, but I hold on to the gun like I've been taught so meticulously.

"Rose." Bianco's voice fills my stomach with dread. "If you don't give me this gun, I'll show you that you've never truly known pain."

I lower the gun. Bianco doesn't even take it from me when he walks away and leaves the room. Like this conversation is over. It's only my wish for freedom, it isn't serious to him. He knows I'm not a threat. I'm just his princess. Weak, pliable.

Nate's smug smile breaks my heart. Does he really not care?

"You're not leaving. Do you understand? None of us is getting out of here. Not until I say so."

"That did it," I tell Rachel. "His conviction that none of this was my choice. That it'd never be. So I shot him."

Blood.

Lots and lots of blood.

I don't know how long I've been silent for, when Rachel nudges me. "What happened after?"

"Bianco had no explanations to give to the case workers. So he pretended Nate ran away. No more Nate, no more three-kid deal. We were free."

"But he didn't die."

“No,” I chuckle sadly. “I missed the vital organs. And we didn’t know until Bianco sent Sam and Nate after us during our senior year. Three years of blissful, ignorant freedom.”

I’m glad my brother didn’t die. He’s the one who sent Bianco to prison, after all.

I told Rachel I’d tell the whole truth. So I do even if she’s going to hate herself for it.

“When Bianco found us again during our senior year,” I explain. “He picked up exactly where he left off.”

“What?” she chokes. “But...but I was with you and...”

“Not after I’d spend time with him,” I explain.

With time, I got really good at hiding Mateo’s bruises and cuts. He made it easy by keeping it on my back, arms, and stomach. “It was only twice in senior year. Then he got sent to prison.”

She nods, but she’s still shaking. “He deserves to die. A horrible death.”

“He does,” I agree. I gulp, choosing my words carefully. “Whenever I’m alone, in a room, and the door is closed.” I shake my head, feeling so stupid for letting it get to me. “I’m just so scared it’ll be locked. When he locked the door, it was just pain. And then, he’d leave me in there for so long—all on my own. I wasn’t allowed to move until he came back, just left to *feel* it. The pain.”

I take a deep breath. “I feel dumb. It was so long ago, and I’m still so terrified of being alone in a locked room.”

“No!” She turns around suddenly, grabbing my cheeks between her palms. “Rose, you’re not dumb. This is not your fault. Trauma...it needs to heal in a healthy way. No one ever gave you that. You’ve always been fighting this on your own.”

She lets go of my head to grab my shoulders and hug me tight. It’s not the kind we usually have. Our hugs have always been passionate, with so much lust underlying them that they never lasted too long. I always end up running my hands under

her top or her skirt, and she always nibbles at my neck until I can't help but bury myself in her.

But this one is just...love.

It's pure love, care, and compassion. She hugs me like a sister would, a best friend. A wife who understands me and wants the best for me. Who has accepted me despite everything.

However, dark thoughts always come in when I start to believe someone loves me. They creep up, and I wonder what she's thinking right now. Was it worth asking? How traumatized is she? Did she prefer wondering why I can't close the door when I'm in a room alone? Why I despise having my hair up? It's hard to tell, but it's too late to take any of it back.

The proximity, the unconditional love...I feel uncomfortable. I pull away and get up quickly enough to make her stumble.

"Rose," she murmurs as she follows. "Please, don't be so afraid to be vulnerable."

I scoff a mocking chuckle as a defense mechanism and hate myself for it. "I'm not vulnerable. I'm unfixable. You figured it out long before I told you about Bianco. He ruined me, Rachel. Do you understand that?"

"Why?" She still speaks softly, and it raises anger in me. I can't even explain why. Shouldn't she be disgusted by everything I went through?

"Because you like it?" she suggests in a gentle voice.

Her words stop me from pacing around the room. Something I hadn't even realized I was doing until I stopped abruptly. I roll my shoulders and crack my neck.

"What did you just say?" I hiss at her. I take a dangerous step toward her, but she doesn't falter. She keeps her words kind and her voice calm.

"Do you think he ruined you because you've come to enjoy the pain?"

“I-I...” I stutter. I can’t remember the last time I actually stuttered because I was at a loss for words.

“You enjoy the pain, Rose. I know you well enough to know that at least. I know because I used to enjoy giving it to you. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Kink helps many people deal with trauma.”

This time, I cackle a laugh. It only lasts a few seconds before my raspy voice comes to a low threat. “What, are you a shrink now? Is that the course your parents let you take before forcing you to marry Conor?”

She shakes her head, like shrugging away the painful words I throw at her. Shit, I genuinely hate myself when I’m like that. But I can’t fucking help it. I have to protect the fragile being I am.

“I know what you’re trying to do. You can’t push me away by hurting me, Rose. I’ve been through it enough times with you. We’re making progress.”

“What kind of progress are you making, Rach? Discovering kink helps fucked up people? Tell me, what sort of trauma are you getting over by cutting people with your little knife? Please, do share, little miss Stoneview.”

She pinches her lips and looks away. I still saw the hurt in her eyes.

“None,” she whispers.

I’m finally getting to her. Hopefully, she’ll give up on trying to find a solution to the fucked up being I am.

“But I’m not ashamed of what I like,” she says a little louder. “I’ve always been weird for as long as I can remember. So long that I don’t even feel weird anymore.” She shrugs her shoulders. “So what? Blood and knives turn me on. Hurting you and making you fear for your life makes me wet. So does being under you when you want to dominate me.”

She takes a step closer to me. It’s not half as threatening as the one I took to scare her, and yet, I take one back. “I don’t *need* to be overcoming trauma to justify my sexual tastes. I’m just telling *you*, it’s okay that you like pain after what

happened to you. And even if nothing had, it would be okay too. As long as you find someone to do it with who loves you. And I mean all of you, Rose.”

She takes another step, forcing me to back away until I hit the kitchen island.

I shake my head, completely denying what she’s trying to say. What is the point of all this? Sam wants me and the Volkov brothers dead, and he’s willing to hurt her to get what he wants. This is all going to explode at some point, and she shouldn’t be by my side when it does. Being alone has always worked for me. Sex and pushing people away are how I function, and it’s never failed me. I’m not about to change this now, not when my life only gets worse by the minute. Not when Sam thinks he can use me as his brand-new puppet.

Not when her life is at risk.

“Stop, Rach. Stop trying to fix me. You keep thinking you can help, but every time you mend something, another piece will tear. I’m bursting at the seam with unfixable issues.” I turn away when she gets too close. “You think it’s bad? It’ll get worse. And what will you do then? What will you love when there’s nothing left of the girl you know? Or worse, when it’s exactly the girl you’re refusing to accept I am.”

“Then I’ll keep loving you!” she rages. “And when it gets worse, I’ll love you more. You’re so blinded by your trauma that you can’t see what’s right in front of you. I’ll love you through everything, Rose. I’ll love you until the light in your eyes shines bright again and then some more.”

“Rose,” she says more calmly as she cages me in with her hands on either side of me. Her eyes are a light blue, as light as I feel when I’m around her. Her fair skin should always have my mark, *always*. Just to make sure everyone knows she belongs to me before them. Her lips are pink, the top one thinner and currently pressing against the bottom one. She brings her face closer to mine, whispering her truth in my ear. “We were meant to find each other. How have you not figured that one out yet?”

“How can you still want me?” I rasp. “Look at me.”

She pulls away slightly, and her eyes roam over my face.

“I mean, *look* at me,” I insist. “This kind of beauty doesn’t exist. It’s not real. It’s only compensated by an ugly, destroyed interior.” I grab a hair tie around my wrist and pull my hair up in a messy bun. I turn my head as far as I can, showing her the scar I had her touch earlier. “This isn’t beautiful, Rachel. This is what I look like on the inside.”

“He might have destroyed you, but I will spend the rest of my life putting you back together.” She says it with such conviction that my heart skips a beat, starting to desire something insane and believing her. I face her again, my head falling against her shoulder, burying into her neck.

“You love so hard,” I whisper as I inhale her perfume. “Why do you love so hard?”

“Because you’re so easy to love,” she murmurs back.

ROSE



Put It on Me – Matt Maeson

Slowly, my mouth kisses its way up her neck, her jaw, her mouth, just to land on her soft lips. Mine are plumper than hers, and I quickly take over our kiss, swallowing her soft whimper and covering her mouth. Our tongues come out at the same time, licking the other and sharing the kind of love I don't deserve—the kind Rachel wants to impose on us through sheer passion.

She pushes my t-shirt above my head as I take off her blouse completely. I undo her bra and bring it down her arms, letting it drop to the floor. She grabs me under my hips and helps me up on the kitchen bar. Exchanging the positions we had earlier. While she kisses my breasts, licking at them with a softness we never truly experienced, I fight against my zipper to get rid of my jeans, stopped too often by my body shuddering under the pleasure she spreads in me.

She helps me take my jeans and panties off, and I help her in return. Only when we're utterly naked do my eyes focus on the bruises on her ribs. They're purple, some of them even swollen. Sam and Lik will die for what they did. I just need to figure out how to get rid of them.

Her hands spread my thighs, her fingers slide between my lips, and I exhale a sigh.

She must sense my anger because she whispers softly, "Focus on this," as her thumb comes to rub my clit. I inhale a shaky breath and my head falls back. "Focus on us, Rose."

“Shit,” I moan as she presses slightly harder, making slow circles, forcing my hips to try and pick up the pace.

She licks my left nipple and gently nibbles at the bud. “Do you know what love is?” she whispers against it. I have a very small scar there, from a time when she cut me. It’s tiny compared to some other ones I bear from the men who have hurt me, but it holds so much more meaning.

I shake my head ‘no’, choosing honesty over meaninglessly telling her I love her. I do; I do love her, I’m just not sure what it means.

“It’s the smell of your perfume and the cigarettes you smoke.” She moves to my other breast, still keeping a slow pace against my clit and making me writhe with need.

“It’s the color of your eyes when you look at me.”

She grabs the stool next to her and sits on it. My hands are holding the edge of the island so tightly, one beside each of my thighs. I have no room to lie back, and I have to sit up and watch her as she puts her hand in the crease behind my knees.

“It’s the butterflies that escape us when we kiss,” she tells me as she lowers herself, dropping a kiss just above my clit. I tremble and try to push myself closer to her. She spreads my legs further apart.

“It’s how wet your pussy gets for me, the sound of your moans and the electricity between us.”

She licks me with a flat tongue from just below my entrance to the nub she’s been teasing for long minutes.

I moan exactly as she expected. “Love, Rose, is the person you choose.” She grazes her teeth against my clit, forcing a zap of electricity from her mouth to my heart, lighting up every nerve. “And I chose you, baby.”

Her words blow against my pussy, and my hand shoots to the back of her head. I fist her hair and force her against me. Her tongue dips into my pussy and back out; her teeth are against my clit and make me whimper with need. She eats me, and drinks me up. She takes the humanity in me and turns me into a wild animal that only answers to her and her tongue.

“Fuck,” I pant. “Fuck, Rach...” I can feel my orgasm building up from my lower belly, zapping its way up to my throat. My lungs constrict, my ears start buzzing, and my toes curl around thin air.

“I don’t want to hear my name, Rose. I want to hear how much you love me.”

“I...” Air gets stuck in between my buzzing vocal cords.

“Say it,” she growls against me. “*Scream* it.”

Running out of air, I scream my words as I explode against her tongue. “I love you!”

I breathe in, choking on O₂ molecules while my trembling body rides the wave of my orgasm. She straightens up, leaves the stool she was sitting on and helps me get off the kitchen island. My legs are shaking, and my eyes are unable to focus on anything.

“Turn around,” she whispers as she leaves kisses on the skin just under my earlobe. She then kisses my mouth, pushing my own taste against my tongue. When she lets me go, I turn around. She pushes between my shoulders slowly, and I fold until my upper body lays across the seat of the stool and my head hangs.

“Don’t move.” Her words are softly spoken, the opposite of what we usually give each other. She runs a hand up and down my back, lulling me into a state of safe, post-orgasm bliss.

I don’t realize when she leaves, only when she comes back. My eyes are closed, my skin sensitive and the leather of the bar stool is warming up from how hot I am. My head feels heavy, blood rushing to it as it hangs upside down, but I don’t have the strength to pull it up.

“Rose.” Rachel’s angelic voice brings me out of a light sleep. She runs a hand against my back, up and down, up and down...

I can feel her settling behind me, but I can’t open my eyes. They’re heavy from the relaxed state I’m in.

She kisses my spine from my tailbone to the top of my neck. She kisses the side of my head and licks my earlobe. "I'm going to fuck you now," she murmurs.

My heart drops in my stomach and settles in my gut. My pussy clenches, my clit swelling from her words.

She spreads my ass cheeks and, from behind, licks my pussy again. I'm so wet for her, I can feel it against my thighs. I sense her straightening up, and one finger enters me. She comes in and out of me, dragging my wetness all over. Then she inserts another. She rubs her knuckles against my g-spot, bringing more pleasure out of me, more of her name in long moans.

"Baby, you sound like a queen when you moan for me." My knees buckle at her voice. She inserts a third finger, stretching me and making me wince.

"Shh," she says as she puts a hand in my hair. She rubs my scalp and keeps moving in and out of me. "You're being so good," she assures me. "And you're going to take more now."

She pulls her fingers out, letting me take a few seconds of respite, trying to catch my breath while desire still engulfs me. She spreads me, and a second later, I feel the head of a dildo against my entrance.

"Rach," I whimper, finally realizing she had gone to find the strap-on we used to use. I didn't even know we still had our toys in that room.

"Yes, baby?" she asks, almost innocently. She pulls back slightly, and then she's slowly entering me again.

"Fuck," I moan.

She works her way into me slowly until the pleasure is so intense, I'm pushing my hips back against her, chasing for more.

While her thrusts keep the same pace, she puts more force behind them and they become harsher, making me scream her name. Her next move hits hard, and I go on my toes, attempting to move away from her. She grabs my hips, stopping me.

“Calm down,” she orders softly.

“It’s too much,” I whine in a short pant.

“Be good, Doll.” That nickname and the change in her voice wake something in me. I still and let her guide my hips back into place. My feet are now flat on the floor. She stands still as she moves inside me. In and out, harsh and slow, pleasure and pain. It all mixes together in a heat of passion, in the throes of pleasure. “You’re taking it so good. If you could see your pussy taking me in...God, you’re beautiful.”

She bends over me, and I feel her teeth against my back. She bites hard, and I scream in pleasure.

“Shit,” I moan. “I’m gonna come...I’m gonna come, Rach...” She accelerates, rubbing against my g-spot so perfectly, and I come undone for her. My knees fail me, and she holds my hips as I grip the legs of the seat. She slows down for a few seconds as I catch my breath and come down. Her hand comes around so her fingers can rub my clit and I gasp.

“What are you doing?”

She pushes into me again, making me shriek. “One more for me, Doll.”

“Rach, I can’t...I can’t take anymore.” I go on my toes, but she pushes harder, moving the stool at the same time, making it grate against the floor. I can feel sweat running down my back. My belly twists with pleasure, and heat spreads from my toes to my ears as air becomes rare in my lungs.

“And yet you will.”

She fucks me hard, fast; she accelerates every time I try to complain. I scream her name in pain, but not as hard as I scream in pleasure. She pinches and pulls at my clit before slapping it. And when she draws a long circle, I explode again. I let her force another orgasm out of me and lose all strength.

She takes her time to pull out, but when she does, I almost fall into her arms. She helps me walk to the sofa, and we both fall on it.

It takes me a while to catch my breath, for my heart to come back to a steady beat. Feeling her own against my back as she spoons me and lulls me to sleep. I nudge her with the back of my head, and she slips her hand in my hair, scratching my skull. Exactly like we used to. Sleep engulfs me with a blanket of bliss, drifting away any horrible memory of today or the previous years. Maybe she's right, maybe her love can fix everything.

It feels like a minute later when a phone rings, but judging at how deep my sleep was and the sun's orange light rising, we slept all night. Rachel jumps off the sofa, pushing me off and making me roll onto the floor with more strength than I could have fought against in my sleepy state. She runs to where her clothes are and grabs her phone.

"It's Conor," she panics. She runs her hands through her hair, fear overtaking her features. "I can't tell him I'm here," she squeaks.

"Fuck Conor," I yawn. "Come back here." I crash into the comfort of the sofa again.

She shakes her head. "He doesn't want me to see you."

"Now, that's simply unfair. What does he think we'll do? Have amazing sex all night long?"

It doesn't make her laugh.

"Fine," I huff. I don't understand why she doesn't simply tell him to fuck off. Letting a fucker like him bring her down and tie her into a relationship, hell, a fucking engagement. I just don't get it. But I wasn't here like I should have been, and my next words taste a little bitter.

"Rach, after all this, you can't tell me Conor will be the one putting himself between us? Surely you know I would kill him before letting that happen."

Her eyes widen. I doubt it's because I said I'd kill him. She's used to that. No, it's like she believes Conor could be an actual problem for us.

“I can’t leave him,” she shakes her head.

“What?” I chuckle. She’s always hated the fucker, and now she can’t leave him?

“I mean...I will. Not now. I can’t right now.”

“I’ll do it for you,” I growl as I get up. I grab my t-shirt off the floor while walking to her, and by the time I’m on her, she’s holding her phone tightly behind her back.

“No. He really can’t know. I’m serious.” She gets dressed too fast for me to comprehend in my sleepy state. She’s already trying to button her buttonless blouse. When did that happen? She looks down at the blouse. It’s teared up from me and bloody from Sam’s cut.

The phone has stopped ringing. It starts again.

“Give me the phone, Sunshine.”

“Please, Rose. I can’t break off an engagement just like that. I need to sit down with him. I need to talk to my parents.”

“Oh, my fucking god,” I cackle a laugh. “You’re still doing exactly what they order you to! Grow the fuck up, Rachel!”

“Believe me, I don’t want to go home right now. Not after you made yourself so vulnerable to me. This doesn’t change anything. I love you, Rose. I just need to handle Conor...” Fear crosses her eyes, deep, bottomless. Rachel still fears her parents and what they want out of her.

“Alright.” I take a second to think, trying to let go of my possessiveness for her. I need to be understanding. I need to let her take this slow. I can’t just barge back into her life and force her to break off her engagement.

But then, her phone starts ringing again, and in her palm, I watch ‘*my soulmate*’ light up the screen. It happens slow and fast at the same time. In slow-motion, she watches my eyes scan the screen. Our gazes meet, and her eyes plead with me silently.

When my hand starts to move, she goes to speak, but she’s too late.

“He’s the one who saved his name—”

I grab the phone from her hands and pick up.

“She’s a bit busy right now, Conor. Why don’t you sleep some more? She’ll be home later.”

“Rose!” she gasps. I’ve already hung up. I also turn her phone off. This is my moment with Rachel. The one I’ve been waiting for since I fell in love with her.

“You can’t do this. This...” She’s lost for words, but she’s happy. I can see it from the pinched smile.

“Why don’t you try to leave and see if I let you?”

I know how it sounds. Possessive, jealous, psychopathic. I can live with that.

And seeing the look on her face right now, so can she.

“I’m going to have a huge argument when I get home,” she huffs.

“Hopefully, he cancels the wedding.”

“Wishful thinking,” she murmurs back.

“You’re mine, Sunshine,” I tell her as I get close to her again. “All mine. Conor doesn’t stand a chance.”

She nods, her eyes glued to my lips. “What happened last night...” She hesitates, not truly finding the words.

“Will happen many more times.” I pause for a few seconds, trying to find an agreement between us. “Look, you want to stay with Conor for now? You want to appease your parents? Be my guest, but you’ll never be his.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “I was talking about Sam...and that guy.”

“Lik.” I blow a long breath. I roll my shoulders and stretch my neck. “No, *that*, that will never happen again.”

“Rose, you can’t just do whatever they ask of you. You can’t! It’s dangerous, it’s—”

“That’s not something for you to worry about.”

She doesn't agree, but she nods anyway, her lips sealed only for a few seconds. "If you were such good childhood friends, why do you hate each other so much?"

Rachel has a universal innocent look. Her blonde hair, her bright blue eyes. She hides evil beneath that, but not the kind that would put someone she loves in danger. She would never do the kind of things I did to Sam, never betray someone as he did to me or I to him.

"He was meant to protect me," I rasp. "He made promises he never kept, and he chose to side with...he..." My words escape me as my heart squeezes and attempts to escape through my throat. "He's a liar. He...he abandoned me."

She can sense how I'm starting to lose focus over this, pain stabbing at my chest.

"It's okay, baby," she says softly. "I trust you. If you say he betrayed you, then I believe you."

I shake my head. "He stabbed me in the back, Rach. And I stabbed him back." My mouth twists. "Right in the heart." I take her face between the palms of my hands. "His hate runs deep, and if doing whatever he wants means he stays away from you, that's fine with me. I'll get my revenge on him once you're safe. Trust me about that."

"But—"

"I said that's fine with me, period."

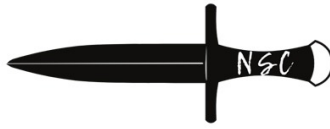
"Rose—"

"Enough, Rachel. I let you stay with Conor, and you let me handle my shit. Argument over."

"I love you," she says meekly.

"And if I didn't love you, I wouldn't have agreed to that shit. Now lay back down. You have a few hours of pleasure before you return to boredom."

Her smile lights up the room, her clothes fall to the floor, and my mouth meets hers in a hungry kiss.



Horns – Bryce Fox

“No one should have lips that red. It’s illegal,” I mumble to myself.

“*I heard that,*” Sam’s voice comes out of the speaker in his car. I borrowed it to go pick up Rose White from her house.

Friday came fast, and I’m already on my little mission to take Rose to the Volkovs’ club in Silver Falls. I watch her walk out of the enormous gate that leads to the mansion she’s staying in. The Murrays’ estate is a nice place deep in Stoneview.

Upper class, rich kids, and a lot of girls who look down on my friends and me. That’s about all I remember from Stoneview. I hadn’t been in so long, I was shocked at how richer the rich got. The only good thing that ever came out of Stoneview was Jake White. A God giving us the chance to look at him from afar as he walked among us, humans. He moved to our school on the North Shore during our senior year, and there wasn’t a minute I could take my eyes off him. His eyes, his dimples, his lips... the exact same as his twin sister.

“*I’m going to assume you have eyes on her,*” Sam speaks again, taking me out of my thoughts.

“I do,” I sigh lovingly, just to annoy him.

“*Will you take your dick out of your hand and get on with it,*” he growls. My beautiful, untamable man getting jealous

because he understands how I find his enemy attractive.

“She’s a girl, *habibi*,” I chuckle. “You know I’ve never been interested in those.” Till now, I don’t say. “But please, keep up the angry behavior. It turns me on.”

“*When’s your next essay due?*” he asks me, changing the topic.

“Why? Do you want to write it?” I hate college and would have never stepped foot in there had Sam not insisted on me getting a higher education. He didn’t and is projecting on me.

“*Because I can see the shit on your desk, and it doesn’t look like someone trying to write an essay.*”

“What are you doing in *my* office?” I fake a gasp. “There’s private stuff in there, sir.”

“*My house. My office. My boyfriend,*” he grumbles.

“Mm, stop. I love it when you call me your boyfriend. The cuteness emanating out of you right now.”

“*Lik, I will choke you with my dick. You let me know how cute you find that.*” My own dick stirs to life, and I have to adjust myself in my suit. “*You’re starting on your essay when you get home tonight,*” he orders low.

“Or what?” I say as I bite my lip.

“*Or you’re going to get nothing next time you beg for my dick in that tight arse of yours.*”

“You’re not even fun,” I pout. Rose spots me on the other side of the road and walks toward the car. She’s wearing black mom jeans, and she’s covered a tight black turtleneck with an extra-large denim jacket that could probably fit Sam. Her long, ink-black hair is being blown away from her face by the wind. “The princess is coming. Bye, *habibi*,” I say in a rush.

“*Don’t call her princess—*” I hang up.

I unlock the car, and Rose hops in.

“Hi, princess,” I greet her with a massive smile on my face.

I watch her jaw clench. Her hands are in the pockets of her jacket, but I can imagine the way she squeezes them into fists like she did at the cabin last week. She hates this situation, and I'm going to milk it. I've spent the last two years watching Sam's eyes light up whenever she was mentioned. It was either with hate or passion. Either way, it was always something substantial.

Her name is always on people's lips. A forbidden whisper for the forbidden girl. No one could touch her on the North Shore, and it didn't matter if they were fucking her or fucking her up. Her big brother Nate would warn everyone against it. They were some brave people, and as far as I know, Rose has quite a fuckboy reputation, so I doubt Nate killed everyone who touched her. But I know Sam killed a few men who went too far. To say it makes me jealous is an understatement.

I had never seen her until last week. It's strange because we have been in the same circles. We went to the same lacrosse tournaments in high school, and I simply never gave the Stoneview girls any attention. Xi met her at multiple parties, Billie hates her, and Emma fucking *slept* with her. Sam only spared her because she's my stepsister. Rose White has been suffocating me for years, and she had no idea I even existed.

Now she only sees me as Sam's boyfriend, but what she doesn't get is that she never leaves his mind. Meaning she never leaves mine. She's been back for barely two months, and he's already killed the only man who touched her—Mattock, gone for touching the woman Sam wants to keep for himself.

Sam killing a man for Rose...it annoys me, but it doesn't surprise me. No, what surprised me was how he looked at Rachel, the jealousy in his eyes.

"The fuck you smiling for," she mumbles as she puts her seatbelt on. Lost in my thoughts, I forgot to take my stupid smile off my face. The one I decided to use just to piss her off.

"Just happy to see my new work colleague." I start the car and pull out.

“If that’s what you want to call it,” she huffs, looking out the window.

“Do you prefer me saying I’m happy to see Sam’s new blackmailed soldier? Oh no, I know, Sam’s new toy? His new bitc—”

“Shut the fuck up,” she snaps as her head turns back to me. Her gaze narrows when she sees my grin and understands I was fucking with her.

This is going to be fun.

Her sharp gaze, a midnight blue that seems ready to bring a night storm upon the world, observes my face closely. Being at a red light, I face her, letting her assess my features. I’m a beautiful man. My lashes are long and my jaw sharp. I have a charming smile and irresistible chocolate eyes. Of course, I don’t compare to her.

She pauses on my smile. My full lips are parted to show my straight teeth and as I taunt her. I’m handsome, take it all in.

“Who has teeth that white? Weirdo.” She turns back to face her window and I explode laughing.

“You’re cute,” I tell her. The light goes green, and we’re on our way again. It’s a good half hour to Silver Falls and I’m not the kind to sit in silence. “Sam told you to dress the part. I’m afraid you don’t fit the role of the sexy girl going to a sex club right now.”

“You can tell Sam to suck my dick. Hell will freeze before I dress as a stripper to enter a club owned by Vikt—” She catches herself, runs a hand through her hair, and finishes her sentence. “The Volkov brothers.”

She throws me a glance but doesn’t turn my way. I caught her, though, and I feel my brows furrow. So she calls one of the Volkov brothers by his first name.

“You don’t even have a dick,” I chuckle to pretend I didn’t notice her slip up. “That would change *everything*.”

“My metaphorical dick, asshole. But if you want to talk reality, you can tell him to suck *yours* and think of *me*. If he doesn’t already.” This time she turns to me fully and winks at me.

It pisses me off, and my hands tighten against the steering wheel.

Not only because it could be true.

Not only because I wouldn’t even know if it was.

But mainly because her little wink just made my heart somersault.

I’m a sensitive guy. And she looks so much like her twin.

My heart definitely used to skip a beat when Jake White looked at me a little too closely.

That must be why.

I put music on to drown out the sound of my heart in my ears. *Art Hoe* by Call Me Karizma plays through the speakers, and I roll my eyes at how much it fits her.

I park at the back of Vue Club and turn to Rose. The sun has set, the night is waking up, and she looks like she belongs to the dark.

“I need you to get changed,” I tell her as I grab the bag from the back seat. It’s got some sexy underwear and a harness she will never want to wear. Sam knew she wouldn’t dress like he asked her to, so he gave me this bag for her. Except I have no idea how to make her change. Because Sam tried to pay a visit to Rachel tonight and she wasn’t at her house.

Rose doesn’t have to know that, right? She opens the bag and brings a black lace thong out. It hangs from her index finger. She looks at me, the thong, and back at me.

“Yeah, I’m not wearing that.”

“Come on,” I smirk. “Do we really want to go back to the whole ‘your girlfriend will get hurt if you don’t do what we tell you’ sort of conversation? We’re past that, you and I.”

I think I've got her until she puts the thong back into the bag and zips it shut. She's the one smiling at me now. Those fucking red lips. I bet they'd feel like heaven around my...

Nope.

"Rachel is out of town. Her fiancé took her dress shopping in New York City for the weekend. So...no, I'm not wearing that."

I bite my bottom lip, chewing on my thoughts. Right, that's a problem.

"But I'll get you into that stupid club."

I raise an eyebrow, surprised, and nod slowly. "If you think you can get me in there dressed like a little boy from the 90s, *yalla.*"

She rolls her eyes at me, and we leave the car. It's fucking weird walking to the small metal door dressed in a deep black Armani suit while she looks like one of the kids from *Stranger Things*.

"I'm warning you now. You get us in and then you let me do the talking."

"What are you even trying to do in there? The brothers don't come here."

"I know who I'm looking for, don't worry," I say as I knock on the metal door four times.

The silence I get in return doesn't bring me doubts, but the girl next to me looking at me like I don't know what I'm doing is pissing me off.

The door finally opens, and a man about the same size as Sam emerges. Both Rose and I must stretch our necks to look up at him. He's so close to us, we take a step back at the same time.

He says something in Russian, looking at me. It sounds like some sort of approval. But then he looks at Rose's outfit from head to toe and shakes his head.

"*Nyet,*" he says before grabbing the door to close it.

“Fuckin’ told you to get changed,” I mumble at her, anger rising in me.

Before he can close the door, Rose puts her foot in there and stops him. Great, she’s going to piss off the giant, and I’m the one who’s going to have to get into a fight tonight.

The guy *literally* growls at her. “Don’t anger me, girl,” he says in a strong Russian accent. “I break little pussies for breakfast.”

She snorts and turns to me. “Hear that, Lik? He breaks little pussies for breakfast. We better keep you safe from him.”

My heart accelerates as she turns back to the Russian guy. “Let me in, big boy. I want to show you something. You can kick me back out if you don’t like it.”

I grab her by the elbow before she can walk in. “What the fuck are you going to show him? Your tits? I’m afraid to tell you your two mosquito bites aren’t gonna get us anything but killed.”

She shrugs me off and disappears inside, leaving me with a mouth hanging low. What the hell is she showing him? If she dies, Sam is going to kill me. But she comes back out five seconds later and waves at me.

“Come in, my little pussy. We’re all good.”

“I’ll have you know pussies are probably the strongest thing in the world. Don’t undermine what gave birth to the entire population,” I tell her casually as we walk through a thin, red corridor. “They’re much stronger than balls, and saying someone is a pussy to say they’re weak is a stupid expression.”

“Yeah, you’d know a lot about balls, considering the amount you must have licked in your life.” She stops and turns to me. “You don’t have to defend pussies to me, Lik. Trust me, you won’t meet anyone who loves them more than I do. Shall we?”

She points at a black door in front of us. *Vue Club* is written in neon red on it.

“You’re about to see girls that actually look sexy in there. Do your best to fit in,” I huff at her.

“You’re so beautiful, Lik,” she smiles.

I raise an eyebrow, knowing there’s something else coming. She wants the last word. It’s like a need in her.

“You’re Algerian, right? It shows in your beautiful traits.” I stay silent, and the other shoe drops. “How often do they make you feel like you fit in in these kinds of clubs?”

I purse my lips. Hadn’t reasonably thought of that. It’s a mission in itself to walk around with my kind of face in our country. I have lived alongside racism my whole life, and she knows she’s right. White people have rarely made me feel like I belong.

I still find something to answer because there’s no way I’m going to let her have the last word.

“First of all, while my mom is Algerian, my dad was Moroccan, so you can’t say I’m just Algerian.”

“A little bird told me your dad was from Oujda. It’s so close to Algeria he could probably wave at your mom from his window.”

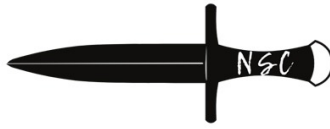
I have to pinch my lips to avoid laughing at how accurate this is. Nevertheless like my mom would say, my dad is probably giving us middle fingers hearing how we’re comparing his city to Algeria. “Leave my dad alone, *miskīn*,” I say to refer to my poor dad. “If he could hear you now. How do you even know so much about me?” I put a hand on my chest and cock my head to the right. “Rose White...are you a fan of me?”

“Emma likes to talk about her family,” she answers simply. “And I have ways to make her talk.”

I stop moving, my hand on the handle. “Do you still sleep with my stepsister, princess?”

Her features tense at the nickname, but she still doesn’t tell me not to call her that. “What if I did? Jealous?”

She puts her hand on mine and pushes the door open.



I'm a Sucker for a Liar in a Red Dress – Adam Jensen

The club is smoky enough that we can't see a few feet in front of us. Red strobes cross the all-black dancefloor, and the deep bass music renders us deaf. I grab Rose's arm and pull her closer.

"Stay close," I say loudly in her ear. For fuck's sake, I'm going to pierce an eardrum in here. I'm starting to understand why Sam sent me. He hates loud places. The boy needs his calm and Zen. He also didn't want anyone here to recognize him. Mainly, he didn't want to spend time alone with Rose.

Zigzagging between sweaty people, grinding against each other, I guide us to the bar.

"A Polugar," I tell the young bartender. She's a sultry blonde wearing a red corset and a leather skirt.

"And a whisk—"

"That's it," I tell the blonde. She turns her back to us to pour my vodka.

"What the fuck, I want a drink too. At least make it worth my time."

"No," I tell her. "You get to stay quiet and wait. And for fuck's sake, try showing that you're halfway decent looking."

She's damn gorgeous, even in an oversized denim jacket and a *fucking* turtleneck. But she knows that and needs her head to be screwed back on her shoulders. My stern voice

must have annoyed her, because she stares at me with narrowed eyes.

“Don’t try to order me around, Lik. Your boyfriend might have something to blackmail me with, but you’re just his little pet.”

She takes a step closer to me and it annoys me that she’s not even short. While she’s skinny and I’m big, the bitch must be barely an inch shorter than me, and I’m six fucking feet. She doesn’t even have to look up to speak straight to my face.

A smirk appears on her face. “I know the kind of guys Sam fucks. You’re his sub. That doesn’t give you any power over me.”

My nostrils flare, accidentally taking in her flowery perfume. When she pushes her voice to speak over the music, it makes it raspier than she usually sounds, and I keep having to fight my brain to stop finding it hot. Her little smile looks too much like a winning one. So I smirk back until she looks confused.

I walk around her slowly and settle against her back, so I can talk directly in her ear. “It would be a grave mistake to think that because I let one man dominate me, I am not a dangerous being myself.”

I feel her tremble. Slowly, I take her jacket off her shoulders. “It would be foolish to believe that I can’t take the reins, especially when it comes to little, bratty princesses who think they’re stronger than me.”

She stills completely when my hands grab the material around her throat. The thick rings around my fingers glint from the red lasers hitting against the metal.

“I told you to look sexy, princess.” I pull harshly, ripping off her turtleneck from her throat, all the way to her breasts. She gasps and brings her hands to mine. “Tsk, tsk,” I tut her, pushing her hands away. I grab the bottom hem and rip it, too, then tie it into a knot just under her boobs. “Next time, don’t make me repeat myself.”

I walk back in front of her and look at her new look. The turtleneck is ripped low enough to show between her boobs and tied again just under them. A few tattoos peek out from her collarbone, and the ones on her stomach are also exposed. She finally fits right in at the club.

“There you go. Wasn’t so hard, was it?” The bartender gives me my drink and I give it to her. “That table over there,” I say, pointing at a table with three men sitting around it. “I want you to bring them this drink. Make friends with the fat one. And, you know, do what you do best. Make the other ones jealous.”

It’s death that stares back at me. Violence is battling in her eyes, ready to annihilate me. She truly hates being told what to do. And yet, when I look down, I don’t miss her thin thighs tensing and slightly rubbing together.

My lips curl slightly because Sam was right. It’s always the most potent spirits that get turned on by being dominated.

“Off you go.”

She turns around, her fingers tight around the glass. So tight, in fact, I expect it to shatter any minute now.

Watching Rose is quite an experience. I wonder if she’s ever tried to flirt with anyone, because looking at the scene in front of me, she doesn’t even need to.

The three men are already captivated by her, and all she’s done is *not* what I told her.

I said to give the drink to one of them; I could not have been any clearer. And all she’s doing is resting her back on their table, not even facing them, and starts drinking the said drink. And yet they’re all looking at her back, at her long hair touching their table. The fat Russian grabs her arm and tugs, indicating for her to turn around. She does so, acting surprised that they want to talk to her.

I can tell the exact moment they see her face, because theirs darken like wolves who finally found prey after days of searching. His hand doesn’t leave her wrist as he talks to her. She says something that makes them all laugh and then

focuses on the one holding her. Great, she's finally following what I told her. I notice the other guys trying to get her attention but not getting one bit of it. Is that what it's like to be into Rose White?

The guy she's talking to rubs his thumb against her tattooed wrist and blood rushes to my ears, making me slightly annoyed.

What the fuck. Get a hold of yourself, Malik.

My heart starts racing when he puts another hand on her waist. Her skinny figure looks breakable in his big hands. I know she's anything but. Still, I get a sudden urge to break every single one of his fingers.

My fingertips heat up, and I turn to the bartender again.

"Another Polugar," I snap. She looks at me under her lashes and smiles. "Lots of ice."

I shouldn't be drinking. I don't drink anymore, and Sam would absolutely flip if he saw me do so. But it doesn't count with a lot of ice, right?

"We don't often see pretty faces like yours in this club," she tells me in a sultry voice. She pours the see-through liquid into my glass, her eyes not leaving mine.

I don't even reply to her. My eyes are on Rose and that man as I down my drink. When he pulls her onto his lap, I take it as my sign to carry out the rest of the plan. I should probably give them more time, but I'm suddenly feeling extra possessive. Good thing it goes with the character I'm meant to play. We need to get invited to their private party tomorrow and we need to go as a duo. A very *special* duo.

I slam my tumbler on the bar and stride toward the group.

Remember, you can't smash his head on the table. You need the guy.

They all look up at me from their seats. Rose was about to pour some of her drink in the guy's mouth. She stops mid-gesture and brings the glass back to herself when she notices my deadly stare.

She blinks up at me, and I let a lethal smirk spread across my face. Slowly, I reach for her, grabbing a fistful of her thick hair and pulling her slowly enough that she can follow the movement.

“Princess,” I taunt. She struggles to get off the guy’s lap, but she manages. Good, it would hurt if she didn’t. “I’ve been looking for you.”

She winces when I shake her head, confusion spreading on her face. I can imagine her thoughts right now. I told her to go flirt, and now I’m coming in like a jealous boyfriend. I couldn’t exactly tell her that was the plan, she would have never followed through with it.

The three men around the table look at me with a mix of envy, jealousy, and hate.

“Gentlemen,” I tell them politely. “I hope she hasn’t been bothering you? She can be a very, *very* bad girl.”

The guys sneer one by one. They’re slowly understanding I play in the same category as them.

“Not at all,” one says. He’s got Russian features but an American accent. He must be younger than the others, a generation born here.

“No, but if she escaped you looking for more company, you are not taking good care of her.” That’s the one that was holding her. He’s older, and his accent is strong. His dark hair is mixed with gray ones above his ears and by his temples. He’s big, his white shirt too tight around his neck and his pants about ready to explode.

I look at Rose. Her eyes are darting to all of them, not quite following the conversation. Or maybe not believing I put her in this situation.

“Eyes down,” I snap at her. This could go either way. She is such a rebellious soul, and I expect her to throw the drink in my face and fuck our plan right this second.

But then her gaze drops to the floor. My lips part slightly, shock coursing through my body before I get back into character.

Shit, it's really hot when she obeys. A lot hotter than when she talks back. Or maybe it's the former coming after the latter that makes it hot.

I let go of her hair and simply grab the drink in her hands. "And you've been drinking? I'm counting the punishments, princess. Are you?"

I can't believe I'm using some of Sam's tactics right now. I know how much I love it when he does it to me. I could never imagine saying these kinds of things to him. But to her? It feels a little too natural right now.

I smell the drink, pretending not to know what it was. Initially, I wanted her to use it as an excuse to talk to the guys. Offer them a drink and start a conversation. But she kept it to herself, so I'm improvising.

"Vodka," I chuckle. "Bad princess. Look at how you make me look in front of my new friends. Now they're going to think I don't train you well." I grab her jaw tightly between my fingers. "Show them how well you listen." I take a large sip of vodka in my mouth, press on her cheeks until she opens and spit the drink into her mouth.

She chokes on it when she tries to swallow. Some of it spills out of her mouth, and I wipe it with my hand.

I shake my head, faking disappointment as if we do this every day and she can't get it right. "Gentlemen, that wasn't very impressive, was it?"

"She needs better training," my new friend tells me.

I'm starting to see, while I'm handsome and he's ugly, that we have a few things in common. First of all, we discovered only tonight that we both like touching Rose. Secondly, we now also both want to train her in BDSM.

Shit.

"I agree." My gaze goes to the three of them and back to my fat friend. "You wouldn't happen to know of a place to take her?" I say knowingly.

He cackles a laugh, shaking his head.

“You’re funny for an Америкос.” He keeps laughing so much that he starts coughing his lungs out.

Did he just call me an American? Funny ‘cause no one calls me American here.

“You got balls,” he finally says after his coughing fit. “Coming into my club with your barely trained bitch and asking to access our rooms.”

I notice Rose’s hands tightening into fists by her sides. Her lips are slightly parted, and I feel like if there was no music, I could hear her whisper something.

“You seemed to have a keen interest in my barely trained bitch a minute ago. I’m offering to add a new client to your business. How stupid of you to consider refusing my money.”

“I’m not refusing yet.” His eyes are glued to Rose’s cleavage. What the hell is he looking at? I’m thicker in that department than she is.

“You just called my sub a bitch. I get to do this. You don’t.”

Malik Benhaim, what in the fucking hell are you doing?

This plan is fucked if that guy doesn’t let us into tomorrow’s party. And here I am telling him off for calling Rose a bitch?

He exchanges a look with his colleagues, takes in Rose from head to toe, and looks back at me.

“Eleven p.m. tomorrow. Say you’re a guest of Semenov. Entry is a thousand per guest.”

Semenov. That was his name. All I could remember Sam telling me was to look for a fat guy by the black door. Not the only door, not the only fat guy in here. This could have gone really bad.

I nod. “I’m Kill,” I lie as I introduce myself. “I’m looking forward to it, Mr. Semenov.”

“And make sure she dresses appropriately, or little *princess* here won’t have a good time getting corrected in there.”

I'm surprised Rose's teeth haven't cracked at how tight her jaw is. She must be hating this with a dangerous passion. Especially now that she understands what the actual goal of tonight was.

I extend my hand. He looks at it for long seconds before shaking it. "Pleasure doing business with you. See you tomorrow."

I put a hand on the back of Rose's neck and guide her away. I grab her denim jacket I had left on a stool by the bar, and we're out the next minute.

She's silent until we're sure no one can hear us anymore, locked inside the car.

"You fucking *asshole!*" she rages. She punches the dashboard, not controlling her anger, and shakes her hand. She's undoubtedly hurt herself.

"That was stupid." I roll my eyes and push around the shit in the middle console until I find my pack of gum. Sam keeps it there for me. I need something to take the edge off, but I'm not allowed to ingest anything fun. So I throw three pieces of gum in my mouth and chew until my jaw hurts.

I crack every one of my knuckles as Rose insults me. She hits the dashboard again and I rub my temples.

"I'm warning you now. You can tell Sam to go fuck himself. I'm not going into your fucking BDSM club just so you can find the Volkov brothers. It's a shit plan. They don't go there. They're not fucked-up like you and your boyfr—"

I turn around so violently that she jumps in fear. But it's only when I brutally cup her jean-clad pussy that she shuts up in a gasp.

"Shut the fuck up," I growl at her.

She's in such shock, her hands didn't even come to grab my forearm. She's holding the sides of her seat like her life depends on it and blinking at me with her mouth agape. My palm is harsh against her pussy, and my fingers are going under her, grabbing at her ass.

“Killing the Volkov brothers is Sam’s way of getting out of the hitman’s life once and for all. He and I have been through enough, and we deserve the fucking peace this money will bring us. Your shitty attempts at rebellion almost failed us tonight. I won’t let you fuck up our plan, do you understand? So now you’re going to listen and listen well. We make the plan. You execute with your mouth shut and, if needed, legs wide open. Tomorrow, we’re coming back here, and you’re dressing like we tell you to, you’re going where we tell you to, and I don’t want to hear any fucking complaints.”

I squeeze her tightly before continuing, making her whimper something a little too close to a moan.

“Or I promise you, Rose. Your girl can be dress shopping in fucking Phuket. I will find her, I will bring her to you, and I will make you watch while I cut her into tiny little pieces.”

I can tell her panting is from all the anger she’s holding back right now, but I keep toying with her anyway.

“And don’t act like a big girl when you started getting wet the second I gave you your first order.”

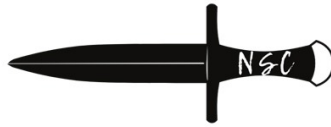
She looks away from me and finally attempts to push my hand away. “Let go,” she whispers.

I don’t need to insist. The defeated look in her eyes before she turned to the window told me everything I needed to know. I let go of her and grab more pieces of gum, throwing them into my mouth.

The mint burns my mouth and stings my eyes. I need to calm down. I’m one remark away from letting go of Lik and letting Kill take over. Over what? The first girl that makes me want to stick my dick in her?

Come on, Malik, you’re stronger than that.

LIK



Switchblade – neverwaves

I'm driving in complete silence when my phone rings. I expect it to be Sam. His grounding voice will help calm me down. My eyebrows raise in surprise when Xi's name appears on my screen. A call from my brother this late is never a good thing.

"Where are you?" he asks before I can say hello. I can hear a party behind him. Fuck, I hope the Kings' Crew didn't try something while everyone had their guard down.

"Just driving back to mine. What's up?"

"We're having a party at the girls'." Mama went home with Austin." By the girls, he means our stepsisters. Our mom spends most of her time at Austin's, but she still has the house she used to share with our dad. That's where Xi lives. Sometimes she likes to spend her evenings there. That's when we throw parties at the girls' house.

"I'm not in the mood for a party, Xi." I check on Rose while I drive, a hand on the steering wheel and one holding the phone to my ear. She hasn't moved from her position against the door while looking out the window. She's crossed her arms over her denim jacket, making sure to hide any bit of skin that was showing from earlier.

"Yeah, I don't care," he answers. *"I need you to come. Billie's in some deep shit."*

As a reflex, I pull my foot off the gas pedal so I can think clearer.

“What do you mean?” Something tugs at my gut. If anything happens to my family, I’ll burn the Kings’ fucking house to the ground.

“*Just come, ya hmar.*” He hangs up on me and I turn the car around. We had just passed the bridge that leads Silver Falls to the North Shore.

Rose realizes straight away that I’m changing direction. We cross the bridge, and she frowns at me. “Take me to my house.”

I ignore her, and she lets out a long huff. It doesn’t take long to reach the girls’ house. I park on the road and turn to her.

“What the fuck are we doing at Billie Scott’s?” she hisses. She looks at the house again, the windows are steamed up from the energy inside, but it’s evident a party is going on. “Do you want my fucking head?”

“Got something to deal with,” I mumble. I get out of the car and stop dead in my tracks.

If I leave her alone, she’ll leave and return to her house by her own means. The thing is, I wasn’t driving her back to her house. She just wasn’t aware of it yet.

“Fuck,” I huff. I round the car and open the door.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” she smiles at me with a newfound hatred. She wasn’t a big fan of mine before tonight, but she’s reached a new level post grabbing her cunt.

“I’m going to be very quick. You *behave* yourself, got it?” I grab her arm and pull her out of the car, dragging her with me to the door.

She stays weirdly quiet as I open the door and, unexpectedly, follows me in without another complaint. This is strange from her; she doesn’t usually miss an occasion to fight back. I’m a bit scared she will stab me the first chance she gets.

A few people shout my name as soon as I pass the door. All the smoke from joints and cigarettes, all the drugs, and the

dizzying music ring deep inside me. I need to let go, and I can't. Taking drugs and drinking isn't something I'm allowed to do anymore. Not after Sam saved me from that.

Knowing eyes take Rose in, and some guys are already on their way to talk to her by the time I've made it to the kitchen, where I know I'll find Xi. How has she already gathered so much attention? I throw a few death stares, and two guys back away before they reach us.

What the fuck does she put in her perfume?

I push open our handleless kitchen door and find Xi and Emma talking to someone, their backs to me and hiding whom I can only assume is Billie.

"What the fuck is wrong with you lately?" Emma shouts at her.

"Your dad's been worried sick," Xi adds. "Are you seriously not gonna start talking?"

"What's going on?" I ask.

Both Emma and my brother turn to me, showing a fuming Billie. Her tiny size is nothing to go by. She's a little monster, and she loves fighting. Not usually her family, though.

Her eyes narrow on Rose behind me.

"What the fuck..."

"...is that?!" I cut her off. Her face is bruised. Not just any bruise; it starts from the top of her jaw and descends all the way to her chin.

"Fuck sake," she whispers to herself.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Billie!" I shout at her. I'm not in the fucking mood, and she is forcing me to tip over.

"Do you know who did this?" Emma asks me, worry coating her voice. Her eyes dart to Rose and back to me, ignoring the girl she's fucked before.

"She won't talk," Xi adds.

“It’s none of your fucking business!” Billie hisses. She barges against Emma as she comes toward me. “Bringing *her* here? Do you want me to commit a homicide tonight?”

“Yeah. I know,” I answer Emma and Xi, ignoring Billie’s anger against Rose.

Emma is a few years older than Xi, and he’s a year older than me. Billie is a year younger than me. So when her dad married our mom, she ended up with two extra older siblings. She never realized how much we’d be on her case. It wasn’t that bad until she started getting into weird shit this year. The Kings have been like a murder of crows around her. Since we lost the Bianco family’s protection, we lost power over the North Shore, and she seems to be the one paying for it.

“We know it’s a guy from the King’s crew, Bills. Just tell us which one. He’ll be dead before you know it.” Emma Scott pleading with her sister to let her know who to kill. If that’s not typical North Shore, I don’t know what is.

Emma had long left high school when I started, and Xi never went. They have no idea which fucker does this to girls. But I do.

I grab Billie by the jaw, getting a closer look at her face. “Are you for real?” I whisper at her.

She avoids my gaze, knowing she’s been caught. Red patches form on her cheeks, shame lighting up her face.

“Your guilty King is Caden,” I say as I release her. “And he didn’t hit her. These are love bites. He leaves them on every girl he fucks.”

A long, shocked silence fills the room, only broken by Rose’s mocking cackle.

“This shit is just too funny,” she laughs at Billie. “Who knew you could fall any lower, Billie.”

“Bitch, shut the fuck up!” Billie shouts back. I stop her when she tries to push past me. I grab her by both arms before she can get close to Rose. “Worry about yourself,” I bark at her.

“Billie!” Emma shouts back. “What...” She lets out a long huff. “What is wrong with you?”

“I thought Sam scared him?” I say.

“Yeah, he tried,” Billie spits at me.

“And it looks like he was successful,” Rose spits in sarcasm. “She loves going for guys she can’t have. It’s a pattern,” she taunts even more.

“We’re leaving,” I announce to whoever wants to hear it. “Shut your mouth,” I hiss at Rose before pushing her out of the room. I don’t need to stay here. Billie isn’t in trouble with the Kings, she’s in trouble with us. They don’t need me to sort that shit out.

I didn’t have to drag Rose back to the car, she went more than willingly. But when she finally realizes I’m not going back to Stoneview, she pinches the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger.

“It’s been a long night, Lik,” she huffs. “What more could you possibly want?”

“I don’t want anything. I’m bringing you to your new place.”

“I don’t have a new pla—” Her eyes widen when she sees the underground parking lot I’m entering. “Come on,” she grunts behind clenched teeth. “He can’t be serious.”

“As cancer,” I mumble as I park.

Does she think I want her living closer to us? Does she think I want her suffocating flowery perfume, her freakishly long hair, and the smell of her brand of cigarettes all over the place I used to live in? We moved out of the penthouse just two months ago, when the first installment from the Volkov contract came in. I still have shit in there I need to move to the cabin. And this apartment complex is close to the forest, which means it’s close to the cabin we now reside in.

I don’t want her in the bed I used to sleep in. I don’t want her close to Sam...to me. I want her in Stoneview, where she

can't cloud my brain or force my heart to beat a little faster. I want her somewhere I never go to.

Nonetheless, Sam decided he wants her close; he wants her where he can keep an eye on her. So, we're putting her in his old apartment.

She's completely silent when I unlock the door. Somehow, between the parking lot and the top floor, she gave up on her 'I don't want to live here' speech.

I close the door behind us and walk over to the L-shaped sofa. "Sam is on his way. Classes, this place, and wherever we take you to find the Volkov brothers. That's what you're allowed, princess."

She was on her way across the living room—going from the doorway to the opposite side of the room, which leads to the hallway and all the other rooms—but she stops dead in her tracks.

"Stop calling me that."

Her voice is as dead as one could be. The rasp is there, the deepness of it, but there are no emotions in it whatsoever.

I huff a chuckle. "I was wondering when you'd ask me to." I twist my body around, putting an arm on the back of the sofa so I can look at her. "Just so I could tell you no."

"You will." That is all she says.

She disappears into the hallway, like she knows the place.

Like she knows the fucking place.

The bitch has been here before!

I don't hear from her in the next five minutes I spend wondering at what point Sam brought her to his place. Yeah, they were childhood friends, but then Rose and Jake escaped their old foster dad, and they lost contact for three years. Sam only reappeared in her life during her senior year of high school, and he told me they weren't close then. That Rose didn't want to hear from him or spend time with him.

So why the hell would she ever go to his place?

Sam has always been adamant that she hated him when he came back. They didn't spend time together.

So why? Why?

Jealousy flows heavily in my veins, making my blood thick and my heart pumping hard. I hear her reappear, and I want to taunt her more. Why should I be the only one fucking fuming while we wait for my lying boyfriend to show up?

"Been here lots, princess?" She doesn't reply, so I slowly turn around.

Well, it's confirmed. She's been here before, or she wouldn't know where to find Sam's hidden gun. The one she's currently pointing at me.

"Want to review your choice about calling me princess, Lik?"

"Don't make me laugh." I fake a chuckle. It's easier to hide the fear of death when playing dumb. "If you knew how to use a gun, it wouldn't have been so easy to get you to fold for us when you visited our lovely cabin."

"I like your earring," she tells me, pointing at the small golden snake dangling from my right ear.

"Put the toy away, *princess*."

She nods, seemingly agreeing, while I know she doesn't at all. "Cool."

The bullet flies past my head, making me duck behind the sofa.

Fuck!

At least she missed. Or so I thought until I see my bloody earring right next to where my face is resting on the sofa. And the blood. A lot of blood.

The pain comes right after. My hand shoots to my ear as I hiss in agony. It's a graze, but fuck, it hurts. She got me right in the earlobe.

"It's called a warning shot," she informs me casually. "I think it's time we look at our agreement again. If Sam wants to

threaten Rachel, fuck, if he wants to *bruise* her, nothing protects you from me.”

Bruise her? I hear her steps, but I don’t look up.

“Get up. With your pretty hands high above your head.”

She’s rounded the sofa and is standing a few steps away from me. I raise my hands above my head before straightening and slowly getting up. “So you think my hands are pretty?”

“So pretty it would be a shame to put a hole through them.” She cocks her head and smiles at me.

“You know he’s on his way, right? You’re a dead little lady if he finds you like this.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” She shrugs her shoulders. “All he’ll find is your dead body. I’ll be gone by then. You know, I was so adamant about killing him for betraying me. But you guys inspired me. I think he’ll suffer a lot more knowing he was the cause of your death.”

Okay, this feels a little too real. I can’t believe I’m going to die for the liar who said he hadn’t spent time—bar from their childhood—with my murderer before he met me. I don’t fucking deserve this.

“You don’t want to be called princess. Noted,” I nod. “But you’ll have to find the Volkovs for Sam, whether I’m dead or alive.”

“I see you’ve never seen Sam in mourning. He’ll leave me in peace, don’t worry.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Well, he’ll go on one of his drinking benders, destroy everything around him. And, once he’s done, he won’t remember what happened the whole time. At least that’s what he did for his mom. I can only hope he loves you that much. Otherwise, I am in deep shit indeed.”

My mouth goes dry. I knew his mom died when he was younger, but I never knew that’s what happened afterward.

And she sees it.

“Aw.” She fakes a pout. “I sense you and him are not as close as you thought. Don’t be so sad, Lik. He is a tough man to get through to. Pity you won’t get to know him better before your death.”

Seriousness crosses her gaze, focus tenses her body, and I recognize she is about to shoot. Her index finger starts pressing against the trigger, and I shout my next words in panic. “Fuck, stop! I’ll tell him to drop it!”

A smirk settles on her face, her winning eyes glinting with pride. “Yeah. You will. You’ll tell him to drop out of his contract for the Volkovs. And you’ll tell him that if I ever hear or see him near Rachel again, he’ll have to use all his hard-earned money on someone to fill the bullet holes I left in you. Is that clear?”

“Yeah, it’s fucking clear. Pretty graphic, actually. I’ll call him.” Visions of my body covered in bullets do cross my mind and I hate myself for it.

“Yeah. Right now, actually. Get your phone out.”

Blood is still dripping from my ear, and I have to wipe some before I can focus again.

“You gave me a headache,” I mutter.

“I’m sure your owner will kiss his little pet better.” Her eyes dart to the lock around my neck. The weight of it just above my chest is a constant reassurance. That Sam loves me, that he’s got me. That he owns me. There is no better feeling than that. Like the sun knowing the moon will take over every time it needs rest. *Always.*

I chuckle. “You want to make it sound like it’s a bad thing, but all I can hear is the jealousy in your voice.” Her jaw clenches slightly. “You like that kind of game, Rose. I saw it at the club,” I keep taunting her. “You wish you could be owned by Sam. Except, all you got tonight was me, and still, you loved it.”

“And tell me, Rose.” The British accent resonating behind Rose accelerates my heartbeat.

I grin as my big, strong boyfriend wraps a hand around her thin throat. A choker stopping her from making any further movement.

“What does that make you,” he whispers in her ear. “If you’re owned by my pet?” He cocks a gun to her temple. “The pet’s toy,” he concludes.

Sam misleads people in the best way. He’s enormous, he’s scary, and we expect him to be loud. No, he’s silent as a mouse, creeps in without a sound, and he got through the door without Rose hearing a thing. She was too focused on spiting me.

I’m no mind reader, but Rose’s thoughts are loud enough. It’s a big, loud *fuck*.

SAM



Do It for Me – Rosenfeld

She stills against my body. Rose is always cold, and as usual, I feel my hot skin needing to warm her up.

“I’ll take that,” Lik chuckles as he grabs my emergency gun from her hands. She doesn’t say a thing, and I don’t let go of her.

Lilac, violet, and geranium. Her perfume attacks my personal space. She’s had the same one since we were kids, and it pisses me off that she never changed it. It’s too sweet for her, childish, and always hides the fact that she’s a White. Just like her brothers, she’s got psychopathic tendencies that double as a god complex. That perfume just doesn’t fit.

Keeping silent, my eyes take in the state Lik is in. I could ignore the slight tremble in his shoulders and the sweat on his neck. But I would have to be blind to not see the blood dripping down from his ear, the bloody graze makes it look like his earlobe is missing.

I press my gun harder against Rose’s temple and she inhales a shaky breath. My hand tightens around her throat. It’s so large, I can practically wrap it all around her slender neck. I can feel how big of a struggle it is for her to breathe right now, with my index finger skimming under her chin and my little finger almost touching her collarbone.

I don’t know what to say, hence why I’m keeping silent. Thoughts are running through my head, fury at how bold she is. Fear for Lik.

There are a thousand sentences I could start with right now.

Did you really think you'd get out of this?

How dare you threaten the life of the man I love?

Why does your body against mine feel so good?

I push the last thought away and tighten my hold again. She coughs, and her hands shoot to my forearm.

“Don’t move,” I hiss in her ear.

“I c-can’t...b-breathe,” she coughs again. Her chest is heaving, her shoulders shaking against my diaphragm.

“Good,” I simply answer. “You don’t deserve to.”

“Sam,” Lik hesitates, sensing my rage. “She’s kinda turning purple.”

I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.

She starts convulsing against me and weakly attempts to step on my foot.

“Sam,” Lik insists. He takes a step closer, and it only makes me press harder.

I could just end it now and she would never bring me any problems, ever again. I wouldn’t have to think so hard about how to behave around her. On how to tell Nate how much I love her. I wouldn’t have to battle hate and lust. She would just be *gone*.

“You’re fucking killing her, and you need her,” Lik shouts at me, annoyed. “What’s a fucking bit of earlobe, I’ll put my earring on the other side...Sam!”

His last word comes when she stops moving against me altogether. I let go, take a step back as if her skin was suddenly burning me, and she drops at my feet. Unconscious.

“Sam...what the fuck!” Lik barks.

“Don’t start, Malik.” My voice is calm, but using his full name makes him drop his attitude.

Quickly, Rose stirs awake at my feet, her eyes slowly opening. It's not like she's dead.

"Fucking asshole," she rasps. A hand comes to massage her throat as she tries to sit up. Instantly, I put a foot against her chest, stopping her movement. I don't put too much weight on it, but enough that she struggles for a little bit until she ultimately gives up.

A long huff leaves her body, and she lies flat on the floor. "Don't go silent on me, Sam."

I smirk down at her, staying silent.

"Lik and I just had an amazing heart-to-heart," she continues. "I can't believe you never told him how you mourned your mom."

I press a little harder against her chest and ignore her attempt at riling me up. "You're going to get up and go to your new room. It's late, go to bed. And before you fall asleep, make sure to run through your head all the ways I'll torture you if you ever put a finger on my boyfriend again."

I let go, and she takes her time to get up. I hadn't realized she hit her head when she fell to the floor, but a small bump is showing just below her hairline. I bite the inside of my cheeks, not liking it at all. That and her previous words force a memory of my late mother through my mind.

I crack my neck and indicate the hallway with a death stare.

She leaves for her room, not without a final taunting look at Lik. I can't help wondering if she's going to pick the guest bedroom...or my old one. A vision of her sleeping under my sheets, leaving her scent everywhere, flashes behind my eyes. I see her long, naked legs showing from under the covers, her cheek against the pillow as she sleeps on her front. Her long hair splaying around her and her bare shoulders waiting for my marks.

Too.

Far.

You want her dead. You want her dead, I repeat to myself.

I run my knuckles along my jaw as my gaze settles on Lik. I love this man, and I shouldn't be thinking of a naked Rose in my bed.

I take the few steps that separate us and put a hand on his ear. It's stopped bleeding, but he's covered in it. He hisses when I touch it.

"You angered her," I scold him.

His gaze lowers, and I leave it for now. I go to the bathroom for my first aid kit. In the hallway, I can't ignore the light coming from under my old bedroom. She picked my room. Not the guest bedroom. The door is slightly ajar, and my heart pinches. She still can't close the door when she's on her own. It takes all of me not to go in.

I patch Lik up. Stitching his earlobe and realizing it's not as bad as I thought. He sits silently on a bar stool, facing to the side.

"Why?" I ask.

He shrugs, making a head movement and forcing me to pause my healing gestures.

"Why did you make her angry when I told you that's not what we wanted?"

"She's unbearable," he finally admits. "She doesn't listen, she doesn't bend, she only does as she pleases. It was driving me insane."

"Well." I give him a terse nod that he can't see since he's facing the rest of the room. "Don't do it again. Because if she comes close to a gun and I'm not around. You're dead."

He scoffs. "I can defend myself. I'm not helpless, she just took me by surprise."

That's the problem with her, she always takes you by surprise.

I remain silent for a couple of minutes, thinking of what Rose said, of the time they had together. I know Lik doesn't

like when I take too long to contemplate in serious situations, but I need to think of my next words. I run my knuckles against my jaw before talking.

“You’re angry at me,” I finally say calmly, knowing there’s a storm coming.

“No shit!” he explodes. He jumps off the chair and paces away from me. “You said you didn’t spend time together. You said you were childhood friends and that you weren’t close when you found her again. You *lied*.”

I take in his words, staying silent for too long.

“You lied,” he repeats. “She’s been here before. She knows you inside out, Sam. Every part of your life, every place you’ve lived, every detail you think you can hide, she knows them all.”

“If you don’t lower your voice, she’ll hear you. Stop showing her your weaknesses.”

“The only weakness I have is *you*,” he hisses. “And she already knows that too.”

I put a hand on the counter, grounding myself so I can think clearly. Rose messed with Lik’s head. He hates her, and yet I saw how he wanted to save her when I had a hand wrapped around her throat.

I put another hand on the counter, facing away from him. “Okay. I lied to you.”

“Yeah, I fucking know that,” he snaps.

“Three years after Rose shot Nate, he found the twins in Stoneview. He sent me after them.”

“I know that part of the story. Get to the part where you spent time with her.”

“I was meant to keep a close eye on both of them. I kept a closer eye on Rose.” I turn around and run my hands through my hair, combing it back. “That’s what I used to do, Lik. I was obsessed. Dangerously. I blackmailed her into spending time with me. Did some petty jobs with her just to be close.”

“What jobs?”

“Pick-ups on the North Shore. Shit I hadn’t done since I was a bloody teenager. That’s not the point.”

“No, the point is you probably slept with the bitch when you promised you never had.”

“My promise stays the same. I couldn’t touch her. Nate would have decimated me. But I was always *there*. I wanted to know where she was at all times.”

He pauses, chewing over my words.

“What did you blackmail her with? Is it something we can use now?” His brain works fast, trying to make our plan work despite the anger against me.

I shake my head. “Back then, she thought she had killed Nate. I threatened to tell the cops. She found out soon enough that he was very much alive.”

“So, you never slept with her.” He rolls his plump lips inwardly, then seems to remember a point. “But she’s been here.”

“Rose has always been a party girl. She puts herself in all kinds of states. I used to bring her back here after parties.”

“So...you never did anything with her.”

I take a deep breath. What’s the point in lying now? It happened, and hiding what happened won’t change the fact that I can’t stop thinking about it.

And yet, I can’t admit to him that the day Rose got taken, I cheated on him. I kissed the girl I was in love with because I thought I was saying goodbye forever. I broke her heart and mine in the process. I never thought she’d get kidnapped. I never thought I’d regret my words so much.

Instead of answering and lying to his face. I take the coward’s way out. I deviate.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go to Vue with her tomorrow. She’s getting to you.”

His head snaps toward me. “What?” I don’t say anything, just watch him walk to me. “No. I’m going. This is my part of the plan, *my* time with her. You’re not putting yourself in the way.”

My eyebrows rise, but I’m barely surprised. “Your time with her, huh?”

I can’t believe it took her so little time to have him fall for her. A couple of weeks of them sharing classes, an evening together. He gets so close to me, and his lips are almost touching mine when he speaks.

“Don’t,” he bites. “You can’t be trusted around her. *I* can.”

I’m about to snap back when I smell his breath.

“You drank?” I ask, this time, truly surprised.

He takes a step back and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as if it would change anything. He looks away.

“Stop trying to change the topic.”

“Lik, I’m going to ask this one more time. And you better answer me.” I take a step toward him and watch him shrink on the spot. “Did you drink tonight?”

“One glass isn’t that big of a deal.”

I let out a dry chuckle. “*Not that big of a deal,*” I repeat. “Says the addict.”

“I’m not an a—”

“Get on your knees,” I growl, not giving him time to search for an excuse.

He runs a hand through his hair and cracks every single one of his knuckles. “Sam—”

“Get. On. Your. Knees.”

“At home. You can punish me at home,” he attempts. “Not here. Not when she can hear us.”

“Better keep quiet then.”

“Please,” he pleads in a quiet voice.

“Keep your begging for when you can’t take it anymore.” I reach for him and put a hand on his cheek in a loving gesture. “Now, don’t make me repeat my order. Just obey.”

He slowly lowers himself, his thighs straining to protect his knees from hitting the floor too harshly. My man in a beautiful suit he wears like a cloak of darkness. On his knees in front of me, his gaze down, focusing on his beautiful hands. What a sight.

I unbuckle my belt and pop the button of my jeans. Slowly, I unzip them, slide my hand inside my boxers, and grab my hardening dick. I stroke myself, watching him struggle to keep his eyes to the floor.

“You know...one of my favorite ways to punish you is to watch you choke on my dick. You get so desperate to please me. You do everything to take it as far down as possible.”

I tighten my grip on my cock, teasing myself before the real thing.

“I make myself as hard as I can before shoving it down your throat, just to make sure there’s no way you can breathe.”

I watch his shoulders rise and fall to a rhythm of desire—fast, ragged. A shudder crosses his body and I smile down at him.

“You’re going to choke like a good boy, aren’t you?”

I grab a fistful of his soft, deep brown curls and pull until he’s facing up. His gaze comes up and I tighten until he’s hissing with pain.

“Eyes down,” I growl.

He drops his gaze, struggling now that his face is looking up. It’s challenging not to look into my eyes when my gesture is forcing him to do precisely that. He blinks rapidly, trying to stay in position.

I pull out my dick and trace his lips with my tip, forcing a tremble of anticipation through my own body. Lik takes a deep breath, as if he can’t help but take me in, inhale me, worship me.

“Say ‘ah’.” A devilish smirk spreads on my lips when his part. He opens as wide as possible, but I insist. “Wider.”

He struggles to try and open bigger. Slowly, I push in at an angle that forces his jaw to stretch out.

He gargles something and puts a hand on my hip.

“Hands,” I snap.

It’s like a reflex, an automatic gesture as he puts his hands behind his back, holding his left wrist in his right hand. His knees spread apart to the perfect angle as a follow-up gesture.

That’s how well I’ve trained him.

I keep pushing in, one hand fisting his hair as tightly as his gorgeous curls are, one my cock. He gags when I hit the back of his throat. I keep pushing, forcing him to relax and open for me.

“You’re taking it like such a good boy,” I murmur.

His open mouth meets my hand wrapped around my cock and his eyes squeeze shut. That’s because he knows there’s a fist-wide length left of my dick. I let go of my dick and put my hand behind his head, pushing until he’s swallowing all of me.

I let out a sigh of satisfaction when his tongue licks the underside. Saliva is starting to spill from the corner of his lips. His mouth is so wet and warm.

“Eyes on me, now.”

He struggles to open his eyes and look at me. They’re bright with unshed tears. I pull out slightly and thrust back in, making him moan around me. The vibrations send ripples of pleasure through my body.

I clench my teeth to not say anything. This is a punishment; he shouldn’t know how good he is at it.

I keep a steady rhythm. In. Out. In. Out. In...

He moans. I shift from one foot to the other and thrust harder. Keeping tight against him, I watch as he chokes, his chest heaves, and he tries to pull away. I push him harder, keeping my movement short and violent.

“Take it,” I growl, my voice raw and dripping with lust.

My muscles tense, the bottom of my spine tingling with a need to release. My grip tightens as I feel a drop of sweat roll down my neck, tracing against my burning skin.

“Don’t you fucking dare relapse,” I hiss.

I watch with indispensable sadism how much he’s struggling, relishing in the pain he must be feeling at the back of his throat, in his constricted lungs. My eyes close and images flash.

Rose’s throat against my palm.

Her whispered moans the only time we kissed.

Lik holding her down while I fuck her. His dick in her mouth, wiping that smug smile off her face.

Her coming all over my dick while he comes in her mouth.

I explode in a low grunt, emptying down his throat and forcing him to drink it all. He chokes and sputters when I pull out, taking much-needed air into his lungs. I release him in a short push and watch him struggle to stay still. I grab his jaw with my hand and keep his eyes on me. Mine go down, looking at the hard-on pushing against his suit pants.

I smirk and bring one foot forward. With my heel still on the floor, I lift the tip of my shoe and press against his hard cock. I start light, then press harder. Then harder...and harder. Until he winces from the pressure. The light in his eyes must match mine, because I am on fire.

“Do you need help with that?”

He tries to nod. I feel it in the palm of my hand, but I’m holding it too strong for him to move. It’s hard to admit, especially for him. He is a tough man and has stood for himself his whole life. The gangs, the racism, the poverty. He had to fight it all and more. Through fists, fights, and murder. He is one hell of a man. And yet, when it comes to me, he folds. He kneels at my feet like a worshiper in desperate need of his God. I crush him under my strength and power. And I

make sure to make it hurt in the process, because that's what we both need.

“You took your punishment so well,” I continue. “Did it hurt?” He attempts to nod again, blinking up at me. “Keep being good. I’ll fuck you when we get home, and if you take *that* like a good boy, I might allow you a release.”

He groans a complaint but doesn't push.

“Atta boy. Get your stuff, I’m going to see Rose.” Saying her name out loud feels strange after imagining my boyfriend and I fucking her as I came.

I zip myself up before going to her room. I can already hear her on the phone as I walk down the corridor. I push her door open without hesitation.

SAM



Spell It Out – You Me At Six

She's sitting cross legged on the bed, and her denim jacket is off, leaving her with her ripped black turtleneck. The covers are to her hips, and I understand why when I see her jeans on the floor.

I stay by the door for a few seconds, looking at her and her at me, while I calm my raging heart that's trying to pump blood back into my dick at the thought of Rose in her underwear. I run my knuckles against my jaw and take my first step toward her.

She's listening to someone on the phone. I can hear a man's voice.

I grab her wrist with a little too much violence for someone who shouldn't care and rip her hand away from her ear until I can see the screen.

Luke is written on there, and I roll my eyes. Her rich friends can't stay away from her. They love her too much for that. Now that I'm closer, I can see the bump on her head. It's turned purple and it forces my chest to tighten with guilt.

A faint *hello* sounds from the phone, and I make a sign with my hand to tell her to wrap up.

"Luke, I gotta go, man. Tell me more about her tomorrow. She sounds great, though. Might be the one."

She hangs up and looks up at me.

“Sam, I can’t stay here. All my stuff is at the Murrays, Hannah and Thomas will worry.”

I step away, turn around, and run a hand over my face.

Just say what you have to say and leave.

For fuck’s sake, I can’t focus. My body is calling for hers, and my brain can’t function. All I can think of is the sheets that are a second away from dropping a little too low. The waistband of her lace underwear that’s showing, and I want to grab and rip it with my teeth.

I hear her shuffle, the sound of her feet hitting the floor, and I turn around.

“I don’t even have a change of contacts. I need my glasses or something. You can’t just let me be blind, that’s really shitty, even from you.”

I don’t say anything, my eyes are stuck on the black lace covering her pussy. It’s see-through, and I can see how bare she is underneath. Why? Why is she fucking shaving? Who is she seeing?

Rachel. It must be for Rachel.

What if it’s someone else? She followed Mattock to my house, ready for a good fuck. Rose loves fucking and being fucked.

Anger boils in me.

It’s a thong. I can’t see the back, but I know the shape. My lips part, attempting to take a calming breath. She’s talking, but I can’t hear her over the beating in my ears.

“...and honestly, you just don’t know what it’s like to talk to someone and just see a blurred face responding.”

I pick up her jeans from the floor in a furious movement and push them against her chest so hard she falters two steps back to balance herself.

“Get fucking dressed,” I hiss.

Her eyes widen, confused. “What the fuck. It’s not the first time you’ve seen me like this.”

“We’re not kids anymore,” I justify in a lie. “And I’ve got a boyfriend.”

I make no fucking sense whatsoever.

“Talking about him,” I finally say, my brain reminding me of why I came in here. I pinch the bridge of my nose with my forefinger and thumb. I can’t deal with this girl right now. “I swear to god, Rose. You better behave around him, because if I get one more complaint, it’ll be me coming to Vue with you. And you’re not going to enjoy your time there if it’s with me.”

“Yeah, cause I was enjoying myself so much till now,” she mutters to herself.

“Just do what you’re told, and everyone stays alive.”

I walk to the ensuite bathroom without giving her a chance to reply. I grab a small bag under the sink and walk back to her.

“Here.”

She drops her jeans back to the floor and grabs it, skeptically eyeing me. Slowly, she unzips the pouch and opens it as if a snake is about to pop out, making me roll my eyes so hard it gives me a headache.

When she finally realizes what it is, she snorts and takes out the box of contacts.

“Are these mine?”

“Only one White sibling used to have a habit of sleeping here,” I deadpan. But my anger has calmed, and my mind settled. My heart feels wrapped in cotton, memories of her and I spending time alone at my apartment taking hold of it.

She used to make me laugh so much.

When it was her and I, we forgot about Bianco and the heaviness of impending doom weighing on our shoulders. We’d watch our favorite films on repeat and cook together. Fuck, I read to her and I loved it.

I watch her shoulders relax and her breathing slow down. Her fingers pick at the box of contacts, and she takes a long

breath.

“Will you really do it?” she rasps.

When I don't reply, keeping my words to myself as the best protection for my feelings, she insists. “Kill me?”

Her deep indigo eyes bore into my black ones, and I can hardly believe what I'm seeing in them.

I expected the fear; she knows I'm a killer. I never thought there'd be so much sadness, distress...desolation. As if she can't take the betrayal, as if our friendship and our love had meant everything to her.

She thought I had betrayed her, so she stabbed me in the chest. And for whom? The man who had taken her away from her free life. Viktor Volkov turned Rose against me, and she blindly believed him. She betrayed me for him, and I can never forget that.

I bring my palm to her cheek, caressing her face just to indulge in something forbidden.

“Go to bed,” I order low, taking all emotions away from my voice.

Her gaze drops with disappointment, shutting down any hope she had of me opening up to her tonight.

She goes to my old bed—the one I shared with Lik for over a year—brings the covers to her chest and takes her turtleneck off from under them. My eyes get stuck to her naked shoulders, her defined collarbone, and the new tattoo she has there. Roses surround a snake as it makes its way through her shoulder, her collarbone, and the bottom of her neck. Only one rose is a deep red. The rest is colorless, and the snake seems to be making its way to *that* rose. Her arms sport dozens of other much smaller tattoos. She's added to our collection over time.

It hurts. Something more painful than a bullet through the flesh. It burns from the inside, and it ignites my heart with agony. I feel it throbbing down my veins, poisoning my blood with a possessive need to own this woman for myself. She must have done them with *him*.

Until she got taken away from me, I had done every single one of Rose's tattoos myself. Bar the only one she didn't want, the sign of the Bianco family she has on her wrist, that X that brands her as theirs. I even taught her how to tattoo, and she did some of mine. And now...she dares to show up with dozens more, with a huge one when she used to only want small designs.

You're getting hung up on details. Leave it. Just leave it.

I see it in her eyes, that she achieved what she wanted when she took her top off. So I don't say anything. I grit my teeth and keep it all to myself.

Silence is your ally, Sam.

I shut down my dad's voice, shut the light, and I'm about to shut the door when her voice reaches me.

"I genuinely believed it, you know." She doesn't give me time to ask what. She knows I won't. "That you weren't going to be part of the people who use me." I hear her shift under the covers. "Look at you now."

My breath stalls, my heart breaks, and my stomach tightens.

"It doesn't matter. You'll be dead soon."

I shut the door, or I think I do. Because when I finally let out the breath I was holding and look back, I seem to have left it slightly ajar, like my body simply refuses to hurt her because my subconscious knows she would have a panic attack if I had shut the door completely.

I find it too difficult to cause her harm, and telling her I'll kill her as soon as I find the Volkov brothers is starting to feel more and more like a lie.

SAM



counting crimes – Nessa Barrett

When Lik and I walk into the apartment the next evening, my eyes widen with surprise. Rose is watching TV on the sofa, eating her favorite Vietnamese takeaway.

“Is that Brooklyn Nine-Nine?” Lik asks excitedly.

It’s as if he completely forgot yesterday, and there is no better way to describe his personality. Someone tried to kill him less than twenty-four hours ago, but he’s now ready to bond over Brooklyn Nine-Nine with her.

He bloody loves this show, and it plays on repeat at home. It’s what I put on for him after I tie him up and fuck him until he’s crying. If his aftercare doesn’t include a blanket, soda, cuddles, and Brooklyn Nine-Nine, I can kiss goodbye to dominating him.

Rose is eating, and that in and of itself is a rare occurrence. She is eating something other than cereal, which is also a shocker. But she’s *here*. She listened, she didn’t go anywhere, and the fact that she ordered in confirms that. That and the smell of cigarettes permeating the flat. She hasn’t opened any windows or gone onto the terrace to smoke—her small gesture of rebellion.

She doesn’t answer Lik, ignoring both of us and focusing on her food and her favorite show.

“Did you leave today?” he insists. He walks behind the sofa, settles behind her, and puts a hand around her throat from

the back. He slides it up slightly and pulls until she has to stretch her neck backward and look up at him.

“Princess,” he sing-songs, taunting her. “I asked you a question.”

The contempt in her eyes is unmistakable. She’s probably imagining his head exploding into a firework of bloody pieces after shooting him.

“No,” she croaks, her neck so stretched she can barely say the word.

“You’re awfully quiet since we sent you a message telling you your girlfriend was back from New York early,” he teases her.

I slept in my car last night, right in front of Rachel and her fiancé’s house. And what a great surprise it was to watch their car come back at five a.m. No wedding dress, but a lot of arguing. I didn’t waste a minute taking a picture and sending it to Rose. I have to show her my threats are serious, or she would have left this flat the first chance she got.

I walk past Lik, going to the hallway, and slap him at the back of the head as I do so.

He gets the message right away and lets her throat go.

When I return with a duffel bag, Rose eyes it with apprehension.

“Don’t look so scared it’s your outfit for tonight,” Lik sneers.

“Fuck’s sake,” she mutters as she gets up. She clears the coffee table of her takeaway and brings everything to the kitchen. I watch her check the time on her phone and lean against the counter beside her while she washes some cutlery in the sink.

“Did you really stay here today?” I ask her quietly while Lik takes everything out of the bag. She is going to lose her shit, and I’m here to make sure she behaves.

Her eyes dart to me, but she stays silent. Is she honestly playing my own tricks on me? By the dining table, Lik nods at

me and I address myself to Rose again.

“Come. You need to get dressed.”

“I don’t want to,” she murmurs, almost ashamed.

Her voice is soft like silk, something that never happens. It’s usually raspy, broken. Her eyes are still on the cutlery in the sink, her hands holding the counter as if to keep herself steady. She’s wearing a sweater of mine I must have left here. Too big for her, drowning her body in the material.

Guilt pulls at my gut, and I have to swallow bitterly a couple of times before I can focus again. She sounds like when we were kids, when she had to go to Bianco’s office so he could torture her.

It’s my turn to ignore her. If I talk, I’ll tell her not to do it. My vengeance is more important than her feelings—the money, my promise to Lik that this could be my last job. I can’t let her take over my heart.

I walk over to Lik, and we both face her, waiting for her to come. Eventually, she gives up and crosses over to us. She observes everything on the table for a long minute.

“Assholes,” she finally huffs.

“It’s not for our personal enjoyment,” I tell her, though I will very much enjoy seeing her dressed in lace and a leather harness.

I give her another minute of hesitation before moving things forward.

“Get changed,” I demand, keeping my voice calm. Knowing her, she will no doubt get me angry very soon and I need to hold onto my inner peace for as long as possible. People tend to associate my silence with internal control.

I get angry. I just don’t need words to kill someone.

She grabs the black, sheer lace bra that will show her nipples and the dark lace thong that comes with it.

“I hate you,” she growls, her eyes annihilating me.

“But do you know who won’t hate *you*?” Lik jeers with a huge smile on his face. “Your girlfriend for not getting her killed.” He amusingly reminds her that we’re ready to kill someone she loves to find the Volkov brothers, and it works wonders.

She shuts up and goes to grab one of the harnesses but my hand lands on hers. “I’ll put this on you. Just go get changed.” I feel the slightest tremble in her fingers and let go straight away. If I keep my hand there, the tremble will turn into a spark, and electricity will start traveling from her skin to mine.

She leaves for the bedroom, and I turn to Lik. He’s holding a small golden chain in his fingers, rapture making him bite his plump lip. “This is going to look beautiful on her.”

“Don’t push it,” I warn him. “Once you go in the back rooms with her, he’ll find her straight away. He’ll want to talk to her, and she’ll give him the envelope for Viktor.”

Viktor Volkov won’t be at Vue Club, but I know exactly who will take us to him. As long as we find him, we’ll find Aleksei too. The most important thing is to cut the head of the snake. And Viktor is very much the one who controls it all.

Lik is still lost in his thoughts, looking at everything on the table with shining eyes. I settle behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. “Someone misses being dominant,” I acknowledge, my head dropping to the crook of his neck.

I feel him shrug his shoulders. “I guess. Sometimes.”

I changed Lik. His switch tendencies went out the window when he became my sub. He loves me, and he did it for me. I should have told him we’d look into it again, that we would talk about it. I didn’t because it would have been a lie. My need to dominate someone is non-negotiable. I’m a Dom, and I can’t change that. He’s been fine with it until now. Our life of BDSM can only work that way if it’s only the two of us.

If someone else were to join us...

My thoughts are cut short by Rose walking back into the room. I watch from her bare feet, my eyes slowly licking all the way up her long, tanned legs, then enjoying the way the

black lace thong embraces her pussy, her hips. My appreciation is cut short after her waist, just to fall on her arms crossed across her chest and covering her breasts.

“Don’t get shy on us,” Lik tells her. “Half of the North Shore has seen what you’re hiding. Don’t get me started on Stoneview.”

She rolls her eyes, but she doesn’t care about his words. She’s never been apologetic about her sex life, and she’s not about to start at the point when she’s probably having the least amount of sex she’s ever had. She doesn’t uncross her arms and my brows furrow, wondering what she could possibly be hiding.

Her tattooed stomach, peppered with small designs, is tight and her ribs are showing less than before she was taken. I can only assume she was treated alright by the Volkov brothers. Something I already had guessed. My eyes stick to the small heart tattoo on her hip, the one with an S in it. I gulp, my fingers itching to touch my own heart with an R in it. It’s in the exact same spot on my body. Instead, I step away from Lik, just in time to notice him readjust himself in his trousers.

“Come here,” I say as I grab the bottom leather harness. I unbuckle the belt and open it, expecting her to stand in between my arms.

“Come on,” she groans. “Is this really necessary?”

I stay silent, and my boyfriend replies for me. “In case you missed the info, it’s a BDSM club, princess. Now wrap yourself in leather.”

“I’m not putting that thing on,” she says with a little more conviction. She takes a step back away from me but straight into Lik’s arms, who was waiting right behind her.

“Gotcha,” he teases her with excitement.

He holds her shoulders while I slip the belt around her waist. I buckle it and kneel in front of her. My heart stops, and I struggle to take a breath. A sense of comfortable warmth wraps around me at the same time as her perfume overcomes me. My heart fails me while my brain fails my intellect. My

muscles relax into bliss, and a thought I refuse to acknowledge crosses my mind.

Kneeling at Rose's feet is the most natural I've ever felt.

My chest constricts, making me feel like this is what I was born to do.

My pause must be felt because Rose shifts. I shake my head, refusing to look up at her like a worshiper fearing the divinity standing upon him.

I roll my shoulders and get to work again, forcing thoughts and feelings out of my mind. This woman has the aura of a goddess, the strength to move mountains and separate oceans.

Who am I to think I could ever break her?

I scratch my throat and look in front of me. I need to do this. The money, the vengeance. Just think of that.

Two leather garters dangle from suspenders linked to the belt. I have to unbuckle them too, and I wrap them tightly around her thin thighs. A bit of her skin pinches when I buckle the left one and she hisses above me. The sound of her pain brings blood to my dick.

I get up slowly, taking my time to grab the harness I'm going to put around her chest. I try to clear my thoughts and control my cock that is slowly hardening in my jeans.

"Uncross your arms," I tell her. My voice feels rough; it's hard to control the lustful need crossing my body.

Behind her, I can see Lik's eyes lighting up like they want to lick fire off her tanned skin.

Rose doesn't move, starting a tornado of feelings in my heart. "Rose," I reprimand her. "I said *uncross. Your. Arms.*"

There's something in her eyes I can hardly explain. A mix of dread and sorrow. Lik squeezes her shoulders until her face twists from the ache. Slowly, she uncrosses her arms.

It's instant. My eyes go to it straight away.

The tattoo under her left breast.

It burns into my retinas so brightly I don't even notice how the bra shows her dark nipples. How the sheer, black lace kisses her so perfectly.

No, all I see is the tattoo of the seven phases of the moon, just below her left boob.

“No,” I snarl. “Tell me this isn't real.”

I grab her tiny waist with my huge hands, clutching onto her ribs with a need to break them. She's so thin my fingers from opposite hands can practically touch. I run my right thumb over the tattoo once, twice, three times.

“Tell me this isn't *fucking* real.” Fury boils in my veins with an intensity I can't control. I rub at her skin, as if the tattoo would fade away with sheer force.

Behind her, Lik holds her shoulders tighter.

“So, you're one of them now? Aren't you?” I spite her, disgust coating my voice like bitter poison.

She's wearing their mark in an intimate place, like a proud branding. A cherished secret she keeps close to her heart. Like she belongs to *him*.

Any sort of sweet feelings I might have felt disappears into nothing. It's replaced by anger. Absolute, uncontrollable rage.

“Sam—” she tries to say.

She can't, I've already grabbed her upper arm and pulled her away from Lik. I slide the harness from the front with enough hostility and speed; she doesn't have time to realize what's happening.

In a violent gesture, I grab the back of her neck, move myself out of the way, and push her face first on the table. She puts her hands in front of her to catch herself, but it doesn't stop me. I push harder and turn to Lik.

“Grab her hands. Keep her still.”

In a split second, Lik is on the other side of the table.

He grabs her wrists, pulls, and she has no choice but to lay on her stomach across the table.

“That’s how she got you inside the club yesterday. She showed them she was a Wolf too. That she belonged to the Volkov family,” I explain to Lik.

My heart is beating in my ears. I don’t remember ever feeling the need to crush her so badly. Even when she betrayed me, I felt sorry for her. Gave her excuses. This...*hurts*.

She’s bent in a way that her bare ass is right against my crotch. Lustful electricity mixes with passionate resentment. My brain ultimately gives up on trying to protect her from me; my possessive tendencies, my dominant nature, and my dangerous infatuation for her.

“Look at you,” I growl. “Bent over just like the little slut you are.” I roll my hips forward and my dick hardens against her ass. “How often did you do this for other guys, huh?”

“Fuck off,” she groans. She fights against Lik’s hold, but he doesn’t budge. Good boy.

“The bratty princess got herself in trouble again,” Lik snickers. His eyes are glued to the place where Rose and I meet. I can see his own dick hardening in his black suit.

I wrap Rose in her leather straps. They cross at her back, and I fasten them together. I slide in the small golden lock that will stop her from taking it off and another one around the belt. I grab what I know will drive her insane and smile at Lik with all my might.

He chuckles and nods at me.

“Look what we got for you, my little slut,” I taunt her. She can’t look, she can only wait.

I slide the leather collar around her throat and watch her stiffen as goosebumps cross her entire skin.

“Fucking assholes!” she shrieks at me.

She fights Lik, pulling at her arms, and she wriggles on the table. She’s on the tip of her toes, Lik pulling her so taut that she can’t even comfortably touch the floor. I lock the collar in place with yet another beautiful golden lock and lightly pull at

it just to relish in the fact that I've locked a piece of leather around her throat.

"My my, you are going to look delicious in this, Rose. A beautiful little sub all ready to be trained. What a pity to miss out on the event." I run my knuckles along her spine and watch her tremble. Fuck, she loves this so much. Too bad she's too much of a stubborn bitch to appreciate it. "What do you think, Lik? Do you like your new toy?"

"Oh...I love it," he smirks.

"Shut up," she spits at us. "I swear I—"

"You what?" I mock her. "All you're doing right now is fighting against your body because your obstinate mind holds too much pride."

I run the palm of my hand between her shoulders, caress her shoulder blades, slide down to her spine, the small of her back...and in an instant of complete madness, I rub her ass cheeks. One after the other. I indulge in the prohibited lust I've always been told to shut down. I pinch her right ass cheek with my whole hand and revel in the aroused groan that escapes her lips.

"Stop," she breathes with an alarmed voice.

"Or what?" I chuckle.

Lik grabs both her wrists with one hand and runs the other through her long hair. "Ssh," he tells her. "Relax."

"Is our new toy getting all wet?" I question her, my voice hoarse from the arousal flooding my body.

Her breath hitches, her body shivers, and she stupidly attempts to close her legs. An impossible task with both my thighs between hers.

"That's okay. You don't have to answer." I bend over her and whisper my next words in her ear. "I'll just check for myself."

"Sam!" she shrieks as I hook my index finger under her thong.

The shock in her voice doesn't even phase me. I'm too angry. But I know where it comes from. I know she never thought her childhood protector would ever talk to or touch her that way. Rose lived a careless life when she had me wrapped around her finger. It's time she finds out what happens when she doesn't.

I follow the string that leads to her ass, forcing it to stretch out from between her cheeks. I don't stop, not until I've followed it all the way around to the front and I feel how wet she's made the lace.

"Soaking. Wet," I conclude.

I follow back to her ass, pull the string taut and let it go, watching it slap back into place. She's stopped talking, caught in her shame. Her head has fallen against the table, her mouth close to Lik's bulge in his trousers, and I relish in the embarrassment she's feeling.

"Now, that's just humiliating, isn't it? Being such a slut for all the men who control you. Is that how he got through to you?"

She knows who I mean.

"Fuck you," she hisses through clenched teeth.

"I can see you would love that indeed."

I grab her hips and flip her around. Her arms twist in Lik's hold and she winces at the pull.

"You're almost ready." I grab the golden chain Lik was touching earlier. I hook the top to the harness around her breasts and the bottom to the belt. Lik was right, it looks beautiful against her skin tone. My eyes roam over her entire body and I tremble with the need to simply fuck her.

Fucking lord have mercy, she looks absolutely gorgeous. The leather that crosses above her breasts, the lace barely covering her nipples. The chain leading to more straps. It's around her waist, around each thigh, covering her thong. In this moment, I want to keep her here.

I glance up, and the leather collar around her neck could be the end of me. My knees tremble, and I'm close to telling Lik I will be the one taking her to Vue tonight.

But I manage to control myself. Because if I take Rose to a BDSM club, it wouldn't be to find the Volkovs. No, it would be to punish the shit out of her, and that's not my contract.

I grab the ring hanging from her collar and pull her up. Lik lets her go as she uncontrollably follows my movement. It's not a small D-ring like some thin collars I used to train Lik. No, it's big enough that I can hook my three fingers through it, and it falls heavily in the hollow of her throat.

“One last thing.”

I keep pulling, and she has no choice but to get up and follow. Rose is a walking wet dream right now. She is pure lust on legs, and her beautiful, angry face is going to make every single man in this club want to have her for themselves. To train her, to punish her, to watch her tears spill and her pride die.

I sit her on a barstool at the kitchen island and grab a pen and paper that I give to her.

“Write ‘don't come for me’,” I order her.

She eyes the objects in front of her and raises a challenging eyebrow at me. “Why?”

I stand behind her and hook the last golden chain that goes with her outfit. One end hooks at the back of her collar, and one at her chest harness, right between her shoulder blades. She lets out a small protest, but I can't quite hear what.

But then, I pull on the chain until she's forced to straighten. I watch the collar tighten around her throat and chuckle when she chokes out a whimper. Her hands shoot to the collar around her neck, her fingers desperately trying to grab at it. She can't, it's too tight around her slender neck.

“You're about to learn how this works, Rose. Tonight, you're going to listen, and you're going to *obey*. Wave goodbye to your smart mouth and attitude. I want you meek

and pliable, or Lik will have a wonderful time teaching you discipline.” She still struggles with her collar.

“*Listen*,” I say softly in her ear and watch with fascination as goosebumps rise on her neck. “That’s the only way I’ll let go.” She nods, incapable of talking with the leather digging into her skin.

Once I’m sure she’s eager enough to listen, I straighten behind her and give my order calmly. “Hands on the table.”

She lets go of her collar, her trembling hands flat on the table.

“Good girl,” I praise her. I give her the tiniest bit of slack, ensuring she can breathe but still feel me holding the chain behind her. “Now, write ‘don’t come for me’.”

Once she has the pen in her left hand, I give her more slack, rewarding her for listening. She shifts on her seat, rubbing herself against it slightly and I smile. The blood rushing back to her brain after I let go is filling her with endorphins. She doesn’t even realize it yet, but she’s already subconsciously associating listening to me with a sensation of pleasure.

That’s when I see it.

Everything the powerful men who wanted her for themselves saw.

Rose is a force of nature.

Rose will light you up in every sense of the term.

Her beauty will consume you.

Her lips will start a fire in you.

And if you get on her wrong side? She will light you up... literally.

So when you find a way to control that, and when she bows down to you and follows your orders, you become the most powerful being in this universe. The supremacy goes to your head, and the need to control her becomes addictive.

She’s a ruler of kingdoms.

And, oh, the triumph there is to watch a king fall.

I let go of her chain as soon as she's done writing. Her handwriting hasn't changed one bit. It's messy; long letters bent to the left in cursive chaos. I recognize it all too well.

She used to leave notes in my pockets whenever I went to Bianco's compound. Every single one of them is tattooed on my body. My favorite is on my ribs, barely visible among all the other tattoos.

Would you choose death or suffering? I'd choose suffering...if only I could suffer with you.

I found it in my pocket the day after Bianco explicitly told her he would marry her when she turned eighteen. She was thirteen and had asked me to take her home with me. I refused because my dad was a killer, an abuser, and he had already gotten rid of my mother. I didn't want that to happen to Rose. But she wanted to come with me, because if she was going to suffer...then she wanted to do it with me.

I shake my head, feeling my throat tighten. Rose's suicidal thoughts started from an early age. She was desperate to leave the life Bianco was forcing on her. She chose to suffer through it because she was holding on to the fact that we could one day love each other peacefully.

A few months after writing that note, she shot her own brother to escape the foster dad who tortured her.

Well, she'll suffer with me, that's for sure. In fact, she'll suffer because of me.

Lik gets my attention by bringing a necklace to me. The exact one that will lead us right to the Wolves' den. I put it on the paper, right in front of her. The way her breath hitches makes me clench my jaw. It affects her so much. *He* affects her so much. I am dying to understand why, and yet I know I might never. I will probably kill the Volkov brothers before I get my answer.

"Recognize it?" I accuse.

"Where did you find that?" she whispers as she grabs it. I lean against the kitchen island, the need to see her eyes forcing

me to move.

They're shining with nostalgia. Bright tears of melancholy that will never drop.

"I thought I had lost it in the accident," she admits with a tight throat, running her fingers along the golden chain. The sapphire pendant is in the shape of a Faberge egg, the blue matching her eyes and the intricate gold designs resembling the colour of her skin.

My skin burns from the inside, and I'm afraid I might combust at any moment. Rose hides any feelings behind a tough and dangerous façade. For her to not be able to control her emotions right now truly tells me there is something she is hiding from her time with the Wolves. I want to discover what that is while also perfectly knowing she will never tell me.

"I stole it at the hospital," I tell her shamelessly. "Did you know they were tracking you? In case you escaped?"

"You're going to track the necklace back to them," she realizes, her voice raw with emotions.

"Mmhm," I confirm as I run my knuckles along her cheek. Her skin is as soft as the most expensive silks. "It broke during the accident, but I had it fixed just to make sure I could find the brothers." I run my thumb across her trembling red lips. I push her bottom lip down, rejoicing in the plumpness of her flesh.

Then I pull myself together.

I snatch the necklace from her and take the note she wrote. I take my time folding the paper in half and putting both that and the necklace in a small ivory envelope. While I do that, Lik has pulled Rose's stool slightly so he can stand in front of her. I watch him grab her jaw tightly and put a deep red lipstick on her lips. It darkens them like she sucked the life out of a man. She did. All of our lives.

I come back to her as Lik steps away and I grip her hair harshly. I press the envelope firmly against her lips, putting pressure at the back of her head so she can't get away.

We had to do this quick. I know I had to take advantage of her shock and emotional weakness of being reminded of Viktor Volkov. She's only soft and compliant for another few seconds. Before I can finish my action, she raises her hands and pushes me away. That's fine, I've already got the mark of her lips sealing the envelope.

"Fucker," she spits at me.

"You're all good to go," I smirk at her.

I can see the hesitation in her eyes, the rebellion in her tight fists, and the harsh breathing that threatens to turn into a revolution.

"I'll make sure Rachel is safe while you help us out tonight," I say low.

A deep breath and she's back to being compliant.

Lik grabs a pair of wraparound heels and gives them to Rose. "Let's go, princess," he tells her.

She stands up, and I help her get into a black trench coat while Lik gets on his knees to put the shoes on her feet. Is it normal to be jealous of his position in front of her?

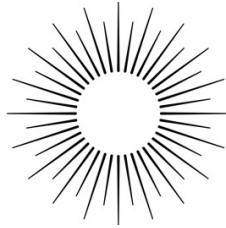
With the coat on, only her collar is peeking out and I grab the back of it. "Behave," I growl in her ear. "Who knows, you might be free from me tomorrow morning."

"You mean dead."

I can't get myself to say it to her. So, I do what I do best.

I keep quiet.

RACHEL



Young God – Halsey

“It’s like your dad knows every time I take a step closer to his company.”

I take a deep breath and put some toothpaste on my toothbrush. I’m standing in front of our double sinks and Conor is right next to me. He spits in the sink and rinses his mouth.

“Last time I asked you to go for cake tasting, he called you that same morning to go with your mom to her plastic surgeon. Now I take you dress shopping, and he calls us back to Stoneview right away for our two families to do a reunion? What is this bullshit? Does he even want me to marry you?”

“Of course he does,” I murmur. *He just doesn’t want you to run his company*, I fail to add. And when I take Conor’s last name, he will start working for my dad.

Conor was in college when I was in high school. By next summer, he will be done with it, work for my father, and I... well, I will be his wife.

I almost choke on toothpaste thinking about it. I finish brushing my teeth and clear my mouth. I feel sick.

I practically jump out of my skin when I look up from the sink. In the mirror, I can see Conor behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles his nose in the crook of my neck. The bruises he left on me last week have faded, and I cringe, knowing he’ll put some new ones there soon.

“We had to leave our romantic hotel room, our romantic weekend.” He takes a deep breath, inhaling me. “You smell good.”

“Don’t worry. We can go again soon.” I wriggle out of his hold and give him a small smile. “I’m still feeling a bit sick.”

Yesterday, I pretended I had a stomach bug to avoid having sex with him. Instead of taking care of me, he let me go find a doctor on my own while he was lost in his work and I went for a walk for an hour and a half. I came back with no medication and no doctor’s note and yet told him everything about seeing a doctor who said it might be from the anxiety of attempting to get pregnant.

Made-up doctor, made-up excuse. Being secretly on the pill while pretending to try and get pregnant is probably what makes me sick with worry. Being with a bigot, sexist, abuser is most likely what makes me ill most of the time. But something still makes me proud, for I can easily fool Conor without him even having an inkling of a doubt. I might not be the sharpest tool in the box; I graduated with less than okay grades and I’m not going to college, but I’m still just a little smarter than Conor. And that alone is a win.

“Come on, Rach,” he groans a complaint. “How long is that shit going to last? You went to the doctor yesterday. Shouldn’t you feel better now?” He tries to grab me again, and I flinch.

Shit.

“Why are you recoiling from me?” He scoffs and wipes his face with his hands. “You think I have fun fucking a girl who just lays there and takes it? Get off your high horse, you’re not even that hot.”

“Stop,” I snap back. I cross my arms across my chest, keeping my robe tight against me. “If you don’t want to have sex, that’s fine with me. My family isn’t in a rush for grandchildren before the wedding. Only yours is.”

He huffs, like it’s a pain to discuss with me. “God, do you know how tiring it is to have conversations with someone as

brainless as you?”

My eyes dart to the side, the insult hitting deep. At school, because I wasn't loud, people assumed I was smart. I went along with it because I was too ashamed to tell anyone I was simply dumb. That's what my parents always said. That's why they want to marry me so quickly, because I'm not good for anything else anyway.

“You're not intelligent. You're not beautiful. You might think you're hot, and maybe you are to all your other dykes, but you're not to us guys. And the worst thing is you don't even like dick. You never had any experience pleasuring a man, and you suck me like a fish choking on air.”

“Shut up,” I murmur, too scared to say it with vehemence.

His words are too believable. I'm not just stupid, I also was never able to keep the only person I fell in love with. Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm just not beautiful enough. Not smart enough. Not good enough.

He comes closer to me, and I attempt to take a step back as tears fall down my cheeks. I feel the edge of the bathtub against the back of my knees and have no choice but to let him close to me.

“What do I get out of our families' exchange, Rachel? Not much, believe me. No, the only thing I can get is your dad's *fucking* company, so I can at least make it worth my time.”

He grabs my jaw in a bruising grip.

“That's something to talk about with my dad, not me,” I yelp. I don't push his hand away, the fear of provoking further violence freezing my movements.

“I don't need to talk with your dad. He doesn't like me. He doesn't want to give it to me because he doesn't want to lose his hard-earned company to a stranger. *Unless...*” He tightens his grip as his other hand goes to my robe. He pulls at my arms until they fall by my side and pushes the silk away from my breasts. I'm thankful for the knot around my waist that stops the robe from opening entirely.

“Unless his little cunt of a daughter gives me a son that he knows will take over me eventually. Blood is so important to your dad. I just need to give him an heir.”

He grabs one of my breasts in the palm of his hand, hard enough to make me squeal.

“Come on, Rachel, what makes you wet? Tell me.”

The little demon in me wakes up.

Blood on Rose’s body. Controlling her into an orgasm. Hurting my doll until she’s screaming my name.

“Not you!” I shout as I attempt to push him away. He’s too heavy and I end up pushing myself backward, falling into the bathtub, and hurting the back of my head.

The world becomes dizzy, my ears ring, and black spots cloud my vision. I hear his mocking laugh, then I feel his hand in my hair.

I scream when he pulls me out of the tub by my hair.

“You hurt yourself falling in there. Are you gonna put that on me as well?”

“Let go!” I screech as he takes me to our bedroom. He throws me toward the bed, but I miss it and end up on the floor. I feel dizzy from hitting the bathtub and am struggling to get my bearings. I’ve got no time to avoid the first kick to my ribs.

Fuck. Fuck, it hurts.

“Remember when I told you I’d fucking kill you if you saw Rose again? You should be on your knees thanking me for letting you live. For not bringing up sooner that she had your phone and fucking hung up on me.”

“Nothing happened,” I lie. “I-I promise.”

“Get up.” The way his voice changes makes the flow of tears accelerate.

“Please, I don’t want to do this,” I plead with him as I get up slowly.

“I can’t stand your voice anymore, Rachel,” he admits with so much disgust it breaks my heart.

I hate it too. So meek, so fake. So unlike the person my demon wants me to be. My demon is a beautiful girl, intelligent, and strong. She kills men who hurt women. She roars loudly when she does so. She’s fierce and would eliminate Conor in the blink of an eye.

But I still keep her at bay, because Rachel is scared of her demon.

I hate him so much that my heart freezes when he’s around. And yet, the way he hates me still touches me.

“Come on, get on the bed.” I watch him undo the string holding his pajamas around his hips. “This will stop once you give me my fucking kid. So why don’t you make yourself useful for once?”

With shaking hands, I undo the knot keeping my robe in place. The task is difficult with my vision blurred by tears and my hands shaking.

The slap to my face comes out of nowhere, shock keeping my mouth agape. “For fuck’s sake, why are you so slow? I told you to get on the bed!”

“I...I was just...” *Taking my robe off* doesn’t even come out, another slap cutting me off.

His hand is in my hair again, and the next thing I know I’m back on the floor.

“There. You don’t want the bed? Why don’t you take the floor?”

A kick to the side.

I try to fold into a fetal position but he’s already grabbing my ankles. I twist and turn, trying not to end up on my stomach, that’s the weakest position he puts me in.

I fail.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” I cry as I feel his legs against my inner thighs. I know it’s going to happen, but the pain is just

too much to take. I think I remember the pain, but every time it hurts more than the previous one. He ignores me, and I wriggle, violently kicking my legs to try and get his attention. “Conor...Conor, please...”

His hands parting my ass cheeks to get more access brings bile to my throat. “I-I’ll do it,” I sob. “P-please, Conor, don’t hurt me.”

“Shut up!” he roars. And I know why. He can’t take the guilt, can’t take the cries. Only he’s too selfish, too money and power hungry to stop his actions.

And since he doesn’t stop, my body is the one giving up. I fall limp against the floor. Become malleable, escaping the reality I’ve been forced into.

His phone rings in the background, a quiet sound at the back of my mind. Once. Twice.

Before he can take it a step further, I feel the weight of his body lifting off mine.

I don’t move, petrified. Fear runs like black ink through my body, turning my veins obsidian, making the angst bottomless.

I hear him talk to someone. I think it’s his dad. But I don’t move.

I hear him complain about something, that it’s late. But I stay still.

I understand he’s moving around, grabbing things here and there in our bedroom. But I don’t make a sound.

Be nice, and he won’t hurt you. Just do what he tells you.

I don’t know how long I stay this way, lying on my stomach on the floor, naked and scared. My eyes shut. Cold, trembling, and wondering when the pain will come.

“Get up.”

His harsh voice makes me recoil in surprise. The tip of his leather shoe nudges me.

His shoe?

I open my eyes slowly, blinking up at him and realizing he'd turned the light on. My eyes were squeezed shut so tightly I didn't notice the change.

A roll of his eyes, a huff, and his shoe is hitting me again. I squeal like a sacrificial lamb. I hate it, but it's impossible to control.

I don't count them; I just take them. He turns me around by putting his leather loafer under my stomach and rolling me over. Like a dirty animal he can't get himself to touch. He's dressed in a smart suit, looking handsome and so unlike the monster he is.

"My dad wants to see me," he says casually. "Just go to bed. Maybe you'll be willing to put a little more effort into this relationship tomorrow."

Vileness crosses his gaze as he looks down at me from his powerful position. For no apparent reason, he presses the sole of his shoe against my collarbone, close to my shoulder. He presses, and I try to make sense of it, quickly answering what he just said. "I-I will," I lie to protect myself.

Trying to make sense of abuse is like trying to scream in a nightmare. You need it, you're in a breathless apnea and it would finally bring life into your lungs.

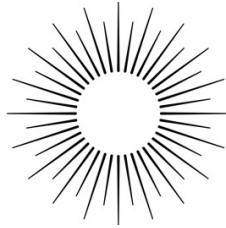
But it's impossible.

Because just like nightmares, abuse is uncontrollable. It doesn't matter what you say or do. It doesn't matter if you listen and wonder if you're awake, alive, or able to fight fate... Ultimately, you're not the one in control.

So, when Conor keeps pressing, putting weight onto his leg and making sure my skin bruises from his gesture, I don't question his motivation anymore.

He's an abuser, and he will always abuse me.

RACHEL



A Little Death – The Neighbourhood

Conor has been gone for less than an hour and I've had a shower. I've had time to rid myself of his sickening scent but not his painful bruises. I have to keep myself busy while my body calms down from the rushes of fear and adrenaline Conor put it through. Then I'll sleep. I start doing things around the house that don't need to be done, just so my brain has something to focus on.

I'm changing the bed sheets in our guest bedroom, where no one has ever slept, when someone knocks loudly on our front door.

We have a Stoneview mansion. Visitors have to ring our surveillance gate before they can reach our door. The only people who know our code are us, my parents, and his.

Conor would have a key, and he's with his dad. My dad never comes. He simply cannot stand Conor, even if it doesn't stop him from going with my mom's wish of forcing me into an abusive marriage with him.

It can only be Mom.

I sigh to myself, dreading seeing my mom at this hour. It's late, and I'm ready to go to bed. I wanted to touch myself to images of Rose's naked body while I fell into a sleep where I would only dream of her and me.

Back to wearing my silk robe with nothing underneath, I open the door to my—

“Oh my god,” I jump back in fear.

In a split second, I attempt to shut my front door on Samuel Thomas. His massive frame comes to stand closer, and he stops my movement with a mighty hand on the door.

Ever so silent, he pushes back, forcing me to step away and let him in. He walks into my house like he’s the one who bought it for me.

“H-how did you get past the gate?” I stutter as I walk backward, my hands coming in front of me as a useless reflex to keep a threat away.

He keeps walking toward me, and I eventually have to stop taking steps backward when I realize I’ve backed myself into the wall that separates our hallway from our living area.

Sam, however, keeps his strides slow and steady. His body is indescribably commanding. It’s not only the fact that he’s huge, that his height makes me feel like I’m facing a tsunami. It’s not the fact that the girth of his arm is probably the same as my thigh.

It’s the aura about him. He’s got the aura of a *killer*. His black eyes suck you in, ready to end you. His gelled-back hair, his tattoos peeking anywhere they can, hinting that they cover his entire body. He’s more than dangerous; he is absolutely destructive.

But even when the lethal man gets close enough to me that I can feel his breath against my cheek, my body doesn’t react a quarter of the way it does around Conor. The palpitations from my heart don’t spread disgust in my entire being. The sweat at the small of my back is not proof of fear, and the hair rising at the back of my neck is not apprehension.

No, it’s something else entirely, and I *know* the difference.

I have always been jealous of Sam. I have always wanted Rose’s attention to myself, and during our senior year, I couldn’t stand knowing she was spending time with him. Precious time she could have spent on me.

But I understand. Truly, I get it. There is something about him that drops my heartbeats from my chest to my stomach.

It's the roughness, the fact that everything about him feels forbidden and illegal. It's knowing he kills people, and he chooses to let me live.

He brings his hand up, and I flinch, the memory of Conor's fingers slapping against my cheek just too fresh.

His brows furrow slightly. I press myself against the wall as his hand goes to my hair. I squeeze my eyes shut when he brings his face down.

Close.

Closer.

But when I open them, he's backed away already, and instead of his face, he's holding something in front of me. A small feather?

"You had something in your hair," he says, bemused.

A shocked pause.

"I-I was changing the sheets," I finally reply. Because that's what matters right now. Justifying myself for having a tiny feather in my hair.

He takes a step back and looks around, suspicious. "I'm not here to hurt you, Rachel. Just to keep an eye on you while Rose does me a favor."

I straighten, trying to give myself more height, trying to show I'm to be taken seriously too and it won't be like when Lik and him took me by surprise.

"Not here to hurt me unless she doesn't do what she's told," I snap back as I put a hand on my hip to show my irritation.

I understand what I'm doing is risky. Snapping at someone as dangerous as him it's practically suicidal, isn't it? I think I'm doing it on purpose. I want a reaction out of him. And the thrill of what that reaction could be electrifies me.

To my disappointment, he doesn't even bother replying. He walks further into my house, going through the door that leads into the living room and I'm the one who has to follow.

His long legs force me to accelerate, and I can feel every single bruise on my body. He's already on the other side of our long room and looking into the backyard through the floor-to-ceiling windows by the time I catch up.

"Hey," I bark, wondering where my confidence comes from. "Don't ignore me."

I catch up, settling right behind him. "I'm talking to you. Just barge into my house, threaten me, and make yourself comfortable, why don't you. All the while, you blackmail my girlfriend into doing some shady shit for you. And how the hell did you get past the gate?"

He turns around slowly, a small smile pulling at his lips like his silence brought him exactly what he wanted.

"Rose isn't your girlfriend." I don't like the way he says Rose. His British accent is not pleasant to the ear, it's uptight, and he makes her name sound bitter.

I scoff, lost for words. He didn't have to throw shitty truths at me in such an effortless manner.

"She's not yours either," I finally bite back.

Way to go. Really got him there.

God, I feel stupid and immature right now.

He shrugs. That's all.

That. Is. All.

He walks around me and carries on with his visit of the house. He is so exasperating. I follow after him, retightening my robe when it loosens.

"Why are you even doing this?" I keep asking.

I didn't miss what he said when we were at his cabin. He kills for a living, and he wants to kill people Rose knows. People from the Volkov family. And I know they're the ones who took her. I had overheard Jake talking about them. I heard Sam and his boyfriend, Lik, talk about it too.

Volkov is a known name in Stoneview. That family has run the underground belly of our rich town for many years.

Multiple politicians who live here are involved with them: CEOs and other powerful men who are just too greedy to stay legal.

Sam's silence is getting on my nerves. I follow him around as he checks some rooms in my house, and there are a lot of rooms in a Stoneview mansion.

"Is it the guy who kidnapped her? Is that why you want to kill him?"

He opens my kitchen door and goes to a cupboard. Helping himself to a crystal glass, he walks over to the fridge and presses the water jet with the rim.

"Hey, asshole, do you ever talk?"

The silence is getting on my nerves, and my brain seems adamant on getting a reaction out of his stoic behavior.

"Aren't you jealous?" Not expecting anything, I keep going. "That I got Rose, and you didn't."

It's like the glass is filling up in slow motion. When it's full, he downs it and starts again. The humming of the fridge is the only sound between us.

"Don't you hate me? Don't you have questions for me? Like what sounds she makes when she moans? What she tastes like? How her body reacts when she comes undone on my fingers?"

The sound of the fridge pouring water stops.

The click of the glass as he stops pressing.

His footsteps as he turns around and walks closer to me.

And the beating of my heart against my ribcage.

"May I ask you a question, Rachel?" The politeness of his words contrasts with his appearance and the apparent fury in his eyes. The heat of his body clashes with mine and my arm twitches with a need to extend it and touch him. Just to check if he's real.

As if I haven't asked a hundred already, I reply, "Only if I can ask you one in return." I raise an eyebrow at him,

challenging him to talk some more.

He's the one whose arm extends. His fingers touch my bare skin just above my breasts, and with a delicateness that doesn't belong to such a rough man, his fingers gently separate my robe and bring one side over my shoulder. I cross my arms to prevent it from falling and exposing my boobs. He skims over the bruise on my collarbone, making me flinch. His brows furrow, his gaze looking at my bruise but lost somewhere else. Somewhere that isn't the present, that isn't the here and now.

His black orbs flick to me, and that's when he asks his question.

“Why do you stay with your fiancé knowing he will never stop hitting you?”

My eyes are suddenly interested in an imaginary spot on my marble floor.

“Why do you stay with Lik when you're hopelessly in love with Rose?”

Our eyes clash together, a dangerous black hole attempting to swallow my innocent blue. It takes a long minute for us to process our own version of ‘I said you could ask, not that I'd answer’, and with every second that passes, I'm falling deeper into a fascination, an infatuation I can hardly control. It translates into a physical need to get closer to him, bury myself in his arms and beg him to protect me from Conor. It's not lust; it's not love. It's a need for companionship.

It's like we're two souls that shared the same traumatic event in another life. Now that we've been reborn into the here and now, we're finding each other again.

“Because he scares me.” I give up my well-guarded secret under the enchantment of Sam's power. He didn't insist, and he didn't force it out of me. He simply stayed silent and expectant. Like he was actively listening and waiting for my honest answer.

Saying the truth makes my heart tremble. Admitting fearing the piece of shit that is Conor McGill is embarrassing.

I have countless dreams about how easy it would be to kill him. And yet, the pain and the fear keep me from ever acting on it. I don't want to die at his hands, I don't want to go to prison. I don't want to lose all contact with my family, especially not my baby sister.

The only acknowledgment to my response is his hand lifting to his jaw and his tattooed fingers running back and forth against it for a few seconds. When his hand falls back down, he rasps an answer to my question.

“I can't control my love for Rose. However, when I met Lik, I had a grasp on my love for him, and I *chose* to love him fully.”

I know the truth in his words a little too well.

“And now?”

“Now, I couldn't stop loving Lik if I tried to. And my love for Rose is just as uncontainable as it's always been.”

We share a moment of understanding. Then, he takes a step back, coming back to reality after a walk with me on the fantasy side of our lives.

“This is going to be a long night. What time is your fiancé coming home?”

“I don't know, but you can't be here when he does.”

As if his word count ran out for the day, he doesn't reply. He finishes pouring water in his glass and walks back to my living room, settling on an armchair by the fireplace.

I don't get another word for the rest of the night. I put a movie on, not even thinking of leaving him unattended. It's not even that I think he'd rob me or turn my house upside down. I simply feel fine with him next to me. Sam doesn't talk much, but I don't think he needs to. His mere presence says everything. His imposing aura tells a thousand words. I can't even follow the film over how loud his silence feels.

I put some gory horror films on, the kind I've watched since I was just a little girl. I like the blood, enthralled by it with a slight disappointment at knowing it's fake. Some people

hate blood, some are unfazed by it. I find it fascinating. Every few seconds, my eyes dart to him, refusing to focus on the screen. Sometimes he's on his phone, and sometimes he's staring back at me, emotionless yet focused. At one point, he stares at the blood on the screen and then at me. Something like recognition flashes in his obsidian eyes before a notification on his phone brings his gaze down.

My life has always been about Rose. Since I've been able to have loving and lustful feelings toward another being, Rose has been the center of them. I orbit around her like I would just disappear into the galaxy if I didn't. Sam has visibly been in the same situation as me his whole life. Two planets going round and round in Rose's galaxy.

I don't realize when I fall asleep. For the first time in practically two years, I'm not scared as I do. I don't feel like I should sleep with one eye open. No, all my brain can focus on is a scientific, astronomic issue. I've always hated exams. The anxiety, my clammy hands gripping my pencil. The focus on trying to get my stupid brain to at least understand one instruction. One math problem, one literary piece. It burned my head, giving me fevers and cold sweats. That's how I'm feeling as I fall asleep. I have a problem written on an exam paper that I just keep reading over and over again...

Two orbits on their own separate trajectories have been circling around the same burning star since before the dawn of time. What happens if said orbits collide?

You have one hour.

ROSE



Blood In The Cut – K.Flay

Lik parks Sam's car at the back of Vue Club. The drive was long and silent enough that I had time to calm myself and think of how to get back at the two men. They had their little fun, they won points at games they made up, and now the ball is in my court. I don't have the physical strength to fight the two, but my damnable beauty has never failed me. And neither has my intellect.

It was fascinating to listen to them arguing about me yesterday. And it's even more fascinating to watch their dynamics. Sam dominates Lik in a way the latter requires. In a way, that also creates a deep craving for dominance in him. And he chose to wield that on me.

Fine, I can play that game. I can slither myself between them and obliterate them from the inside. It took so little for Lik to start fixating on me, he almost made it too easy. All I had to do was shoot him.

Then he took pleasure retaliating today.

A strong woman who falls to her knees for him. He wants what practically all the men I've ever met wanted. They see a beautiful, enchanting girl who doesn't let anyone push them around, and they feel like stronger men when they shut her up.

Pathetic.

And easily faked.

The problem is my stupid, stubborn brain that refuses to comply when I'm told an order. I try, but the burning prickles of pride spread across my skin and make me fight back. And since the Volkov brothers entered my life, my wildness has become less and less controllable.

Right now, Lik is conflicted. I see it in the way he's still holding the steering wheel when the car has been parked for five minutes. I notice how he chews on the three pieces of gum he shoved in his mouth during the drive. By his temples, muscles clench and unclench as he grinds hard enough to pull one. I observe his face, my eyes taking him in. His eyelashes are so long they give mine a good run for their money. His deep brown eyes currently reflect a need for power, self-control, and authority—something he represses around Sam.

His lips are dark and plump, and he keeps rolling them inwardly. His skin is darker than mine. While I look Mediterranean in a sun-kissed skin sense, he has that extra glow, that sun in his blood that never goes away despite being born in America.

It comes to my mind that I don't even know if that's accurate.

"Were you born here?" I ask before I can rear back my words.

It makes him chuckle, his rings-covered fingers finally letting go of that poor steering wheel.

"People who ask me that question usually want to send me back to wherever I was born."

I give him a terse, understanding nod. I never experienced racism, and I couldn't understand it. I have a completely different experience with life than he does. All I can relate to is knowing what it's like to feel like you don't belong. Not with the rich, the middle, or the working class. Not with a white American foster family, a mixed orphanage, or an Italian abusing foster dad. Not in a preparatory school that houses children of politicians or in the North Shore, broken by poverty and abandoned by the government.

I know what it's like to wonder *where* you were born and have no idea of the answer. To look at my eyes and ask my mirror if they belonged to my mom or dad. To rub my hands against my skin and wonder what kind of beautiful colors I'm a mix of. Mainly, I wonder why my parents made the fateful decision they didn't want me in their lives.

"I don't even care where you were born," I admit. It just came out while my brain was spinning out of control from looking at his beautiful body.

"I don't care where you were born either," he answers like a kid who got turned down. *You don't want to be my friend? I didn't even want to be your friend anyway.*

"I don't know where I was born," I chuckle just to say something. Just so he doesn't win our little back and forth.

There's a short silence. "If we don't know who your parents are..." He pauses, like every other time someone starts seriously talking about the fact that my brothers and I were abandoned. "Does that mean we don't know who gave you your infuriating brat genes?"

The humor tinting his voice makes me cackle a laugh despite the current situation. I'm just too thankful it wasn't another one of those 'I'm sorry you got abandoned, and it fucked your entire life' kind of sentence.

"Why, do you know which of your parents gave you issues that you turned to BDSM needs?"

He fakes a gasp, putting a hand against his chest. "I'll have you know, all I look for in a guy is someone that protects me, takes care of me, and makes all the decisions. Is that too hard to understand?"

"There's a name for that. It's called daddy issues."

We both laugh, completely forgetting what we're meant to be doing. An hour ago, the guy had me pinned to Sam's dining table in an apartment I've been forced to stay in. Under this trench coat, I'm wearing underwear that barely covers anything and leather that feels rough against my skin. But I can't control the way Lik and I click. It reminds me too much

of the way Sam and I made each other laugh when we were kids. Throwing little jabs at each other, turning our misfortune into dark humor because we thought laughing was better than crying about it.

Laughter is underrated. People forget how hard it is to genuinely make someone laugh or to have someone bring out the rumble of emotions out of your chest and into the world.

Our moment of fun is cut off by a notification on his phone. It's sitting between us, and I can already see it's from Sam. Our laughs crash down like a rare bird shot mid-air, too heavy with the weight of reality to keep flying freely.

He unlocks his phone with one finger. I don't know if he wants me to see the message or simply doesn't care, but he just leaves it on the console. My heart turns cold when it opens to a picture of a sleeping Rachel, peacefully dreaming on her sofa in a red silk robe. The text that accompanies the picture sets my blood on fire, though.

Sam: She sleeps like you. And you'll never guess what she was watching tonight. Don't show this to Rose unless you need to keep her in check.

My feelings of fear and resentment must be written all over my face because Lik takes the phone, locks it, and puts it in his jacket pocket. I wasn't meant to see it. The bastards are talking about my girlfriend behind my back, and they don't even want me to know.

I know the kind of films Rachel watches. It was blood and gore, with a frustration that it was fake. And I know how she sleeps by heart—curled into a ball against my side with a hand on my exposed back to keep me warm.

I hate that Sam thinks he can compare his boyfriend to *my* girl. So he needs to shut the fuck up about my girl and the similarities she shares with him. It's one thing to talk about her to threaten me, it's another to take a genuine interest in her.

“She reminds him of you,” I simply say, my brain ready to spill out what I know will destroy them.

He plays with the ring piercing in his right nostril while thinking about what to say. “Just pretend you didn’t see that. Unless it helps you behave,” he huffs.

I ignore that and keep going with my trail of thoughts. “Let’s hope it doesn’t get out of hand between them.”

His brows furrow, and I relish in the confusion on his face. He looks ahead, not entertaining me, but I keep pushing. “I hope they don’t kiss,” I sigh. “I’m a jealous person, Lik.”

I don’t even need to lie about that. The only thing I know for sure is that they won’t kiss. But I truly am an insanely possessive person and not ashamed of it one bit.

“You’re crazier than I thought if you think he’d ever kiss her.”

“I don’t know,” I shrug.

I feel like I’m moving my chess pieces while Lik isn’t even aware the game has started. I’m about to checkmate him so hard he’ll feel it pierce his heart as if we were playing Wizard’s Chess. He’s going to get knocked down harder than poor Ron Weasley, and it’s all thanks to their little argument yesterday and Sam’s beautiful lie.

“You know,” I start again. “He kisses you. He kisses me. What stops him from kissing her, really? That gets me worried, not you?”

Time stops in this car. Temperatures drop, and silence covers us in a thick blanket. Lik turns his head to me so slowly I feel like it’ll never stop, and he’ll do a 360 like possessed dolls in horror films.

He looks so handsome tonight, which spurred the idea to put myself between him and Sam: the undeniable fact that I find him incredibly attractive, and it wouldn’t even be that hard to do it.

He has everything I’ve ever loved in men and women: the softness, the elegance, the intelligence, and the sensibility of a

beautiful woman. Along with the roughness, the sharpness, and the perspicacity of a handsome man.

He is a mix of all my vices in one. His voice feels like honey when he talks. It's silk when it travels through the air, and someone so strong shouldn't have such a soothing voice. But not now, not tonight.

"What?" he seethes. No, right now, he sounds like he swallowed shards of glass and is ready to spit them back in my face.

"What?" I repeat, a hint of fear in my voice, scarcely covered by the pretense of confusion.

I'm currently sitting next to a hidden force of darkness that he seems to barely control. The funny, witty, and smart-mouth man who has been around me in the last couple of months is drowning under his sharp suit. A black button-up shirt, a black waistcoat, a black suit, and a black tie. And as night swallows us and coldness fills us up, there is only one color his eyes turn.

Black.

He has a thin golden chain attached to the button of his waistcoat and going into the pocket of it. I don't know what's attached to it, hidden in the pocket, but all of a sudden, I can't stop focusing on it.

Something is telling me Lik has gone. That the guy Sam keeps calling *Kill* has surfaced and I should stop now. But, I've gone this far, and this is my chance to destroy Sam and find my freedom again, to keep Rachel safe. I can't stop now.

"He kissed me."

I had a whole monologue planned. I was going to tell him all that happened the day I got kidnapped. How Sam had kissed me before telling me he had a boyfriend. That he and I were always meant to be, and Lik had no chance of ruining that. That he only used him as a failed attempt to put something between us.

Only my braveness has vanished and hidden somewhere deep, and those were the only words I could splutter.

“When?” His frozen voice incapacitates me. I take a deep breath.

“I thought you knew,” I lie.

I heard them argue yesterday, I know he thinks nothing ever happened between Sam and me. And nothing did, except unsaid love, unexpressed passion, and repressed emotions. That, and the kiss.

It’s harder than I thought to do this, especially when I see the heartbreak and betrayal in Lik’s eyes. He truly is in love with Sam, but I can’t let that ruin my chances of getting my revenge on Sam.

“I said *when*,” he rasps with fury.

“The day the Volkov brothers took me.”

Nothing else comes from the man next to me. He takes his phone out of his pocket and puts it back into the middle console.

Nothing except the simplest yet coldest words. “Get out.”

Gone is the guy I thought I could control. I don’t know what I’ve just done, but Lik isn’t taking me to Vue Club tonight.

Kill is.

ROSE



Gimme Love – Rosenfeld

As soon as Lik and I pass the same security guard as yesterday, we go a different way. He walks me to a coat room. It's a separate room with another door on the opposite wall. The lights are red, bathing the room in it. There's a girl behind a counter and my eyes widen taking in what she's wearing. Who knew my outfit would feel overdressed compared to hers. Topless and with only a thong made of fake diamonds, she approaches her counter.

“Good evening, Sir. How can I help you?”

“Kill for Semenov,” Lik simply says as he drops two wads of cash on the counter.

Her eyes dart to a list behind her counter and she nods.

“Of course, Sir.” She disappears at the back and returns with a sealed black leather pouch. “May I take her coat?” she asks in a crystal voice.

I take time to appreciate her as she rounds the counter. Her fake boobs are high and perky, and my mind wanders to lovely places. Her hips sway as she approaches me, and her light blue eyes don't leave Lik. She doesn't waver one bit in her sky-high stilettos, evidently used to walking with them.

She stops right in front of me, waiting for Lik's approval. He walks to an armchair next to the counter and sits down. “Go on. And dress her too,” he says as he rearranges the golden cuffs on his shirt shaped like two Hamsa hands.

Dress her? My eyes go to the bag on the counter, but when I open my mouth to talk, his dangerous gaze digs so deep inside my eyes, so I shut it straight away. Goosebumps rise on my skin as the girl comes to stand behind me, wraps her arm around me, and undoes the coat, revealing me to Lik.

He slowly takes me in as she puts the coat away and she grabs the leather pouch. His eyes are fire and ice, wanting to light me up and cool me down simultaneously.

“What’s in the—”

“Quiet.” The simplicity of his word and calm voice contrasts with my nervous one. It sounds completely different from the Lik I’ve come to know. His usual expressive face is stone cold, his tense muscles making him look bigger than he usually does.

The girl comes back to me and unzips the pouch. She takes out two items I can’t quite make out, then she puts the pouch on a small three-legged table next to me. I thought this whole dressing me up thing was over since we left Sam’s.

I don’t like this. I feel naked and vulnerable, even if she’s more naked than I am. I’m the inexperienced one who has no idea what is meant to go on in this kind of place. Lik has turned into a king, sitting on his throne and waiting for the sacrificial virgin to give herself to him. I don’t want to be the sacrificial virgin, for fuck’s sake.

The girl I want to name Blondie for her wheat, shiny hair takes one of my arms in her hands, and the next thing I know, she’s wrapping my tattooed wrist into a leather cuff. She runs a thumb across the scar that doesn’t quite go all the way around my wrist and her eyes flick to mine. I don’t say anything since she’s not about to tell *me* any clues. She secures the cuff and straightens the D-ring attached to it.

She repeats the same process with my other arm, including staring at the scar around my other wrist.

Mind your own fucking business.

She can sense my uneasiness, and when she comes around to stand behind me again, she massages my shoulders. She

drops soft kisses on my neck, just above the collar I'm wearing, and then under, then between my shoulder blades. I relax in a soft sigh and feel her smile against my skin.

She grabs one arm, bringing my wrist close to my spine, just below where she just kissed me, and I finally understand the use of the golden chain Sam had secured on my back. She locks the cuff to the chain at my back and does the same to my other arm.

It doesn't just rob me of my hands. With the way the chain links the harness to my collar, I'm forced to stand with a straight back, pushing my boobs out and constraining my shoulders back as my hands stay stuck between my shoulder blades.

I throw Lik a glare and shake my head. "I hate you."

"I just learned my boyfriend cheated on me with you. I think the hate coming in between us is ninety percent me, princess."

The girl ignores our exchange, telling me it's not the first time she's dealt with a girl who is here against her will. An urge of resentment spurs toward her as I watch her grab something else from the pouch. When she approaches me with a silicone, shining, black ball gag, I take a step back and shake my head.

"You're fucking insane if you think I'm going to let you put that on me, Lik," I seethe. Fury is burning through my veins, and I can't even do shit about it with my hands locked behind my back.

Blondie turns to him. He ignores her, his gaze glowering its way under my skin and obliterating me from the inside. Why does my core burn up when this man looks at me?

"I'm not doing it," I repeat. But this time, it's a quavered whisper. If he wants to put that thing on me, there's nothing I can do. Cold sweats dampen my neck and I pull at the chain at my back. All it gets me is for the collar to tighten around my neck.

Fucking asshole.

“Sir?” Blondie tries.

Lik slowly gets up, walks to us, and grabs something from the pouch. He hooks three fingers around the ring at my collar and pulls until I’m forced to follow.

“Would you look at that,” I sneer, “I’m taller than you in heels.”

I can’t believe I’m stooping as low as making fun of his perfectly normal height to not feel like I’m losing grasp of a situation I’ve never had any control over.

I’m simply fucked.

When he reaches the armchair, he turns to me and smiles. He unrolls what he grabbed from the pouch, and I attempt to recoil when I see the leash in his hands, but his grip on the ring is too firm.

It’s made of a gold chain and a leather loop that he wraps around his fingers. He throws the pouch away from us as I hear a click under my chin and his fingers release the ring that now has a leash securely hooked on it.

I watch him confidently sit down, his black suit wrapping him in a sharpness only the devil should wear. Once sitting down, he pulls hard on the leash and makes me stumble on my unstable heels. The second pull brings me down in front of him. I grunt at the pain from my knees hitting the floor harshly.

“Well, would you look at that,” he smirks. “Not so tall when you’re on your knees before me.” I’m a little too shaken to reply. Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have made fun of him.

He bends until his forearms are resting on his knees. His mouth is so close to mine his minty breath makes me tremble when he speaks again.

“You’re going to wear that gag, princess. Or I’ll release your hands and you’ll be crawling behind me when we enter this club. You’re not experienced in that, and it won’t be easy. You won’t find the rhythm, you won’t get over the humiliation, and I’ll pull that leash every time you struggle to take a step like a bad pet who can’t keep up with its master.”

The anger rising in my chest, my pride being crushed down under his stupid black soles...It all makes me pant with a need to scratch his face with my nails.

“So? Gagged or crawling?”

I swallow my response down my throat. He might have won this round, but I’m not about to ask him to fucking gag me.

“We don’t have all night. Answer.”

I shake my head, and he shrugs. “I guess that means both.” He nods at the girl behind me, and I almost shriek my answer.

“Gag!”

He chuckles as he relaxes back and rests his hands over his stomach. I can’t help but eye the leather around his hand, knowing it leads straight to my neck.

“Let’s start with your first lesson. You don’t tell me to do anything. You beg. And if you do it well enough, I grant you what you need.”

“Come on,” I groan as if this is a debate. It’s not, and my resolve is wavering.

“That’s not how you beg, princess.”

I grit my teeth and glower at him. “Please.”

Like a tough coach to his team, he repeats. “That’s not how you beg. Eyes down. Precision in your words.”

I take a deep breath to try and calm the fury boiling my blood. I drop my gaze to the floor, but the words don’t come out. I shift uncomfortably on my knees.

“I’m losing patience, and someone is going to be crawling like a bitch soon.”

“*Please,*” I rush my word. My cheeks are heating, my ears burning and the blood beating in them is deafening. “Please,” I gulp. “Gag me.”

He doesn’t say anything, and it’s fucking torture to not be able to look up to gauge his reaction. The need to hear his

voice becomes a craving the more I wait for his approval. I'm dying just to peek up, see if he's smiling or not, happy or annoyed. After a long silence where I pray he won't make me repeat it, his voice reaches my ear like a blessing.

"Good girl."

I let out the breath I was holding. Who knew it would be so satisfying to hear those words just because I couldn't look at him? A tingling sensation drops to my lower belly and settles like an ache in my pussy. I move my hips slightly, trying to make it go away.

It doesn't.

"Open," he says as I feel Blondie come behind me.

I don't want another fight he's going to win, so I comply. When I feel the ball against my lips, I realize I haven't opened them nearly enough. I stretch out my jaw to its limit as it passes my lips. When she pulls at the ends to buckle it, the ball settles in my mouth, my lips slightly pulled back from the straps biting at the sides. There's a pull at my hair from the leather wrapping around my head and keeping my long strands stuck to my face. My mouth feels so full I can't swallow. I gag around the item slightly, feeling like it's hitting the back of my throat.

"It's an impression, it's not actually touching. Breathe through your nose," Lik orders softly like he can read my thoughts.

My nostrils flare as I try to bring as much oxygen into my lungs as possible. My gag reflex doesn't stop as I imagine what I must look like with all this leather wrapped around me, my hands tied behind my back, a collar, a leash, and a black ball that barely fits in my mouth.

Panic settles, I retch around the ball, and Lik puts a reassuring hand at the top of my head.

"Ssh, relax, princess."

The words he had uttered at Sam's house while he was pinning me to the table shouldn't work. They didn't then, when he was mocking me. But then he adds something else.

“I’ve never seen someone so beautiful,” he whispers to me. “A fallen goddess begging for redemption.” And they do. They reassure me.

My breathing stabilizes, my gag reflex settles, and my jaw relaxes around the silicone ball.

“Good girl,” he murmurs close to my ear. He buries his nose in my hair and inhales deeply, getting high on me like I’m getting high on his praises.

He gets up and pulls upward on the leash. It takes time for me to get up, but he watches me patiently.

He stands in front of the door opposite the one we came in, then turns back to me, a smirk I don’t understand on his face. He walks behind me, undoes the cuffs and the gag, and slips his words in my ear.

“It’s good to know that it *is* possible to domesticate you after all.”

I want to scream. He never planned on making me go in there with all those things. He just wanted to prove he could if he wanted. And I let him.

Shame clutches onto my stomach, and lower...something else gets a hold of me.

“Be good, princess. Because if you are, I know you’ll enjoy it. If you’re not, I’ll take great pleasure in punishing you.”

Blondie opens the door, and the bass of a languid sexy song escapes from the club it leads into. The lights are low, a dark blue and purple, and Lik walks in first. A slight pull on the leash and I’m following, letting the world of BDSM swallow me with only this man as my guide.

ROSE



Cravin' – Stileto, Kedyle Paige

Slowly, Lik and I walk down two flights of stairs. The room they lead into is bathed in a midnight blue hue that matches the color of my eyes. There aren't that many people here. I don't know if it's worse or better than if there were hundreds of people like in the club upstairs. I'm aware of every person around.

Eyes turn to me as Lik and I walk past. Men are dressed as smart as he is, and the women are dressed as much as I am. If I thought I had it bad a minute ago with a ball gag in my mouth and a collar around my neck, I quickly come back to my thoughts. Some of the women in here are moving around on all fours with butt plug tails trailing after them leaving me to wonder how the hell they are able to keep such a heavy object in place. One of them is on her knees, wrists bound behind her back and a sign attached to a chain hanging from her mouth.

It reads, I've been a bad kitty, and now Master says I'm to be shared with other guests.

I gulp, my mind running through all the scenarios of being shared. Threesomes, that's about as far as I ever went. One with a man and a woman, which ended up being a lot of leaving that guy to the side. One with two girls, where I took over and did most of the work. I fell unconscious from being drunk before I could get anything in return.

Although as I watch three men approach the bad kitty, I know it would be nothing like what I've experienced before. I

struggle to get a gulp of air into my lungs. The temperature in this place is burning hot, and it takes me a few minutes of watching bad kitty getting face-fucked by three guys to realize it's not the room, it's me. Her sign has been discarded to the floor next to her, and I have to focus on that to learn to breathe again.

I'm always cold. I find warmth in alcohol, drugs, and strangers' bodies. Feeling this sensation of burning without anyone touching me or having ingested anything is odd. I don't realize I've stopped walking, but as soon as Lik feels it on the other side of the leash, he turns his attention to me. His walking back toward me with a smirk on his face and his handsome body settling close to me does nothing to help the heat coursing through my veins.

With the hand that isn't holding the leash, he grabs my jaw softly yet sturdily. I can see from up close that his ear has stitches from my bullet grazing it, and it brings some sort of calming peace to my racing heart. His lips caress my ear, his tongue peeking out to lick at my neck. My blood liquefies, adding to the pulsing ache in my pussy and dampening the thin thong I'm wearing.

“Does it make you wet, princess? To see another brat being put back in her place?”

I inhale a ragged breath. When he faces me again, his eyes gleam with a dangerous need. Until he sees something behind me. He shortens the leash by wrapping it around his fist until a thin veil of air only separates us. “Listen to me.”

I'm all ears, my body reacting to his deep voice in a way it shouldn't. The vulnerability he's put me in left me with a desperate necessity to follow his lead, and the fact that it doesn't scare me *scares me*.

“The point of tonight is getting that letter to someone. I will point you to him when I find him. In the meantime, you be good for me, alright?”

I can't answer anything, something is stuck in my throat. So I nod. My ears pick up the sounds of bad kitty orgasming, her mouth full and moaning around someone's dick. My eyes

flick to her, but Lik grabs my jaw again and forces me to watch him.

“Focus. No talking. You only follow *my* orders, got it?”

I nod again.

“If anything gets too much, I want you to snap your fingers. Show me.” I snap my fingers a few times. “Good girl.”

His free hand caresses my thigh, all the way up until he’s feeling the lace of my thong. It takes all my strength not to react, but I don’t think I’m in control of my own body tonight. A tremble courses through me, shaking every cell of my being, making my eyelids drop, and pushing me into a haze of desperate want. I can feel my clit tingle from the proximity of his fingers, but he doesn’t touch me there.

“Try not to come before anyone touches you,” he mocks me.

At the same time as I attempt to swallow my need for his touch, my pride goes down my throat and settles heavily in my stomach. And still, it doesn’t shake the plea for pleasure he must see in my eyes.

“Kneel,” he tells me softly.

Not quite understanding why, I look around, to make sure he’s talking to me.

“Now,” he growls. A pull at the leash and I’m on my knees in front of him, just before his voice rises to someone behind me. “Semenov,” he smiles warmly at the man stopping right behind me. So close, I can almost feel his shoes against my bare ass. “How are you, my friend?”

“I see pet is more tame than yesterday,” he tells him, his Russian accent rolling down my spine with revulsion.

He sounds like Alexei Volkov. The uncontrollable half of the Volkov brothers. He and Semenov both make it look like they can’t be bothered to put the effort into their English because they’re too patriotic to their own country. That would

never bother me with anyone. But this reminds me too much of ruthless Alexei.

I don't know how Lik senses my discomfort, but his hand comes to land in my hair. He starts massaging my scalp, slowly taking the dread away. I don't know when I stop hearing Semenov's voice, when I stop feeling his presence or anyone's except Lik's. I don't know when I stop caring that I'm acting exactly like the old Russian called me. The perfect pet purring into Lik's hand as he turns me into putty. I can't even feel the leather or the collar. All I know is that when Lik's hand leaves my hair, I automatically follow, trying to get more from him.

I only hear the end of their conversation when Semenov says, "She should see the show. It's important to know what happens to bad pets."

"And she will," Lik concludes. Despite not being able to see him, I instantly know when Semenov is gone.

"Come here, princess." Lik grabs me under my armpits and helps me up. "You were such a good girl just then." His fingers skim my taut stomach, coming up between my breasts, and keep going up languidly until he hooks one around the ring. He pulls me close and drops his lips just below my ear. His tongue darts out, licking until he replaces it with his teeth. I swallow a gasp, my head rolling to the side. His sucking turns into biting and a spark leaves from the spot he's touching, traveling down my body, lighting fires onto every cell it touches.

A moan makes its way up my throat and resonates in my mouth. The heat liquifying my entire body is uncontainable.

His bite hurts, bruising my skin, no doubt leaving a clear hickey. He pulls away slightly when he hears me hiss and heals me with enchanting licks.

When he backs away, I feel underwater. The music resonates deep at the back of my head. The air is liquid, and the whole room is blurred from the sheer pleasure I can't shake. Worse than the pleasure, is the need for him to touch me more.

I don't come back above water until I realize Lik and I have moved and he's now sitting on a chair by a table. We're surrounded by small tables with one or two chairs around them. In front of us, a black stage is lit up by a single spotlight. I'm starting to think the fucker has a sixth sense because he once more reads my confusion before I show anything.

"Down," he orders softly. I sink to my knees by his side and my head falls to the left, right onto his lap.

The music lowers slightly and a man in an expensive blue suit emerges. In his right hand, he holds the same kind of leash Lik does. Except the woman coming after him is crawling on her hands and knees. Her posture is perfect, her hips swaying sexily in a way that should be impossible in her position. The curve of her back is so perfect, I'm dying to run my hand along her spine.

The look on her face is apologetic. Like she's done the unforgivable. The man's expression is so passive that one could wonder if he even wants to be here.

But his gaze lights up when he secures her onto a bench, her shameful face toward us, her arms secured into cuffs on the sides. He steps behind her, tugs down the thin underwear she is wearing, and from the inside of his jacket, he pulls out a wooden ruler.

My entire body tenses. Pulling my head away from Lik, I feel dread freezing all my muscles.

No.

I can already see the flashbacks of Bianco pulling out his ruler to hurt me. The phantom pain burning my back. Pinches he added, just for the sake of it. The bruises. The blacked-out room. The *loneliness*.

I expect the woman on stage to cry and fight. To scream for help. Then, I remember we're in a BDSM club. And this is normal.

The first hit gets a cry out of her *and me*. The second, a whimper from her. The third, a moan.

In between each time the ruler hits her ass cheeks, the man rubs her until she stops writhing. I can see the pain turning into pleasure in her eyes. Her lost, half-lidded stare, the relaxation of her muscles.

I don't know how many times the *slap* hits my ear, how many times she moans 'sorry, Master', or how many times said Master's eyes turn black, pupils expanding from the ecstasy he feels. I just know the jealousy that courses through me for not having this kind of relationship in my life.

I'm so aware of the pleasure pooling between my legs, so aware of every shift in the air against my skin, of Lik's eyes stuck on me rather than the scene in front of him, that when she explodes into an orgasm from the simple repeated gesture of a ruler hitting her bare ass and thighs, a long moan escapes me.

The need to find this kind of release is primal. My lungs are on fire from the despair and jealousy to feel what she feels. I feel cold when they leave the stage, the man walking with his sub in his arms, holding her like she's the most precious entity he's ever had the chance to touch. Her head is lolling to the side, a glaze in her gaze, and her eyes lost in utter bliss.

"Princess." The simple word pulls something in me. Slowly, Lik is taking away the pejorative meaning I had associated with the word and turning it into a sensual call. He preaches it like a prayer. He uses it like a love curse.

His tall form now stands in front of me, my face right into the hard-on he's sporting in his Armani suit. Layers and layers of black.

Black like the devil's suit.

Black like my heart's needs.

Black like his intentions.

"Pain turns you on, princess," he murmurs like a secret. Lik has found his way into Atlantis and is not letting anyone know about his discovery.

But he doesn't understand how impossible it is for me to accept what he's uncovered. That would be letting Bianco win.

That would mean all the training he's done on me worked.
And I know it has, the proof betraying me between my legs.

But how can I make sense of it?

ROSE



Desert Rose – Lolo Zouaï

I wonder what my body looks like. I'm panting with need. The near impossibility of swallowing my pleasure makes me sick, and yet I can't stop it. Nor can I stop the wetness dripping down my thighs.

I don't understand my own cravings. I need power like I need air. I'm built like a war machine, always defending myself, always ready to attack.

So why have I never felt this good before? With a feral need to beg someone to take absolute control.

I should have known. The person who brought me the closest to this is Rachel. On the rare occasions when she lets her little demon out and I turn into her pliable doll. Those are my favorite moments together. So why did I always think it was a mathematical impossibility for me to enjoy what I'm currently very much enjoying with Lik?

I'm pretty fucking stupid for a genius.

"You need release." He doesn't need to ask. I swallow his statement as soon as it crosses his lips, my head falling forward in capitulation.

His hand comes into my hair, grabbing strands between his fingers in a loving gesture.

This is what I wanted, wasn't it? To put myself in between Lik and Sam. To destroy their love so I could get an obligatory vengeance on the man who broke my heart. Who betrayed me.

Then why do I feel like I'm in way over my head? I'm getting more than I bargained for in a dangerous game I'm not sure I can win anymore.

It was one thing to destroy my pride for the sake of revenge.

But now that my defenses have fallen, like the first line of shields in a Spartan battle, my heart is starting to take the next hit. Spears and arrows are coming at me, and I have nothing to protect my beating organ as a new king makes its way across the battlefield to conquer me.

My head comes back up, waiting for the game maker to move his piece.

I sense what Lik is about to do from the sheer shift in his eyes. From the connection he forces on us. There's something we're sharing tonight other than the sexual tension and an attraction purer than uncut cocaine.

The need to hurt Sam.

Nearly two years ago, his boyfriend kissed me. What better way to deal with the burning jealousy of knowing I took that kiss willingly than by going a step further?

I see it in his eyes that he's thrown away the hesitation that was still holding him back when he sucked a hickey out of my skin. The restraints are gone now that the beautiful goddess is panting with need at his feet, hands behind her back, speech stuck in her throat, and silently begging for a release only he can provide.

So when he places his black leather shoe right in between my legs—putting pressure onto the insufferable ache—I feel like I'm the one who spelled it out for him.

His grip tightens around my hair, keeping my eyes on him, and his voice is pure sin when he tells me, "Get your release, princess."

My hips move of their own accord. I attempt to soothe the ache burning in my pussy, the same one that made me forget why I was here in the first place. I start with small, practically

imperceptible movements, the fear of someone seeing what I'm doing just too embarrassing still.

But, like rubbing two rocks together, it creates a spark, and the need for friction makes me accelerate until that spark turns into a full-blown fire. I lose myself, rubbing my burning clit onto the leather. The lace of my thong feels thicker by the minute, a barrier between me and the release Lik so gratefully allows me to get out of him.

The leather becomes slick from my wetness while I rub myself shamelessly. A frustrated groan escapes me. Lik's gaze alone sends thrills of pleasure down my spine. I whimper when I slip slightly and drops of electrifying pleasure get lost into emptiness. I need more, want more. My whines and pleading eyes make him harden his stare.

“You take what you're given. Make yourself come like a good slut, or don't come at all.”

He's holding my hair with the same hand that holds my leash. I feel the cold golden chain against my scorching cheek. It knocks over and over again while I rock back and forth. I can almost hear the *hiss* escaping from the difference in temperatures.

My attempts at filling my lungs with oxygen keep being broken by ragged breaths of pleasure. A ball builds up from my clit to my lower belly and zapping hopes of release shoot to my toes. I push myself harder against his shoe, now feeling the roughness of the laces against my clit. I rub with more power, panting with need and hope. My eyes drop to a half-lidded dreamful stare into Lik's black eyes. He looks like he's on drugs, his pupils wide and jaw clenched. The harshness mixed with the control he holds over me tips me over.

I explode against him, attempting to bury my head against his thigh as I curl onto myself from the pleasure. My moan is loud and deep, my lungs exploding behind my ribcage. I can't stop rubbing my clit, pushing through the waves and holding onto the pleasure that has been building up.

When my eyes squeeze shut, Lik tightens his grip, forcing me to open them and share my pleasure with him.

Slowly, I come to a stop. Still, I shudder against him, and as soon as he releases my hair, I bury myself against his inner thigh. Rubbing my head like a pet in need of love.

I struggle to catch my breath and my muscles hurt like hell from the tension. Lik pets my hair, his fingers and palm caressing me reassuringly.

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life,” he whispers so low I doubt I’ve even heard it.

Being told I’m beautiful is something I’ve gotten so used to that it doesn’t even register anymore. But being told I’m beautiful post making myself come against a man’s shoe like a wanton whore...the word suddenly takes on a whole new meaning.

His gaze flicks up from me, looking behind, and everything changes in his eyes.

“Stay,” he whispers. “I’m going to take you home.”

He takes a step to the side, and a million thoughts cross my mind. I’m addicted, scared, and I don’t think I can spend a single second without him.

Where are you going?

Don’t leave me alone!

Take care of me!

I want to shout all of this at him, but speech is still impossible for me. And so is getting up and going after him since my muscles have turned into jelly.

He doesn’t go far though, because another man comes to meet him. My eyes meet his and the violence and incomprehension in his stare freeze me on the spot.

Aaron Williams.

Jamie’s brother.

The man who freed me from the Volkov brothers is standing in front of me, looking at me with a disappointment one could not express with words.

He made me one promise when he drove me out of the compound. That he would never see me again. Because he was going back and made me swear I would never.

“Williams,” Lik nods at him, but Aaron doesn’t even stop to acknowledge him. He tries to get past him, making his way to me.

Lik puts a hand on his chest, stopping him right away.

“Rose,” Aaron calls a little too harshly.

My confused brain shakes my body. It’s not even the embarrassment. It’s the fact that I’m slowly understanding Lik and Sam’s plan and that despite trying to put myself between the two, Lik still follows his boyfriend’s orders.

Aaron Williams is a Wolf who rarely comes near Stoneview, the fear of bumping into his mother and his sister keeping him far. When he does, he stays hidden at Vue Club. He’s close to Viktor Volkov, the brother who rules them all.

Aaron is the only link between the compound and Vue. He is the only one who makes the trip, the only one who knows the way, the only one who goes back to Viktor after spending time here. And when Lik slams the envelope with my note and necklace against Aaron’s chest, I know he will lead him and Sam straight to the Volkov brothers.

“You want to talk to her, you go through me,” Lik growls at him. “All she has to say is in here.”

Aaron grabs the envelope, his puzzled stare not leaving mine. “Don’t get all heart-shaped eyes, pretty boy. It’s for your boss, not for you.” Lik’s words might sound light, but his voice gives every reason to listen to him.

“Get her out of here,” Aaron hisses at Lik, his gaze flicking to him then back to me. “I didn’t risk my life for someone to bring her right back into the wolf’s den.”

I don’t miss the double entendre.

A sharp nod from Lik, and Aaron is gone, shoving the envelope in his suit pocket. And just like that, I let Lik seal the

Volkov brothers' fate because he found a weakness in me I thought I'd never give into.

The shaking worsens, the cold seeping through my skin and settling against my bones. My heart pumps, but no blood rushes through. I'm still on the floor, resting with my knees slightly parted and my thighs against the floor like those helpless girls in manga and Anime. My hands are resting on the floor beside me. My eyelids drop, my muscles aching.

A sob constricts my chest, and for the first time in a long while, I feel like I'm going to cry, the sensation estranged to me. My attempt to take a deep breath takes Lik's attention away from Aaron's retreating form. He hurries to me and picks me up in his arms, my legs dangling and my head against his chest.

“I got you, princess.”

In the back of my mind, a tiny voice is fighting. Shouting.

Fuck you, I got myself. I always got myself!

But it's drowned out by the warmth of his body, by the feeling of completion I get when I hear his heartbeat against my ear and it kicks mine back into working.

When Lik puts me down in the passenger seat of Sam's car, he's wrapped me in the trench coat. A minute ago he also took off all the leather, and I watched with drooping eyelids that the chain on his waistcoat leads to the key that was locking the harnesses into place.

I was afraid I would fall asleep before he even got in the car. But now that he's reached his seat next to me and I'm curled up on mine, he massages my arms, my shoulders. His actions tell me Lik is back, but his black eyes, still attempting to fire my skin, hint that Kill isn't truly gone yet. His fingers skim my collarbone and chest, massaging into the skin that bears the redness of the tight leather binds.

The trembling has stopped, his hands are so warm. The coat is on my shoulders, but it opens every time his hand goes

a little further down. When he reaches the hem of the thong, I push my hips up.

“Princess,” he chuckles. “You’re recovering.” At my shaking head, his fingers hook the lace. His brows furrow slightly, like he didn’t control the gesture. “You’re dropping,” he insists, convincing himself rather than me.

We’re not in the club anymore, but I still can’t find my words. I haven’t since the moment he put the gag in my mouth earlier. My gesture is languorous when I grab his wrist and push him lower. His palm slides against my mound, his fingers past my wet lips, and I guide him until his middle finger touches my entrance.

“Fuck,” he lets out in a breathless hiss.

The gentleman he was trying to be by letting me recover from my first time in a BDSM club is practically gone.

He uses two fingers to feel my wetness, spreading it around for a few seconds and drawing a lethargic moan out of me.

“More,” I whisper quietly. I feel like if I talk too loudly, he will snap out of it and leave me wanting.

His gaze is on mine, and I see the hesitation flashing in his eyes. Not because he’s not sure if he wants this, but more because he’s not sure how to proceed.

And that’s when it hits me.

Lik has never been with a girl.

My pride sparks back to life, flaring its way from his fingers, up my stomach, and lighting my chest on fire.

I slide down my hand from his wrist until my fingers are juxtaposed with his two. I caress his middle finger. “Use this one,” I murmur.

I put slight pressure against it until the tip is dipping into me. The thickness of it, mixed with the slow movement, sends a wave of pleasure through me. I tremble slightly, my legs spreading apart in one jerked motion.

He looks down at my pussy covered by the thong, and I hurry to pull it down, still holding his middle finger one knuckle into my wet pussy.

His mouth falls open in a ragged gasp when he settles his gaze on our joined hands, my wetness, and the magic he's creating inside me.

I push a little more, and at a torturous pace, I slide his entire finger inside me.

"Shit," he growls. "So wet." His head falls back, and I watch his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he gulps and attempts to breathe normally. I use my free hand to stroke his steel-hard dick through his pants.

When his eyes come back to me, a firestorm blazes through them. I slide his finger out and back in a little quicker, panting with pleasure.

He readjusts himself closer to me, grabbing my left thigh tightly with his right hand, turning fully to me, and giving himself more access to my pussy. My own hand that was on his dick comes to grab the edge of my seat, the movement creating more friction. He's got his left leg on my side of the car and his right knee on the middle console, attempting to close any sort of distance in the awkward space.

His eyes back on our hands, he starts picking up the movement and the pace. I moan, my muscles relaxing as pleasure zaps through them, forcing me to let go of the finger I was controlling. He doesn't care, fully immersed in compelling pleasure on me.

"Oh my god," I pant when he starts moving his finger around my pussy.

He discovers the space like a fucking explorer on a mission to climb the highest mountain. His movements inside me drive my pleasure to peaks we're uncovering together. When he curls his finger, I moan loudly, my head falling against the headrest and my eyes rolling back.

He stills, his hand on my thigh tightening and forcing my blood to rush to the spot.

“Princess?” The hesitation in his voice drives me insane. He isn’t sure if that was good or not when it was the best thing in my entire fucking life.

“No, no, don’t stop,” I whimper. “Do that again.”

He repeats the curling movement and I writhe against his hand. “More, Lik,” I beg in a small voice that attempts to order him.

His confidence is back, I see it in his eyes. “Greedy, princess,” he chuckles. He retreats slightly, and in the next movement, he’s inserting a second finger.

I scream a moan at the pleasure drowning me. “More...”

Slowly, he finds his way again with two fingers. I squirm on the seat, moving my hips to his rhythm and chasing the highest peak on our unexplored mountain. He scissors his fingers, testing and stretching me, not even realizing he’s driving me absolutely insane with pleasure.

He moves slightly, his forehead falling against mine, our noses brushing, and our breaths mixing. His lips are so close to mine, but neither of us tries to kiss the other.

“Lik...Oh my god...” A sharp breath cuts me off, electricity coursing through my entire nervous system.

“You gonna come for me?” he hisses against my lips. “Show me. Show me that it took. *One. Fucking. Night.* for me to own this pussy.” Each pulsed word is accompanied by a jerk of his fist, and I lose control.

“Fuck!” I explode against his hand.

My entire body shakes to the rhythm of his fingers fucking my pussy and pushing my body to climax into an overpowering orgasm. He forces me to ride a wave that seems interminable. He watches me come apart for him and drinks it all up, like sealing the precious moment into his memory forever.

His lips slide to my neck as his movements slow down, and he sucks at the skin, coercing one last moan out of me and leaving a fresh hickey just below the previous one.

He pulls away, watching my head flop to the side as I watch him go back to his seat. My eyes widen with shock when I catch him bringing his fingers to his mouth, wrapping his lips around them, and sucking on them. He swallows the proof of my pleasure with his eyes on mine.

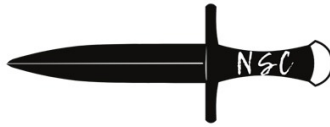
“As sweet as the most poisonous flower,” he rasps.

“Do you like that taste?” I tease him, still trying to recuperate my breath.

“Yeah.” The smirk he offers me sends a thrill of darkness down my spine. “Tastes like *mine*.”

And to the sound of those words, my insufferable, traitorous heart skips a beat.

LIK



New Bad Habit – Adam Jensen

I fingerfucked a *girl*.

I made Rose White come.

My brain keeps replaying the moment she exploded over and over again, to the point that I start worrying about how much I'm not paying attention to the road. She fell asleep against the window before I even started the car. I texted Sam, saying 'we have a problem'. He tried calling me and I ignored the call. I want him waiting at his old penthouse when I arrive. Worried something went wrong. Tense and thinking Rose fucked up. And then I want to rub it in his face that I did something he never had the chance to.

He cheated on me with Rose.

He kissed her and never told me about it. The worst thing is, back then, I would probably have forgiven him. What's a little kiss with a girl I knew he'd been in love with and was saying goodbye to forever? I would have been mad, but I would have tried to understand.

No. He decided to lie, and that I *can't* understand.

He kissed her and so I made her come. *Twice*.

It was one thing to let her rub herself against my shoe when she was in a vulnerable place, discovering a side of her she seemed to have buried deep inside her. It was one thing to let her *make herself* come.

It's something else to actively bury my fingers inside her tight, warm, *dripping wet* pussy. To stroke her until she was purring for me, to fuck her with two fingers until she came all over me. To let her make me rock hard.

I've never fucked a girl before. I've never gotten so close to a pussy. The closest I'd ever been was when I'd helped Jake White play his little revenge on his girl. That time, we tied her to a hotel bed and watched videos on our phones while she was forced to come over and over again on a vibrator. Jake chose me because he knew I would never touch his girl or be remotely interested in her—or any girl, for that matter. He didn't get why I was hard as steel that night. Never realized it was because of *him*.

She looks so much like him.

But better.

Rose controls the world. Controlling her is indescribable. It's a high you can't get anywhere else. I stopped taking drugs. I stopped drinking. Sam has kept me in line to make sure the lines didn't keep me. But I'm an addict. I am, and I can't control it. I might be forbidden to take any hard drugs anymore. Only now I've found my new addiction.

I play with the ring around my right nostril, lost in my thoughts with a hand on the steering wheel.

Lights from the Silver Falls lamp posts drag past me. *Rose pushing my finger inside her. Cars drive by. Rose's moan. Red light. Rose's raspy voice begging for more. Green light. Rose coming all over me. A bump in the road. Rose's taste in my mouth.*

She tastes bittersweet.

Like revenge against your lover.

A forbidden high.

Addiction.

The bump in the road wakes her up and I feel her stir next to me. She ignores me. I see goosebumps rise on her skin from

the cold, but somehow, she doesn't close the coat. So, I put the heat on.

From the corner of my eye, I watch her wrap her hands around her thighs. She tightens her hold, then releases. She does it three or four times and then seems to relax slightly.

Her mouth is partly open, and I hear the faintest whispers. "Anne, George I, George II, George III, George IV, William IV, Victoria, Edward VII—"

"Why are you citing English monarchs?" My voice makes her jump in her seat, like she genuinely forgot I was next to her, and the car was just driving itself.

"What?" she asks as if nothing happened. I give her a side look and she shakes her head. "I wasn't."

I'm not sure if she doesn't realize she was doing it or just simply lying.

"I must hear voices, then," I tell her calmly.

She rolls her eyes and turns the music on. The same song that was on the last time she was in this car is playing again. *Art Hoe* by Call Me Karizma.

The song is finishing, and we only hear the ending. *I think I fell in love...*

"This song reminds me of you," I say without shame.

I'm not in love with her, and she knows I'm not, so I don't expect her to understand which lyrics remind me of her.

"I'm not five foot four," she replies casually.

"Huh?" I'm so confused, no other word comes out.

"And my haircut is not shorter than yours," she continues. She thinks to herself. "Although, it's true I didn't have my dad there, and you definitely can't resist me."

When I finally understand she's talking about the lyrics, I smile. "Big fan of Call Me Karizma?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about," she deadpans.

“The artist? Singing this song? You seem to know the lyrics, so I’m assuming you’ve been listening to it.”

She shrugs and looks out the window. “No. You put it on last time.”

“Right, and you remember the lyrics,” I chuckle sarcastically.

“Yeah.”

I can’t help but turn to her, slowing down as I do so. Why is she assuming I know what the fuck she’s going on about?

“You remembered the entire lyrics of the song from listening to it *once*,” I insist, spelling out the impossibility of what she’s saying.

“Yeah.” Her raspy voice, not bothering to get further into it, makes me roll my eyes with annoyance. She catches it and huffs. “I remember everything, I thought you knew that.”

“No, I didn’t, because that’s impossible.”

I don’t know why I’m debating with her on something so trivial. It’s just lyrics. It’s just something I didn’t know. It’s just that I can’t stop trying to make her talk just to hear her hoarse vocal cords, her throaty chuckles, and her constant sarcasm.

“I thought your boyfriend would have told you about my greatest talent. Don’t tell me he only ever said I was of an unmatched beauty.”

“Don’t call him my boyfriend,” I snap back. “And stop thinking that all he does is talk about you.”

She smiles, happy to have raised my blood pressure. Where is the meek girl who begged for an orgasm at my feet?

“Whatever,” I try to conclude. “It’s not even that hard to remember a song.”

“I remember everything, Lik.”

She finally closes the coat tightly around her as if just noticing she’s been practically naked all this time.

“I remember everything Mattock said in that first class we had together. Where you spied on me from five rows behind me. I remember the chemicals in the bottle of shampoo you left at Sam’s penthouse, the one for frizzy hair that I’ve been using and is making *my* hair greasy as fuck. Cocamidopropyl Betaine, Sodium Lauroyl Methyl Isethionate, Sodium Lauroyl Sarcosinate, Glycerin, I can keep going.”

She shrugs. “And yes, I remember that shitty song you put on and all the lyrics and how it’s not like me at all but simply what people say about me.” She runs a hand through her hair and rests her head against the seat.

“Your hair doesn’t look greasy,” I simply reply.

It makes her chuckle in a relaxed breath. “Thanks.”

I let a moment pass, thinking of what she said about those lyrics. That she’s not a girl who takes drugs and uses people for sex just to fill a void left in her life. She’s not the Art Hoe from the song, it’s just what people say about her.

And all I can do is wonder for how long she’s been lying to herself. Because, as far as I’m aware, that’s precisely what she does.

When I unlock the door to Sam’s penthouse, I already know he’ll be waiting behind it like a lion in a cage. I even hope he thinks one of us got hurt. My stomach twists thinking who of Rose or me getting hurt would make him the most worried. I bury the feeling down before pushing the door open.

What I *didn’t* expect was for Sam to have come with our sweet collateral, Rachel. They’re mid-conversation like an old couple arguing about who lost the remote.

“That’s not a valid excuse,” Rachel snaps. “If I’m not home by the time he gets there, I’ll be telling him I got kidnapped by a big, tattooed English man. I’m sure they’ll find you easily enough.”

I’m surprised Sam even wastes a few of his precious words on her. The argument definitely isn’t worth it.

“What did you tell him last time?” he sneers. Rachel—who was the one doing the pacing while Sam sits on one of the stools by the kitchen island—stops as far away from him as possible.

She seems to calm down, knowing what Sam is getting at. “That I got attacked in a Silver Falls alley.” She swallows.

“Right...” Sam nods slowly more times than necessary, pretending to be lost in thoughts. “And you even had a cut on your throat. Blood on your blouse as well. It looked legitimate enough.”

The way she throws daggers at him stops me from getting in between them. I wouldn’t want to get one in the heart.

“So,” Sam insists. “What did your fiancé do then?”

She shakes her head over the argument because she knows she’s lost it.

“That’s right, nothing. Don’t worry. If you’re that desperate for an excuse, I can mark you.”

“What the fuck.” Rose’s voice is hard as she pushes past me, both her shock and mine having finally worn off.

She walks toward Rachel. It’s an automatism that can’t be stopped. I’m watching a train on its tracks, leading her right to the woman she loves with no hesitation. My brain pulls the jealousy strings in my heart.

Come on, Malik. You were the one in control, don’t let it slip so easily.

I catch the beginning of their conversation; everything else in the room is non-existent. The worry in Rose’s voice as she asks Rachel if she’s alright, the possessiveness when she touches her body. The way it’s reciprocated. Rachel’s eyes when she understands the way she’s dressed and fear over what could have possibly happened. I didn’t take her collar off. Couldn’t get myself to, and she didn’t bother asking. I prefer seeing her with it.

“Lik.” Sam’s Britishly clipped monosyllable brings me back to reality, and I turn to him.

He hasn't even gotten up from his seat.

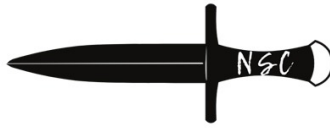
I raise an eyebrow at him, and he shakes his head like I'm dumb. "What's the problem?"

"Ah," I nod. "The problem."

He looks confused, and I hate it. I hate that he's not even a little worried I could have found out he cheated on me. I hate that he's reassured enough in his lies that nothing shows on his face. That something wrong automatically means *someone else* did something to me. Not him.

I'm still by the door. I close it behind me and lock it. No one is getting out of here until I've given Sam a piece of my mind.

LIK



Dead Body – Call Me Karizma

Silence reigns after the locked bolt resonates throughout the room.

On my left, Sam is sitting by the kitchen island. On my right, Rose and Rachel are leaning against the back of the sofa.

My eyes are on Sam when I ask my question. “Did you know Rose is a natural submissive?”

That earns me a choked ‘*what?*’ from Rachel and a growled ‘*shut the fuck up*’ from Rose. Only I’m more interested in Sam’s reaction. He stays still, silent. And that’s how I know he is aware something not so good is coming his way. Silence is his sanctuary.

Since he doesn’t say anything, I take pleasure in my next words. “And if you did know, was it before or after you kissed her?”

If I thought it was silent before, it’s replaced by a tension that presses on everyone’s lungs so much, they can’t make a sound.

The only person brave enough to break it is Rachel. “What? When?” But her whole attention is on Rose, not me or Sam.

Rose’s is on me. “Lik,” she warns. Well, she started this, didn’t she? I understand Rachel knows nothing about that kiss.

I'm the one who holds the power in this room, and if they think I'm not going to wield it, they are gravely mistaken.

Sam runs his tongue against his teeth, bringing a hand to his jaw and running his knuckles against it. Back and forth a few times like every time he's thinking deeply about his next words. A tell that tells me he honestly didn't expect to have this conversation tonight.

"I'm sorry," he finally says. It's calm—an emotionless fact. The weatherman is sorrier when he tells us it's going to rain.

"Wh-when was this?" Rachel insists in her clear, innocent voice that contrasts in every shape and form with Rose's.

I try to give Sam my fakest smile, but even that I can't force. The disappointment and betrayal on my face are just too readable. "Please, Sam, do share the details."

"I was going to tell you." He nods. "You have to understand there was nothing behind it."

He sounds like he wants to make this better. And yet, he doesn't move from his seat, doesn't approach me in an apologetic stance. Doesn't try anything except simply to get himself out of trouble with the most generic words a cheater could utter.

"*When?*" Rachel insists like it's the most crucial detail.

"That doesn't fucking matter," I snap at her.

"For you," Sam cuts me off. Our relationship is on the brink of failure, yet he's more interested in getting Rose in trouble with her girlfriend than getting himself out of it. "Rachel wants to know if she and Rose were on or off at that point."

Rose stays suspiciously quiet.

"They had a deal back then," Sam continues. "Rose could break up with her to see other people as long as she was faithful when they were *on*. A stupid deal between two immature teenagers so Rose could fulfill her need for attention."

“Shut up, Sam,” Rose hisses through gritted teeth. “*My* relationship with *my* girlfriend has nothing to do with *your* lack of fidelity toward *your* boyfriend.” She keeps pointing fingers at whoever she’s talking about and, had this situation not meant I’m about to break up with the man I love, it would have been comical.

“Please,” he scoffs. “You’re a cheater who loves disappearing on people so they look for you. Your attention-seeking is so obvious. I simply cannot fathom how someone like Rachel keeps giving you chances.”

Rose’s face looks like it’s something she’s heard before. She puts up more barriers and places a possessive hand at the back of Rachel’s neck. “You’re not ruining my life just because *you* kissed me. I didn’t even know you had a boyfriend!”

Sam points an accusing finger at her. “I did something you always had bloody begged me to. You’ve always been fucked in the head and doomed for failed relationships, but I’m not going to let you take me down with you.” His eyes flick to Rachel. “It was the day she got kidnapped. So, *yes*, Rachel. She broke off your deal.”

The look on Rachel’s face practically breaks my heart. She looks how I feel, and I can’t imagine what it’s like to be toyed with by Rose for as long as she has. I’m two days in and can barely control my raging thoughts and feelings. I’m surprised she’s as sane as she is.

“Rose...” Rachel’s voice breaks from the treachery. She shrugs out of her grip, making Rose panic.

“No, no, Sunshine. You don’t get it. *He* kissed *me*. I did not go there for that. I went to say goodbye. He took me by surprise.”

“Don’t skip the part where you moaned and cried for more.” Sam’s satisfied expression raises my hackles.

I shake my head at him with disappointment. He’s so focused on her, he doesn’t understand I’m not about to forgive

him. He thinks we'll get through this, taking me for granted, and I feel myself losing value in his eyes.

"I waited for you that day," Rachel whimpers with tears in her eyes.

I feel a tinge of guilt twist my guts. The only person I wanted to affect doesn't give a shit about my feelings, and the girl who wasn't meant to get hurt is practically crying.

"While you were with him," Rachel cries. She doesn't even notice Sam and me, her broken stare remaining on Rose.

"No, no..." Rose puts two hands on either side of Rachel's face, framing her in so she can focus on her. "I was on my way to yours, but then Nate said I should say bye because they were leaving. So I went, and then he...he...*he* did it. It wasn't me! And then Vik—" she catches herself just on time, "—the Volkovs happened, and I was gone and—"

"You chose to go to him instead of me. You chose to disappear on me *again*."

Her words make Sam chuckle. "She always chooses to disappear."

"Shut the fuck up!" Rose rages, but it doesn't stop him.

"You know why you always disappear on people, Rose?" Sam keeps taunting her. "Because you love when they look for you."

"I swear to god, Sam—"

But he's caught Rachel's attention, and he's not letting go of it. He continues but addresses himself to her. "She likes being desired, chased after. She makes herself unattainable so that people stay interested and keep chasing her. All this is because she's scared of being alone, of being uninteresting, of being *abandoned*."

He turns back to Rose from his chair he uses as a throne. "All you are is the typical girl with abandonment issues. And all you did was take down an innocent girl with you."

Rose is panting with anger, but he doesn't truly get his point across. Because instead of inciting Rachel to leave her

for good, I can see the pity in her eyes. As if Rose truly can't help but be the way she is. This girl has way too much empathy.

I don't.

"Funny coming from the guy who keeps falling at her feet," I calmly tell Sam.

He finally turns to me, as if he had forgotten I was here, right by the door, ready to leave our relationship while he focuses on destroying someone else's.

"Funny coming from the guy obsessed with her." I raise an eyebrow at him. "Being the guy enthralled by the typical girl with abandonment issues." I shake my head and roll some rings around my fingers. "Shit, what does that make *you*?"

Back to his silent self, I know it means he cares, and somehow, it makes me feel a little warmer inside. Just to know I have a grip tight enough on him to still hurt him.

"It makes you the guy who pretends he can be in a relationship when he's never let go of the woman he's loved forever."

I watch his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallows my words.

"You really love her, don't you?" Silence, silence, silence. Always silence. "Do you know what I did to the woman you love tonight, Sam?" The evil smirk that spreads on my lips gives my shadow the horn of the Devil, as if inhabited by Satan himself. "I made her kneel and come at my feet."

"What?" Sam snaps.

"What?" Rachel echoes, a little less anger in her word.

Rose doesn't try to cut me off. No, because that was her plan all along. To destroy Sam and me from the inside. I'm glad I can offer her my heartbreak so ideally.

"I had her rub against the shoe *you* bought me, in a suit *you* got me and a club *you* got us in. I did that until she was coming all over it. I got her in *your* car and fingered her until her moans resonated so loudly in it, I forgot my heartbeat was

meant to resonate to the sound of yours.” I chuckle to myself, ready to finally end him. “You got a kiss, baby. You might know how delectable her mouth is. But if only you knew how sweet her pussy tastes.”

It takes a few seconds for him to register everything I’ve just said. He nods slowly, chewing over the words, turning around the thoughts in his mind. Who betrayed him the most? Who got their best revenge? Her or me? He’s torn about who he hates the most right now, but I already know who will get the big prize.

He finally gets off his seat in one harsh movement, making the chair tumble over. The jealousy in his gaze is a raging storm, that’s for Rose. But the obsessivity? The possession? That’s all for me, and I drink it up.

He pounces on Rose so quickly she has zero chance to escape him. Rachel screams when he grabs her girlfriend by the throat and drags her to the nearest wall.

“You’re a dead girl. You know that, right?”

Rose is on her tiptoes, both her hands wrapped around Sam’s strong forearm. His fingers dig into her neck and push at her collar, replacing it with a larger, tattooed one.

But the smile on her lips shows who is really winning.

“I was a dead girl anyway,” she coughs.

“I’m going to end you, Rose. I’m going to torture you until you’re begging to die so sweetly, I’ll have to slit your throat out of pity.”

“Why don’t you do what you *actually* want to do and finally fuck me?”

His growl is animalistic as he pushes harder. Rachel runs to him, pulling at him and shouting to let her go. She is so naïvely in love with her it hurts. Why can’t *I* get that? Her tiny body doesn’t compare to Sam’s war machine, and he doesn’t even budge a little.

“Come on, Sam,” Rose croaks. “Are you mad your boyfriend paid you back? Or are you mad it was with *me*?”

“You think you rule all of us, don’t you?” he hisses in her ear. “But you’re going to bow down, Rose. Because I’m the king, and as long as I allow you to live, *I* rule.”

Her smile doesn’t falter. An echo of Rachel’s *‘let her go’* resonates before Rose talks again.

“Ah, but you see...If you’re the king, I’m motherfucking *God*.”

Something snaps inside him. I see it straight away, and for the first time, I genuinely worry for Rose’s safety. I take a step toward them and pull Rachel out of the way, knowing it’s only about to get worse.

“What are you doing?” she shouts at me. “Stop *him*! Not me!”

I keep an arm around her waist while she flails her arm trying to escape me.

Sam cackles a laugh at Rose’s words. He lets go of her throat and she goes back to flat feet, taking deep breaths and thinking it’s over. I thought she knew him? She should know something is *wrong*.

She soon realizes when he grabs her tightly by the hair and starts dragging her across the room. A groan of pain escapes her as she desperately tries to follow his powerful strides.

“You’re stupid, Rose,” Sam calmly says. “Such an incredibly stupid girl to forget who around you knows your greatest weaknesses.”

I have to let Rachel go so we can both follow Sam into the hallway. He’s going straight for his office, and neither of us can understand why.

He enters, still holding her by the hair while she keeps struggling against him.

“*Stupid* to forget who knows your worst fears.”

Her behavior changes drastically as soon as she realizes she’s in an office.

“No!” she shouts.

“Yes,” he answers simply. He pushes her face first onto the desk, keeping his hand in her hair. “Stay.”

She fights back, more desperate now. “Sam, you can’t do this!” Her voice clogs with sobs that she’s not letting out.

She pushes against the desk, but he keeps her tight against it.

“At least I’m not taking the ruler out,” he hisses at her. “But you let me know if that’s the only way to keep you in check.”

“No, no, no,” she panics. “Please, don’t do this.”

“Why don’t you think about what you did wrong while you’re in here?” he says as he pushes her harder against the hard surface.

“Don’t leave me here. Don’t. I want to talk. I-I want to talk this out. I want to apologize.”

Apologize?

I wasn’t even aware that word was in her vocabulary.

“You can do that once I let you out.”

“Sam, please...” The plea in her voice pulls something in me. Noticeably not just me.

“Hey!” Rachel calls from the hallway. Somehow, neither of us has dared to cross the threshold. “That’s enough!” She takes the first step in, but Sam is already crossing the room back to us. In two steps, he’s out with the key to the office in his hand.

Rose barely has time to get up when he’s already closed and locked the door. A split second later, she’s banging on it.

“*Open! Fuck, Sam, open!!*” Her screaming turns into unbearable shrieks being pulled out from deep inside her.

“You can’t do that!” Rachel shouts at him as if he doesn’t get it. I’m afraid he knows precisely what he’s doing. She just doesn’t see it. “She...she can’t be alone in a room with the door closed, let alone locked! She...”

She finally gets it.

“But you know that already,” Rachel concludes in a whisper.

Sam doesn't grant her a response. He puts the key in his pocket and starts walking away, but none of us follow him.

“Rachel,” he tells her. “The longer you stay by that door trying to reassure her, the longer she stays in there.”

Rachel gulps at the threat and steps away from the door. On the other side, all we can hear are Rose's sobs.

“I've never seen her cry before,” Rachel admits quietly.

“There's a reason for that,” Sam agrees. His gaze snaps to me. “We need to talk.”

And while I was worried for Rose's safety, it all goes away with the tone in his voice.

Now I'm just worried about mine.

SAM



Dancer in the Dark – Chase Atlantic

As Lik and I walk back into the kitchen and living room, my head gets crowded with thoughts of the mistakes I made.

I can't just order Rose White around. A girl who spent her life fighting orders. Fighting people controlling her. Finding loopholes to avoid obeying every single powerful, dangerous man who tried to keep her for themselves.

I breathe in through my nose and exhale through my mouth. My fist is itching to punch a wall and I run my knuckles against my jaw.

I betrayed Lik, and I'm paying for the consequences. I should have known it would come back and bite me in the ass. And I could have taken it. I would have gritted my teeth and accepted my punishment...if it had been anyone else but *her*.

I'm a possessive man when it comes to Lik. I have found what I looked for all my life in a man who accepted to submit to me. In an addict who chose me for redemption. We fell in love at points in our lives where we needed each other the most.

Lik is the high to every single one of my lows. He picked me up more times than I care to admit. Lik fills my silences with love and joy. He is my comfort when I lose myself to phantom pains. His humor, his childishness, his lack of control over his impulses. It all fits with me in an unexplainable way that we've both become addicted to.

He's mad at me, furious even, but he can't leave me. Not only because he knows I would never let him—I would chase him down, I would bring him back, kicking and screaming. I would chain him up and shove my cock so far down his throat it would cause permanent damage. No, he can't leave me because we are nothing without the other. What's day without night? What's the sun without the moon? What's a king without a kingdom?

Nothing.

It's endless time and pointless lives. It's running around in a circle, losing beginning and end, losing a sense of self, losing sanity.

That's me without Lik and Lik without me.

And yet, there is one thing he cannot be for me. Something he will *never* be.

Rose.

While I wish I could explain it to him. While I wish I could put words to the feelings that crossed my body knowing he decided to take his revenge on me by touching *her*. By putting his hands on *her*.

While I wish I could explain how I felt to learn that she let him make her feel good. She let him make her come. She fucking gave to him what she knows belongs to *me*.

I can't.

I have killed most people Rose has slept with. Every single one whose death wouldn't raise suspicions is six feet under. Not that she knows it.

I spent an entire life pushing her away. Reasons changed, excuses evolved, but my love never faltered.

Even hating her with all my guts doesn't affect the fact that I wish I could give myself to her, offer her my life on a silver platter, and watch her make a lovesick puppy out of me.

Her foster dad, her escape from him, her older brother, my conscience, Lik. Everything has always forced me out of her

way. But she's pushing back in. She's putting herself between me and the love I found outside of her orbit.

I should have never used her to find the Volkov brothers. I should have never accepted that contract. I've been convincing myself it was for the money, so I could hold up my promise to Lik that I would never do a job again once we could settle.

So, when do I accept that it was because I wanted a way back into her life? When do I admit that hating her isn't enough to stay away from her? That wanting her dead also means I want to keep her close to me, *mine*. My tortured victim until she begs for deadly mercy, until I'm the only one she has eyes for, until I'm the last thing she sees. My face imprinted on her mind before she leaves this life.

People say love and hate are two sides of the same coin, a thin line blurred by intense emotions.

They feel so separated for me. I've always loved Rose. I only started hating her when she betrayed me. When she listened to the lies and brainwashing. I still can't spell the act out precisely. I still can't remind myself of what she did. Simply the loathing.

The hate is a burning sensation in my throat and a twist in my stomach. The love is a dull ache deep inside my chest, something pushing at the back of my eyes and giving me a painful headache every time I try to think of someone other than her.

Rose is a traitor, and it should have been enough to stop me from being so in love with her.

Why? Why doesn't it stop?

Why do I want to punch Lik for touching her? Why do I want to kill her for seducing my boyfriend, who's mine and not hers to touch? Why do I want to put her in the middle of us and fuck her ass until she's crying into his arms and begging him to give her pleasure so she can survive me?

I never touched Rose because I always told myself she couldn't take it. Bianco broke her with pain.

I love pain.

He's a sick sadist. And so am I. If I inflict that pain on her like he did, that makes me *just like him*—the man who ruined her entire life.

“...and you can't just lock her away. She's post-scene crashing, Sam. She's in sub-drop where she can't find her left from her right. She needs aftercare. Not...whatever...whatever the fuck you just did. You, of all people, should know that!”

I realize I've missed half of what Lik has been saying. I'm holding onto the kitchen counter, facing the wall and cupboards. Knowing he's right behind me and trying to get a reaction out of me. I zoned out in silence trying to protect myself, but I didn't need to hear the rest of his words. Only one thing grabs my attention and pulls fiery anger out of me.

I flip around, grabbing him by the throat and pushing until his hips hit the kitchen island behind him. His upper body goes further back than his legs, the latter blocked by the island. He's leaning back, his hands flat on the island so he doesn't fall back on it.

“I sent you to *use* her for our own personal gain. I sent you to gain entry into the Volkovs' BDSM club and give a letter to Aaron Williams. I sent *you* because we agreed I shouldn't enter a place like that with her. Because we were aware of my own weaknesses.”

I press harder, and he squeezes his eyes closed. His hand wraps around my wrist, fingers with golden rings cold against my skin.

“At what fucking point did you hear me mention the word *scene*. You want to give her aftercare because you had her come all over you? Because you disobeyed my orders?”

He opens his eyes, and the lack of regret in them sends me over the edge.

“How was it making her your little bitch, Lik?” I seethe. “Knowing she only did it to hurt me?”

I press myself against him, grabbing his crotch with my free hand. “Oh no,” I chuckle mockingly. “My poor baby, hard as steel because he loves being abused.”

“Fuck off,” he rages, pushing back against me. I’ve relaxed enough around his neck that he manages to shove my arm away, but I don’t let him move past me.

“So what do you want, Lik? Do you want to be her Dom or my bitch?”

“You’re so proud of yourself for turning that shit around, aren’t you? Trying to fuck me up in the head when you know this happened because you fucking *cheated* on me with her.”

This time, I let him push me away. But he doesn’t stop. His hands crash against my chest again until I’m the one with my back against the wall, or the kitchen counter in that case.

“Do you even regret it?” he spits at me.

“No,” I answer in all honesty.

Because I regret hurting him, but the world would have to swallow me and spit me back out before I could regret something as satisfying as kissing Rose. Even then, I probably couldn’t.

It’s a high I never experienced again.

Lik laughs manically, his white teeth blurring in front of my face, his eyes going black from the betrayal.

“I’ll leave you, Sam. You think I won’t, but I will,” he lies to hurt me.

I’m too quick for him to react. Grabbing the back of his head, tightening my fingers in his curls, I pull him away from me until I can switch our places. I push him face down on the counter, hard enough that his teeth clatter and he lets out a pained breath.

“Why don’t you try and see what happens?” I hiss in his ear, bending over so my breath brushes his cheek. “Why don’t you run away with her and see what happens when I catch you both?” I push him harder against the hard marble and he groans in pain when I tighten my grip.

He’s hurting, and my cock becomes hard as a rock against his ass. “I swear, Lik. Try to leave me, and you’ll regret it. Try

to leave me with or for her...I will bring you both back and absolutely *destroy* you.”

“You’re an asshole,” he rages back, pushing with his hands against the counter to try and get back up.

He manages to lift himself up slightly and I slam him back down. He hits his jaw, hisses, and spits out some blood. He must have bitten his tongue.

“Does it *hurt*?” I chuckle. “You’re making me want to fuck you right here and now. Let her hear you scream while I destroy your ass.”

He rocks back against me as a reflex, and I groan in pleasure. He can hate me all he wants, and will still forever love getting fucked by me.

“Looks like you’d love that,” I mock him. “I have an even better idea. Why don’t we let her watch?”

“Don’t...” he attempts just before I press him against the counter with my hips.

“I’ll let you come, I promise.”

I slide my hand between his hips and the counter and grab his hard cock through his jeans.

“You’re dying for release, Lik. I’ll make it so good for you. All you have to do is take a bit of pain.” I squeeze him until I know he’s hurting.

“Shit...” he whimpers, losing control of his anger and giving into his need for pleasure instead. “Stop.”

I let go. Not because he asked, but because I have much more fun things in mind for him.

I step back, turn around and stop dead in my tracks.

“Are you taking the piss?” I snap at Rachel. I had almost completely forgotten she was here. Hard to now that she has a knife pointed at me.

“That’s enough,” she says firmly. “You’re out of control.”

I'm so fucking hard right now. I just want to grab that fucking knife and incapacitate her without a second thought. But I give her a warning instead.

"I kill people for a living, Rachel. Trust me when I say you can't hurt me even with a knife in your hand."

She doesn't believe me, how stupid. She tightens her fingers around the knife, holding it completely the wrong way and making it easy for me to disarm her. She doesn't even understand why it's suddenly in my hand rather than hers. Or how I'm holding her against me, her back pressed to my chest and her fists in my free hand while I have the knife to her throat.

"Wh—"

"Didn't I warn you?"

She wriggles against me until she can feel the hard-on Lik left me with. She freezes, her breath shortening.

"Remember last time I had you like this?" I whisper in her ear.

"Let go of me," she growls back.

"You're not a pushover, Rachel. I don't know why you insist on hiding the strongest part of yourself."

She tries to step on my foot, but I'm too quick. I know she has a fire in her, that she's not the weak little woman she displays to the world. I see it in her eyes when Rose hurts her. How much she wants to hurt her back. She's just too scared she'll leave her if she does.

"Why do you push away the powerful girl you could be? Why don't you take the lead and punish the fuck out of your girl like you're dying to? Rose won't leave you. She loves you too much. But she might finally respect you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she whispers weakly, barely trying to deny the truth.

"You let her play you like you're the most boring board game that's ever been invented. She comes and goes as she pleases. She breaks your heart because she knows you'll patch

it back up and bring it to her again. If she gets to play with your heart, you should get to play with her body and her head. Drive her insane, hurt her good. See how she feels after that.”

She attempts to wriggle out of my grip, but I’m not ready to let her go. Not until she gets on my side.

“You’re angry at her. I get it,” she starts. I don’t even let her finish her thoughts.

“So should you,” I insist.

“I am!” she shouts back. Silence fills the room as Lik settles beside me, and we wait for her to continue.

She attempts to bring her voice down when she talks again. “I am, okay? I hate her when she hurts me. I hate her when she plays with my feelings. Just because she can, just because she knows how much I love her. She takes people for granted because everyone has always shown her how precious she is. One of a kind.” I let her go and she spins around, a fire in her eyes that probably matches mine.

“So what? Don’t you feel it?” she insists. “How special you are when she looks at you? How the whole world doesn’t matter as long as her eyes are on you and you’re on her mind. It might be ephemeral but—”

“So are most highs,” Lik cuts her off.

She looks at him and back at me. “Yeah,” she huffs.

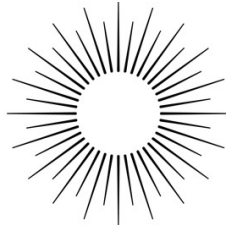
“There’s only one way to make it last forever,” I explain to her. “Show her who she belongs to.”

She hesitates a few seconds when I hand her the knife back. But eventually, she takes it, and that’s how I know she’s ready for the same things I am.

I push past her, walking to the back of the room and into the hallway. I feel their burning stares; I feel the one and only question that hangs heavily in the air.

Which one of us does she belong to?

RACHEL



Chill (Dark Version) – Mickey Valen, Joey Myron

I shouldn't be here. I should be at home, waiting for Conor to return, playing the part of a good housewife.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't enjoy watching Sam possess his boyfriend in ways that turn me on. I shouldn't like having Sam holding me so close to him, promising me to punish Rose in ways I could never do myself.

Punishing her.

For all the pain and the heartbreaks.

For all the times she broke up with me to be in someone else's bed. All the bullshit I put up with. All the times she disappeared on me. All the times she made me worried sick, wondering if she had accidentally or purposely attempted to take away her own life. Those nights she took so many drugs she might not have come back at all. All the people she chose over me.

Like Sam. She went to him, kissed him, on the same day I was waiting for her at my house with my packed bags, ready to run away with her. Instead, I went to dinner with my parents and Conor's family. And I was forced to get engaged.

A family dinner. An upscale restaurant. Five pairs of eyes on me and the diamond that would link me to my abuser. The pressure, the tears I had to fake as happiness.

And the begging that came afterward in the car, on the way back to the family house.

Daddy, please do something. Please, I can't do this.

Rachel, you'll do as you're told, my mom had replied. Her stern voice was a stab in the chest.

I love you, sweetie. You know I do. I want what's best for you, he'd said in a defeated voice.

How can such a powerful man be so weak to the whims of a cruel woman?

I cried. I was called a spoiled girl. I kicked their seats and screamed. I was called insane.

A noose around my neck and a stumbling chair would have felt more comfortable than the heavy diamond Conor forced around my finger.

And Rose...

She chooses others. Not me. Always others.

I know it's not her fault she disappeared that day. I know she got taken. But I can't help believing that had it not been the case, she still wouldn't have come back to me.

She always leaves.

And every time, it's a new fresh wound, a new way my heart breaks. Like it never happened before.

They say you can never remember pain. You think you can, but you can't realistically remember how bad it hurts. A way for your body to protect you. You always know when something will hurt, hence why none of us will purposely put our hands in a fire. We know it will burn and that it's painful. But we can't truly remember how badly.

I can cognitively remember Rose hurts me.

But for the life of me, I can never remember what the experience actually feels like.

Until tonight when it happened once more. My heart broke all over again. Because while Sam was watching me in my own house, she was getting off on Lik's *fucking* shoe. She was letting him touch her in his car.

Now Sam is offering me the girl I've always wanted all to myself. Offering me to take over as I've always dreamed of. I've controlled Rose before, but never nearly as much as I have wanted to. I've shown her my fiery demon, but only as much as she could take. And I always took a step back whenever I felt she wanted that control back.

Not anymore.

The idea of doing crazy things to her, and her not having a choice but to take it...It turns me on so much that I can barely stop the need shaking my bones.

Sam walks back into the living room, and my heart skips several beats, palpitating to a rhythm of overexcitement.

He isn't even holding her, a simple hand on the small of her back suffices to keep her close.

She is more beautiful than ever. She's still crying, however silently. And while I am used to the color of a night sky when I look at her, I've never seen the thousands of stars that could shine so brightly in her gaze. They light up her face and enhance her beauty. Her eyes are red and puffy, adding a cuteness to her that she doesn't usually have. She snuffles, running the back of her hand under her nose, and I notice the reddened tip.

And I understand why I suddenly find her more beautiful than ever: she looks *vulnerable*.

"What's going on?" she asks, eyes darting all over the room, black dilated pupils taking everything in. Her voice is raw, breaking more than it usually does. She sounds like she doesn't have the strength to fight anymore.

My hand tightens around the handle of the knife I'm holding. I want to destroy her further. I'm finally seeing the weaker side of her, and it brings out the powerful side of me.

Lik moving next to me and into my field of vision makes me realize that I'm not the only one entranced by her beauty right now. It's never shone brighter.

Sam drifts his hand up her back, between her shoulder blades, until he can wrap it around the back of her neck.

“She’s stunning when she cries, isn’t she?” he tells Lik and me. “She’s irresistible with tears streaking her face.”

Neither of us replies. Rose squeezes her eyes shut, forcing tears still stuck in her lashes to roll down. When she opens them again, they’re on me.

“Do you know why you’ve never seen Rose cry?” Sam asks me.

I shake my head in negation, my eyes not leaving hers. I always assumed it was because of her heart of stone.

“Because Bianco loved it so much. She knew when she did, he would keep her to himself for hours on end. Just to watch beautiful, golden tears light up her face.”

Rose’s face twists at the mention of her previous foster dad, and she retreats into Sam, turning around so she can bury her face into his chest. Jealousy accelerates my heartbeat, though I try to ignore it.

“She is terrified of crying. She associates it with bad things coming her way rather than the result of bad things that have *already* happened. A bad omen. Simple reaction to trauma, really.”

A sense of sickness spreads in my stomach from enjoying her tears. How fucked up am I that I’m adoring seeing the girl I love at her lowest point? Being reminded of years of her life that turned her into the wounded woman she is.

However, when Sam’s black eyes lock with mine, I understand that no matter how bad I feel right now...It’s not bad enough. Because I still have a burning need to possess her.

He smiles at me, apparently privy to my thoughts. “Don’t worry, Rachel. At least with us, she’ll enjoy herself.”

She doesn’t deny it. Instead, she fists his t-shirt tightly, burying herself deeper against him.

“I’ve protected you long enough, Rose,” he tells her quietly, a private conversation between the two of them. “It’s time for you to face the consequences of your actions.”

He looks up at Lik, and I watch as the man beside me bows his head in submission.

“You’ve been a bad girl,” he says as he strokes Rose’s hair, though his eyes are on his boyfriend when he finishes his sentence. “It’s time to beg for forgiveness.”

He grabs Rose by the shoulders and softly pushes her away from him. Bowing his head to look into her eyes. “I’m not going to touch you, but you’re going to let Rachel play with you how she sees fit. Do you understand?”

It’s small, almost imperceptible, but I don’t miss it—her nod.

It spreads a smile on Sam’s face and liquid fire in my veins. I can feel my heart beating in my ears from the excitement. Sam takes a step back and looks at Lik.

“Grab a chair. Sit with your hands behind you.” His voice is much harsher when he addresses him, but I don’t worry about them. Too focused on my own personal *doll*.

I am in awe of the tattooed man in front of me. The power he holds over Lik, over all of us, is thrilling. A couple of words, simple nods, hard looks...that’s all it takes to kick Lik into actions he’s been trained to understand.

I want that.

I want the strength, the fulfillment, the control. Every single cell in my body is buzzing for it. Jealousy for Sam’s dominance pulses in my veins, and I want him to teach it all to me.

He brings Rose closer to me, standing tall behind her while Vantablack orbs absorb the light in my blue.

Eyes on me, lips against Rose’s ear, he talks to both of us.

“Look at the woman who owns you, Rose.”

My heart drops in my stomach when her eyes look up at me.

She knows.

“Now kneel before her.”

I'm shaking when she drops to her knees, the empowerment more than I can handle. Her eyes are still on me, but mine go to Sam's for help.

Rose and I used to switch a lot in bed. She'd take control then hand it over to me so I could hurt her in the way she liked best. We were simply fulfilling a sadistic need on my part and a masochist demand from her.

This...this is different. This is complete surrender and I have no idea why she's doing it. Her mind is a complex place that I yearn to understand. What if I break her further? What if she hates me after, because I've used her for my own selfish pleasure when she was at her most vulnerable?

"She needs it," Sam tells me softly. "Believe me."

We're facing each other. Rose kneeling between us is the only thing separating our bodies. The knife in my right hand feels heavy. Thor's hammer ready to wield a dangerous power over her. I slide my free, trembling hand in her hair, grab the roots at the top of her head tightly and watch with fascination when she hisses. I pull, forcing her head to tilt up and look at me. A dangerous storm is brewing in the ocean that is her eyes. A storm I'm ready to face, to tame, and to make mine.

Tonight, Rose White kneels at my feet like I'm her king. A merciless king who will make her the most pliable subject in his court.

Tightening my hold on her hair, I shake her head slightly. The trembling is gone and replaced by a burning sensation, knowing I hold power at the tip of my fingers.

"I've let you play with me for long enough, Doll," I tell her with an ease that makes me feel light. "I've let you run free. I've let you make a fool out of me."

Her eyes drop to the floor, acknowledging the mistakes she's made.

"Eyes on me," I order with more strength than I anticipated. Her eyes shoot up, forcing a smile to my face. "Look at me. Read my lips and hear my words. *No. More.*"

I bring the knife to her face and hold it flat against her cheek. “No more running away. No more choosing others. No more freedom. No more mercy. For every mistake, there will be consequences. For every misstep, a punishment.”

I bring the knife down and hold the tip under her chin, pointing up so she can't bring her head down.

“Your reign is over, baby. The old king is dead.”

Sam squats behind her, puts his hand on mine that's holding her hair, and whispers in her ear.

“Long live the king.”

Her neck is taut. She must be so uncomfortable, but she can't bring it back down. We're holding her too tightly, and I have a knife by her throat. She must be in pain. Her limbs are probably hurting from the awkward position.

“Are you comfortable?” I check.

“No,” she rasps.

Her first words in a while. It's like she's unable to think for herself since Sam brought her out of his office. Her intellectual capability is limited, her thoughts lasting only long enough to answer orders.

“Good,” I admit.

The knowledge of her being forced to stay the way I put her, despite the pain, shoots pleasure down my spine.

Sam lets go of her, peels the trench coat from her shoulders, and disappears from my field of vision. My eyes are too taken by the sight in front of me to notice what he's doing.

Rose is only wearing see-through lace, her dark nipples poking through and standing to attention. I take in her entire body. Her tanned skin peppered with small tattoos, that big one on her shoulder and collarbone that looks so out of place compared to the others.

I want to uncover every single one of Rose's secrets. Explore her and delve so deep into her soul that she will know

nothing but answering to me. She will do nothing but live for me.

Her skinny form looks so weak on her knees. Without her height and genius, she is nothing but a small woman bent to my will, ready to be used, seeking the abuse I'm more than willing to give her.

"Hold your hands behind your back," I tell her. She obeys without a thought. She has none of them left.

"Look at yourself," I chuckle. "A simple doll too dumb to think anymore."

She blinks up at me, taking in my words and agreeing by keeping silent.

"I want her hands tied behind her back," I order to whoever wants to hear it.

I don't have to wait long before Sam locks heavy steel handcuffs around her wrists.

"Perfect," I smile down at her. "All ready for my use."

I let go of her hair, keeping my knife under her chin so she can't move, and squat in front of her.

"Enough of that senseless silence, doll. I want to hear your screams now."

And the moment my fingers push her thong to the side, and I run the pad of one digit against the slickness that has already reached the seam of her lips, is the exact moment she comes back to life.

She gasps, taking in a deep breath and attempting to bring her head down. She realizes too late that my knife is still against her skin. She flinches, tilting her neck back up to avoid a cut.

"Spread your legs wider." I watch, fascinated, as she shifts on her knees. "Good." She trembles at my last word, and I take a mental note.

My girl might love the pain, but she needs the reward that comes with it. The praise for listening and taking the ache.

Her new position allows her lips to spread more for me. I use my thumb and ring finger to open them wider and tease her entrance with my index and middle finger.

“That’s a very wet girl,” I mock her. “All it takes is a bit of humiliation. A bit of pain.” I enter her with two fingers, not bothering to prep her any more than she already did with her sick needs. She moans so loudly I feel the men beside us shift.

“Does that feel good?” I ask her as I move in and out of her at a slow pace, taking my time to drag pleasure out of her.

“Y-yes,” she moans without an ounce of shame, knowing Sam and Lik are watching us. I give her what she needs, pushing in, pulling out, spreading wetness all the way to her clit. Going back in, I make sure to fill her up as much as possible before coming back to two knuckles in and curling my fingers.

“Fuck,” she hisses. “Sunsh—” She cuts off as soon as I harshly pull out my fingers. “Wait...” she pants.

“Oh, there’ll be some waiting, trust me,” I snarl.

“What?”

I finally drop my hand that was holding the knife to her throat and her head drops, looking right at me. The confusion clouding her eyes brings a smirk to my face. The roles have finally been reversed, I’m in complete control of Rose, and she can’t do anything about it.

“Sunshine,” she says in a voice that attempts to be assertive. “When you start something, you finish it,” she growls. She pulls at the cuffs with frustration. “I need to come.”

“You come when I allow you, Doll. Welcome to your new life.” I stand back up, towering over her. “Stay,” I order low before turning around.

“Rach!” she barks. “I swear, I will—” She is forced to quiet down when Sam grabs her hair with a mighty hand. Her barking turns into a mewl and the satisfaction it brings me is unmatched.

“Tsk, tsk,” he smiles. “You come when she says. You talk when she says.”

“Let go,” Rose spits in return. It’s good to see her fighting energy is back; it makes it all much more satisfying.

He lets go, but her happiness is short-lived. He grabs her jaw from behind, prying it open with one hand while he hooks three thick fingers to her right cheek. The hand holding her jaw then grabs the left cheek.

“Try to talk now,” he orders her.

She shakes her head, denying him the pleasure of her humiliation.

“I *said*,” he pulls harder on her cheeks, forcing drool out of her mouth as her lips pull back, “try to talk now.”

She hisses with pain, her eyes darting to me for help. Instead, I calmly tell her, “Obey.”

He shakes her head slightly, three fingers on each side, keeping her mouth wide open. “Say, ‘I’m sorry, Rachel, for disrespecting you.’”

Gargled words come out, saliva dripping down her chin. She squeezes her eyes tightly and stops talking while she takes in the degrading situation. Sam chuckles behind her.

“I have ball gags the size of my fist, Rose. If you want to play, I’ll play harder. Do you understand?”

She nods and he lets go. Her chin comes to meet her chest and she snuffles as she attempts to regain composure. Other than that, she’s completely silent. God help me, I want her obedient and pliable, so much so, she would ask my permission to take her next breath.

Going back to my initial idea, I turn to Lik. While I was busy with Rose, Sam tied his wrists behind the back of the chair and his ankles to the front legs. He’s been waiting for Sam’s next order in complete silence. That barely surprises me, their dynamic is well established, and he knows he messed up. He’s not about to make it worse for himself.

My eyes widen slightly at the sight of his unzipped pants and his dick begging to be let out of his red boxers.

“Tight in there?” I ask with malice.

A halo of jealousy is crowning me tonight. Lik got to play with my girl, *my* doll, without my permission. And that is the last time I allow Rose to do this to me.

I’ve seen one dick in my life, Conor’s. Needless to say, it’s never been an enjoyable experience. Though there’s something different about the man tied to the chair before me. There’s an itch I’m dying to scratch when I see him. I don’t exactly wish for him to bring me pleasure, but I do want to see him undone by carnal desire.

Lik is a handsome man. The perfect balance between masculinity and femininity. His interminably long lashes cover his face in a veil of prettiness while his angled jaw, currently shut tight, allows us a peek into his well-hidden roughness.

His brown skin is darker than Rose’s, but they share a golden radiance that shines a light on their beauty. He owns his style with a confidence that puts fashion models to shame.

Groomed eyebrows above deep brown eyes, a certain recklessness brightening his gaze. The gold ring pierced into his nose matches the countless ones adorning his ears. His left earlobe has stitches and I wonder what happened. Did he get into a fight? Did Sam take it too far? Did Rose rage back against him?

Instinctively, my hand goes to his hair. His short curls are much softer than I expected. They’re tight, small, unlike Rose’s hair that goes on like soft, endless waves. His hair is a dark brown, hers an inky black.

My eyes drop to his open shirt. He’s a much skinnier man than Sam. Fit and muscular. Four tattoos are scattered on his chest and stomach. A star of David, three lines in Arabic, the outline of an anatomically accurate heart, and something that looks like a Hebrew letter. His toned abs flex and the letters dance across his skin. Against my will, my tongue comes out to lick my bottom lip, and when my eyes go back to his face,

the corner of his mouth lifts. He is utterly aware of how beautiful he is.

A flash of fury courses through my body, and my hand tightens in his hair. I straddle him, bringing my knife across his throat and my lips close to his.

“Did you enjoy making my girl come tonight, Lik?” I hiss in his face. His eyes dart to Sam, seeking advice and command.

He must nod or something, because when Lik looks back at me, he gulps and lets out a breathless ‘yes’.

“Good,” I smile sweetly. “My turn.” I grind my hips against his length purely to rile him up. There isn’t much he can do tied the way he is. Still, he nuzzles his mouth against my neck and lifts up his hips.

“You’re playing with the big boys now, baby. Better be ready for it,” he whispers.

I push away from him, going back on my own two feet and collecting myself.

“Pretty confident for a man at my mercy,” I taunt.

I grab Rose by her hair, barely looking at her as I force her to come closer to us. She struggles, shifting on her knees and stumbling. She grunts when I pull tight, settling her between Lik’s knees.

“You two wanted to play together? Why don’t you show us how?”

Sam places himself behind Lik and looks down at Rose on the floor at the same time as he finally frees his boyfriend’s dick from his boxers.

Lik bites his bottom lip with pearl-white teeth, so straight they barely look real. He closes his eyes, attempting to control groans of pleasure as Sam strokes his hard cock.

I look down at Rose and pull her bottom lip with my thumb. “Open.”

Her lower jaw relaxes, mouth falling open. I push my thumb in and her tongue comes to wrap around it. She sucks on it eagerly until I pull it out.

“Show me your tongue.”

There used to be a willingness to reassure Rose when I dominated her. Comforting words, gentle gestures. I don't want that for her now; she better take it, or I might impose it on her.

She sticks her tongue out, pulling her head back to present it to me. I bring the knife to it, and she trembles but doesn't move.

“Are you scared?” I murmur to her. She nods slowly. “Do you want me to hurt you?” This time, the nod is more assured.

So I go for it. I grab the tip of her tongue between my thumb and index finger and pinch hard. She winces but stays put. Then, like the psychotic masochist I am, I press the tip of the knife onto her tongue. I push until I see blood spreading on it, mixing with the saliva in her mouth. Tears spring to Rose's eyes at the same time as wetness comes to drench my underwear. She shifts on her knees, attempting to put pressure onto her cunt with her leg.

I don't think she can get more beautiful than kneeling at my feet, bloody and needy.

We stand at the end of the same spectrum, our love for pain matching and opposing.

When I esteem her tongue bloody enough, I force her to face the man tied to the chair. Sam is holding Lik's thick, hard dick with one hand, an offering for the sacrificial lamb at my feet.

Grabbing Rose by her hair again, I look down into her eyes. “Show me how desperate you were for him, Doll.”

She shakes her head, pushing back into my hand while I push her down onto his dick.

“Rach—”

“And then maybe I'll let you come.”

Her resistance falters, and she lets me guide her until the tip of Lik's dick is grazing her lips.

“Show me what a good whore you can be and I'll reward you.”

Her mouth stretches to accommodate him as she takes him in. Unbalanced, with her hands cuffed behind her back, she has no choice but to let me guide her up and down his shaft.

Her mouth comes to meet Sam's fist, and our eyes cross. His is burning up with unfulfilled desires, and mine must be drowned in satisfaction.

My eyes move to Lik. Golden stars of pleasure shine in the depth of his eyes. He watches as I push Rose further down, his mouth hanging open and a moan freely falling off the cliff of his lips. Sam lets go, pulling his hand away, and I push on Rose's head. She chokes, pushing back and I tighten my grip in her hair.

“You wanted him, so you got him now, doll. A nice mouthful of him.” I accompany my words with a harder push, forcing her to take all of him.

I know how hard it must be. God knows I couldn't, but she hurt me tonight, and I'm all too happy hurting her back.

She twists in my grip, but I don't relent, forcing her to take him all in until the tip of her nose is touching his pubic hair. She's retching around him, her head trembling. Lik's eyes roll to the back of his head as he hisses a long 'fuck'.

Just when Rose loses strength, I pull her back up, watching with fascination the blood that now coats Lik's dick. She coughs bloody spit that falls on him and he shivers.

Sam wraps both hands around Lik's neck and smiles down at me. “You'll be choking as long as she does, Lik. Be a good boy, and you'll get to come in her mouth. We'll watch together when she swallows your cum.”

Rose has barely had time to take a normal breath before I'm pushing her back down all the way. Sam squeezes Lik's throat, cutting off his ability to breathe. Lik tenses, fighting

against the binds tying him to the chair but not the groan of pleasure escaping from his mouth.

I pull Rose away, up and down, forcing her to suck him until he turns red from choking and desire. Sam's hands are powerful, his fingers strong, leaving red marks on Lik's neck. Marks that will no doubt turn to bruises. Watching Rose's blood smeared all over Lik's dick, her lips becoming an even darker color than they usually are, sends spikes of pleasure through me. My clit is pulsating against my underwear, and my heartbeat has dropped down. My pussy is so wet I'm dying to force Rose's tongue on me rather than Lik.

Only I won't let her make me weak tonight. I won't show any of these men how turned-on I am. No, tonight, I'm in complete control.

"You want to breathe, Lik?" Sam rasps in his ear. Lust is rough against his throat. "Then come down her throat like a good boy."

That's all it takes to bring Lik to the cliff of insanity. He lets himself fall into oblivion, exploding in a loud grunt while I keep Rose's head down and his dick deep in her throat. She splutters and coughs as I release slightly so she's only got his tip in her mouth. I know he's still filling her up by the way his hips are moving up and down.

"Hold it, Doll" I order low.

I pull her away, knowing much of Lik's cum was already released straight down her throat. But not all of it. I angle her so Sam and his boyfriend can fully view her mouth.

"Show them." She opens her mouth, sticking her tongue out to show the cum left in her mouth that's now mixed with blood. "Now swallow."

They both watch her close her mouth and swallow, drops escaping and glazing her lips. Lik is taking a huge gulp of breath, dotted bruises already showing around his neck.

Their eyes...I've never seen anything like it. Enthralled, possessed by her beauty and vulnerability.

“See,” I cut through the obsessive silence that had fallen on all of us. I cut through Rose’s pants and Lik’s deep intake of air. “You can be such a good bitch when you put your mind to it.”

She purrs something inaudible, moving her hips and burying herself against Lik’s thigh.

“If you have something to say,” I growl as I bring her head back up. “Say it clearly.”

“I want to come,” she murmurs, and I barely catch it.

A call for worship and endless prayer going on and on in my head. The need to give her pleasure, to satisfy her, is so strong that I can barely control myself.

But if I bend to her will now, she will never learn. And tonight is all about teaching her the mistakes she’s made. Making her regret it all.

“And what makes you think you get to ask for anything?”

That makes Sam laugh. “You learn fast, Rachel.” He looks at me knowingly before adding, “It’s almost like you’ve been shoving that side of yourself into hiding when you should have let it out all along.”

I ignore his jab, focusing on the goddess on her knees.

“Sunshine...” She pulls at her cuffs, turning her skin raw. “I need it.”

Pushing her face against Lik’s crotch, I pull her hips up until she’s forced to balance herself on her knees and using Lik. If her hands weren’t tied behind her back, she’d be on all fours. I pull her thong over her ass and to her knees, letting it stretch between her thighs.

“You need it? How bad?”

“Bad!”

“Then why can’t I hear you beg for it with all you have?”

I run my palm against her cheeks until it settles against her pussy. I grind on her clit, rubbing with the flat of my hand until she’s panting against Lik. His dick is brought back to life

like her moans are a magic spell. It extends against her cheek. Instinctively, her bloody tongue darts out to lick him. He grunts, and Sam grabs his jaw.

“Quiet. I want to hear the slut beg.”

I pull my hand away from Rose as soon as her pitch rises. She slacks against Lik.

“Rachel...please.”

I slap her ass cheek harshly and she moans. The bitch moans instead of taking it as a punishment.

“Baby, please. I’m begging you. I need a release.”

“That kind?” I say as I bring my hand between her legs again. I push in with one finger only, dragging another moan past her lips.

“More...please...”

I add a second one but slow down my pace and she cries out with frustration. “Rach...you’re killing me!”

I accelerate, but only so slightly, taking my time to torture her. She’s so wet it’s dripping down my fingers.

“Such a needy little slut,” I chuckle. “I own this pussy, Rose. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she grunts, pushing her hips against me as her breathing accelerates.

“Say it.”

“You own it—fuck, Rach, let me come!”

“I want to hear you say, ‘Rachel, you own my pussy,’” I growl as I push harsher inside her.

“Rachel, you own my pussy. You own all of me, for fuck’s sake, just let me—aah!”

I pick up my rhythm and use my other hand to caress her clit.

“Fuck her with three fingers,” Sam commands. “Stretch her.”

And I do it without hesitation. She protests slightly, but she takes me in anyway. I tap gently against her clit, and I know she's seconds from coming apart on my fingers, her mouth against Lik's hard dick. When my gaze locks with Sam's, he shakes his head slightly and I get the message.

I pull away from her in a quick movement, and she cries out. "Why?! Please, please, Rach."

"Shut it, Rose." Sam's stern voice quiets her right away.

He wraps a tattooed hand around Lik's neck and forces him to look up. "You wanted to do your firsts with her, didn't you? You found out there's a girl your dick gets hard for, and you wanted to have her behind my back."

Lik's chest is heaving from tension. His lack of reply makes Sam tighten his grip.

"Answer me, Malik."

"Yes, Sir," he admits, his gaze dropping.

"Then you better make her come."

"What?" Lik chokes. "I-I—"

"*I-I*," Sam mimics mockingly. "You did it once, you can do it again. Get your dick wet and show me how much you want her."

He lets go of him, rounds the chair, and grabs Rose by the waist, settling her on Lik's lap so she's straddling him. "You want to come so desperately, little slut? Go on, get your release through him."

Rose is uncontrollable. She's been edged enough that her body is running on pure primal need. She grinds against Lik's cock spreading her wetness all over him.

"Fuck," he hisses.

Sam takes a step back and I settle behind Rose. Holding her waist, I guide her above Lik's dick and help her sink on it. Her hands are still behind her back as her fingers grasp my top, gripping me like her life depends on it.

“Rach, wait...” She tenses and I stop. “Fuck, wait, he’s big.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted,” I rasp in her ear. “Lik’s big dick to make you come hard?”

I hold her tight and push her to take more of him. Lik’s tensed groan tells me he’s still attempting to resist it. It won’t last long and she’s barely lowered, hissing at the intrusion when his hips push up.

Rose moans loudly as he invades her fully.

They both release a loud ‘fuck’ that makes me and Sam smile. Sadistic smiles that enjoy their humiliations.

“Fuck her, Lik. And you better make her come, or you won’t be able to walk for days after I’ve had my turn with you.”

Grinding his teeth, Lik pushes up his hips. His movements are awkward, a mix of his restricted limbs and a complete lack of experience when it comes to pleasuring a woman.

Rose lets out mewls of frustration, so close to her orgasm yet incapable of reaching it from their unbalanced dance.

She falls forward, her head against his chest. “Please,” she begs desperately. “Please, I just want to come.” She rolls her hips, probably attempting to get friction on her needy clit.

“Rach,” she calls, her face buried against Lik. “Please, baby, please help me.”

“No.” Sam’s voice is a finality, and I don’t make a move. Tonight, we’re on the same team.

“It’s not me you should be begging. It’s the guy whose dick is buried inside you.”

“He’s too big...I can’t-I can’t focus...”

Lik pushes against her in one harsh movement, forcing a scream out of her. “Stop fucking talking,” he growls at her.

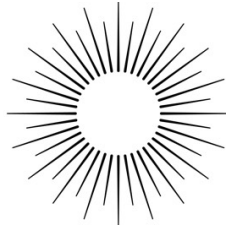
I pull Rose against me, run my thumb against her bottom lip and slip the magic words in her ear. “Come now, Doll.”

One more hip thrust from Lik, and she comes completely undone. Her screams resonate in the entire apartment. Her hips roll over and over again as she rides the wave of pleasure. I hold her tight, ensuring she knows to who she owes this. Lik's release follows, his face twisting with pleasure as his head falls back.

Rose slows down, her thighs shaking and her body shutting down right away. She falls slack against me, and her weight becomes too much.

Silently, Sam pushes me gently out of the way and grabs her easily. He pulls her away from Lik, holding her tightly in his arms. I don't miss the cum running down Rose's inner thigh, acknowledging we made a big mistake there.

RACHEL



4Am – Kid Brunswick

Sam lies her down on the sofa and quickly undoes the cuffs. Her eyes are half-open, her gaze wholly lost. She's shivering, muttering something none of us can understand. Tears are rolling down her face as Sam covers her with a blanket. I catch his attention, silently asking him what to do.

He shakes his head, dismissing me. I try to go to Rose, but he grabs my arm after my first step. I watch from afar as she curls into a ball and buries herself deeper into the sofa's comfort.

Sam lets me go, not without a look warning me not to go to Rose. He unties Lik, giving him a simple order.

“Go clean up.”

“Yes, Sir,” Lik murmurs shyly as he gets up and leaves through the hallway that leads to the other rooms.

Sam picks up the knife to go and wash it in the sink. I join him, talking quietly so Rose can't hear me.

“Aren't we meant to attend to her? Give her aftercare or something? Isn't that how BDSM works?”

He chuckles, looking at me like I'm a child. Too young and inexperienced to understand.

“This wasn't BDSM, Rachel.” Blood swirls down the sink, water washing away proof of my sickness. “BDSM includes safe words, clear consent, talks of soft and hard limits. It's a

power shift offered by the submissive. They give control to their Dominant in a trusted exchange so they can take care of the submissive's needs as well as their own. *That...wasn't* BDSM."

"What was it then?" I bite back.

"Revenge."

My brows furrow, my eyes observing his careful movements as he rinses the knife and dries it with a towel. He puts it back in the drawer and turns to me, his hands on the counter, his backside resting against it. I watch his tattooed fingers tap against the white marble as I observe him observing me.

"You must be so wet right now." He tells me this in the simplest way possible. No shame, no holding back.

My only reflex in return is to look down at his crotch. His hard dick is pressing against his black jeans.

"I'm not doing anything with you," I scoff. "I'm not *that* desperate."

"Of course not." His British accent concludes in a tight 'o' and a sharp 't'.

Watching Rose ride Lik's dick was torture, but it doesn't mean I'm any more sexually attracted to Sam than I was before. I know there is something slithering its way between him and me. I know it's mighty and emotional. But it isn't sexual attraction. I am attracted to his power, his control, and his capability to dominate. That turns me on, not him.

"I want to tend to her," I tell him to change the subject.

"Isn't your husband going to be home soon?"

"*Fiancé*," I growl as I correct him. His mouth tips at the corners, enjoying riling me up. I take a deep breath. "I want to be with Rose."

He looks down, observing his black Converse intensely, and I almost miss the secret he lets out. "Me too."

It's soft, gentle, and I take it all in. Offering the same in return. "Even if this wasn't BDSM, I want to give her aftercare. I want to watch you do it to Lik so you can teach me."

"I'd like that too, even if Lik doesn't deserve it." His eyes are still focused on his shoes, like his script is hidden down there.

Without another word, I delicately graze his hand with my fingers. He grabs it, and I'm somehow fascinated by how it completely disappears into his palm. I use that so I don't have to look into his eyes. I drag him out of the kitchen area with me and into the living room. Lik is back, wearing nothing but navy cotton pajamas. He's sitting next to Rose on the sofa, a hand stroking her hair.

"Get her into bed, Lik," Sam tells him. "I'll get something to clean her up."

Our roles switch, and he's now the one bringing me with him. He keeps my hand in his as we walk into his bathroom. He only lets it go when he grabs a towel and runs it under the tap.

"There's Advil in that cabinet," he points with his head. "Lik will know to bring a bottle of water."

"Do you really think she'll need Advil?" I ask, failing to hide the worry in my voice.

"You cut her good." A beat while he remembers. "And she took Lik *very* well. All that will hurt in the morning."

I follow him back to the bedroom. Lik is lying down on the bed, Rose's sleeping form completely quiet next to him. She had no energy left whatsoever, but she still managed to turn around so she could sleep on her front as always.

Sam hands me the wet towel. He doesn't need to talk for me to know he's not comfortable touching her so intimately, even after what happened tonight. I noticed how he avoided touching her as much as possible.

"Say sweet things to her while you clean her up," Sam explains, walking me through aftercare. "Praise her for being

so good.”

Rose’s back is moving up and down at a slow breathing rhythm, indicating she’s asleep. Nevertheless, I still talk to her as I take the lace off her body and clean her up. I stroke her hair as I speak softly in her ear.

“You took him so well, baby. You were such a good girl for me.” I drop a kiss on her cheek and she sighs, bringing herself closer to me.

“She should pee,” Sam advises.

“She’s sleeping,” Lik contradicts him. “Just let the girl rest.”

“She could get a UTI,” the first defends, his black eyes darting to Lik in that dominant manner of his. “Why don’t you let the people who know what happens after sleeping with a woman handle the situation?”

Lik’s nostrils flare, but he doesn’t say anything. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks away.

“UTIs surely are no fun. I’m sure Rose is not exactly looking forward to spending hours on the toilet just to pee two drops that’ll feel like needles,” I chuckle, trying to de-escalate the tension.

I run a hand up and down her back, slowly waking her up. “Baby, come on, let’s use the bathroom.”

From the corner of my eyes, I see Lik rubbing his chafed wrists. “So am *I* not getting aftercare?” he pouts at Sam.

“Do you think you deserve it?” Sam questions him, raising a single eyebrow.

“Are you still turning this situation around?” Lik snaps back. “Cause I swear I’ll leave right now. I can stay at Xi’s until you wake up and realize how badly you fucked up.”

Slowly, I help Rose out of bed and lead her out, leaving these two to figure it out.

Sitting on the toilet, Rose looks at me with heavy eyelids and a dumb smile. She sways left and right while peeing,

practically falling asleep.

I stand right in front of her, watching her so intensely, trying to reach into her soul and bring a slice of it back into my body.

“I love you,” she mumbles. A single tear rolls down her cheek and I wipe it with my thumb. “I do, Sunshine.” A sob constricts her throat before she attempts to talk again. “I really do. I’m in love with you.”

“I’m in love with you too,” I whisper back with less sentiment than her.

She’s not in her normal state, and I heard what she’s saying, but I know she’s not herself right now.

I give her a minute to finish it all up and hold her close to me as we walk back into the bedroom. Sam has taken his black tee off. His back to me, I can see the giant tattoo of two dragons fighting on his back. It takes up the entirety of it. More tattoos cover his shoulders, arms...everywhere. There is not an inch of skin that isn’t covered in ink. He is applying cold cream to Lik’s wrists, and my heart skips a beat catching the love between them.

It’s Rose’s shaking that brings me out of their bubble. She shivers next to me, her teeth clattering and her body completely giving up.

“What’s wrong with her?” My eyes snap to Sam as I voice my concern.

He gets off the bed, taking his time as if to show me there’s nothing to worry about. Facing me, my eyes catch all the tattoos on his front. Compared to his back, they’re small, overlapping the others. A lot of them are phrases, but I can’t read them. I catch his pierced nipples and feel a blush come up my chest, like I shouldn’t have seen them.

“She’s crashing. She’s had a bloody long night and she needs rest.” He grabs a gigantic sweater that must belong to him and slips it above her head, covering her naked body. I help her slide her arms into the sleeves.

“She’s freezing cold,” I indicate as I watch him pick her up just as her legs give out and put her into bed.

“She’s always cold,” he tells me as if I didn’t know.

“I know that,” I defend, fighting a stupid battle to show who knows her best. “I meant more than usual.”

“Then why don’t you come to bed and warm her up,” he smiles.

I do just that. I lay down by her side and let her settle next to me. On her front, she snuggles her face against my side as one of her hands comes to rest on my boob. Exactly how she loves to sleep. Sam leaves the bed to grab a pair of clean boxers and an oversized t-shirt. For a short minute, he simply watches me watch Rose.

“It’s because her back used to hurt from her foster dad’s abuse.” His voice is a whisper, as if to not wake her.

I look up at him, brows slightly furrowed to show my confusion.

“That she sleeps on her front,” he explains. “I’m sure it doesn’t hurt anymore. I don’t know if it’s a phantom pain or a habit. But that’s how it started. It used to hurt too much to sleep on her back.”

I nod, acknowledging that he was a big part of the life they once shared together. He is deeply in love with her. The kind that time, distance, betrayals, and hate cannot diminish. And I understand why he barely touched her tonight. He held himself back, scared to hurt her beyond repair. He was protecting her from himself.

“Anyway. Some old stuff I left here, if you want to get changed.”

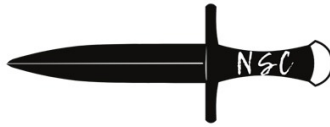
I nod as he drops them next to me. I don’t really want to move now that Rose is peacefully asleep next to me. It’s like having a cat. Once it falls asleep on your lap, you’re stuck in that position forever.

I assumed Sam would lay down next to her, but he purposely leaves the space for Lik. Once he’s settled, she

unconsciously wraps a leg across his, like trapping him in. Sam comes to lie down next to Lik, letting his sub drop his head on his chest while he wraps an arm around him.

No one says anything. The situation is a little too crazy for all of us. It's too difficult to understand or put words on. So we stay quiet, all falling asleep to the sound of Rose's breathing. All letting our queen's peaceful rest bring us down with her.

LIK



Until I Come Home – Two Feet, grandson

We snuck out like thieves in the night, being careful not to wake her. We made sure we disappeared before the sheets turned cold from our escape.

Was it the best decision? Absolutely not. For the first time since meeting Rose, since being in Sam's life, since this whole thing started, we were making progress toward the right direction. A spark of trust, a sprinkle of happiness in the darkness we'd created all around us.

Sam is still driving, the sun barely showing its first rays across the horizon as I run a hand across my face. I'm fucking exhausted.

It was four a.m. when Sam woke me up. He had a text from his IT guy that the tracker in Rose's necklace had reached a location that could be the Volkovs' hideout. Apparently, it stopped moving for long enough that we can assume Aaron Williams has given the letter and necklace to his boss. He sent us the location, and we were on the move immediately.

Not the best decision, but probably one that will be worth the pain it's about to cause Rose.

We were meant to drop Rachel at her house in Stoneview. Then she convinced Sam to come.

I want to be part of this. I won't let her use 'protecting me' as an excuse to keep me out of her life.

I'm strong enough. You all underestimate me.

There is something going on between Sam and her. I wouldn't call it flirting or romance. No, something else profound. He took her under his wing somehow. Decided he wants to bring the warrior out of her. I don't understand it, but I don't mind. Weirdly, while I don't see what he sees in her, I feel no jealousy toward her whatsoever. I like her, actually.

That's how we ended up leaving Rose alone, in a deep sleep that didn't get bothered in the slightest when we all left.

It's always fascinating and simultaneously terrifying to watch Sam get ready for a kill. We stopped at the cabin so he could grab his stuff. I was sitting in a corner while he was silently getting everything he needed. He changed into clean clothes, black cargo pants—that fit so beautifully around his ass—and a black t-shirt. Always.

He was moving around confidently, picking up two handguns from his safe, multiple knives he hid across his body, and a smaller gun he put around his ankle. His focus didn't waiver when he put unlimited amounts of ammo in a duffel bag with backup weapons and first-aid kits. His shoulder muscles tensed and rolled as I watched him bring everything he needed to the car.

What he didn't take was his balaclava, and I knew then he was taking this kill too personally. I also knew, because so was I.

It's because he let Rachel and me join that I knew he was too lost in his own revenge to care anymore. He's never *ever* let me come on a kill before, let alone an innocent girl who could become collateral damage.

From the back seat, I gently start massaging Sam's shoulders. They're tense, his grip on the steering wheel turning his knuckles white.

“Baby, relax,” I tell him. “Do you want me to drive for a little bit?”

He stays completely silent, and I don't try anything else. There is no point dragging him out of his safe place. Not now.

“Rachel,” I say to her. “Let’s switch seats.”

She turns around and smiles at me. “Why? Don’t you like the back seat?”

“I don’t see why I’m in the back in the first place. That’s my seat you’re sitting in.”

She shrugs but doesn’t reply. She picks up the gum I keep in the middle console and puts one in her mouth.

“Hey! That’s my gum,” I accuse. “And my seat. So, switch.” She simply looks at me defiantly, picks up another piece of gum and puts it in her mouth. I kick her seat, and it makes her laugh.

“Sam,” I whine. “Tell her it’s Lik’s gum.”

“Behave,” he grunts, wholly lost in his own thoughts. Rachel winks at me before facing the road again.

After long minutes of silence, which I spend brooding at the back of the car, Sam finally comes out of his own head. He grabs a burner phone and throws it at me.

“You spoke to Mattia before, right?”

“Not really,” I answer, already unlocking his phone. “But I’ve heard of him.”

Mattia is the guy Sam uses whenever he needs information on someone. Digging into their past, following them with a tracker...anything computer related. He belongs to the Luciano family, yet another mafia family who rules the East Coast.

While the North Shore Crew, my crew, used to be under the Bianco Family’s protection, the Lucianos provided for the Kings’ Crew, our rival gang. They don’t anymore. No, the Kings deal with the Wolves now, the Volkov family.

Since Mateo Bianco’s fall, my stepdad, Austin, and his daughter, Emma, have been trying to get the Lucianos to supply us with drugs and weapons. They wouldn’t talk to us until Sam convinced them. Now they give us everything we need, except protection.

Sam doesn't belong to anyone. He is this sort of freelance 'contractor' who goes by one rule and one rule only: I don't hear anything. I don't see anything. It's why he's able to work with all of them.

He used to be stuck with Mateo Bianco, because his dad was loyal to him. But since Bianco was sent to prison, he's been taking work from everyone. He doesn't need to know anything about their organizations. They give him a contract, and he kills people. That's it.

And sometimes, they like their lethal employee so much, they let him borrow their best guys. Like the Lucianos do with Mattia.

"Call him," Sam urges me. "Ask if that tracker's moved."

"Surely, if it had, he would have told you."

"Malik," he snaps, and I instantly scroll through the contacts.

"Alright, alright." The tone rings on repeat, but Mattia doesn't pick up. "Want me to try Luna?" I know Luna is his apprentice that takes on the easy jobs for Mattia.

"No."

Silence follows his monosyllabic word, so I don't insist. I simply keep an eye on the phone to make sure I don't miss if Mattia calls back.

When I see signs telling us we're entering New York City, my brain starts ringing the alarm.

"Sam," I address with conviction. "This is weird as fuck." His silence riles me up. "Are you listening to me? The last time you found the Volkov brothers, they were hiding in Ontario's countryside. Why would they move from bumfuck nowhere Canada where they have all the space in the world to hide...to fucking NYC?"

Rachel turns around in her seat to share a look with me. She agrees, despite not knowing anything about our world, about crime organizations, or who any of those guys are.

“Sam,” I insist. No answer. Coward. Hiding in his silence when he knows I’ve raised a sensible point. “You’re taking this job too personally. And I’ll be the one hurting if it gets you killed.”

Rachel gives me sorry eyes when I’m left with yet another motherfucking silence. Does Rose even realize Sam isn’t killing the Volkov brothers for the money anymore? He’s long forgotten he took the job for the enormous amount of cash. He had initially promised me it would be his last, and we could settle down after this.

No, he’s killing them because they stole Rose from him. Because one of them turned her against him.

And I’m terrified that adding love to the mix will be his downfall.

Forty-five minutes later, he parks his white SUV in front of a Manhattan townhouse.

“Stay in the car,” he mumbles low as he grabs his gun.

“You’ve gone fucking insane. This is not how you do your usual jobs. You haven’t scouted the area, the building. You don’t know who’s in there. You don’t know who’s waiting for you on the other side of that door.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re being reckless. You’re not fucking invincible!” I shout, concern rippling through my voice.

He ignores me, opening the door and slamming it behind himself. Then he opens the back door.

“Come with me,” he simply says.

“Oh, now you also want to get *me* killed. Great. Turn this into group suicide, why don’t you.”

I grab the gun I had picked for myself and follow him out. I’ll complain, but he’s my ride-or-die. I can’t let him go get himself killed without doing anything about it.

“Get the first-aid kit ready, Rachel. You’ll probably need it to stitch our heads back onto our bodies. That’s if we ever

come back out.” I slam the door behind me and follow him to the house.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Sam chuckles. I should shoot him. That would avoid us the trouble we’re about to get ourselves into.

He easily picks the lock on the door, proving further that this is not the Wolves’ hideout. It’s too easy to get in.

He slowly opens the door and looks at me. “Stay close.”

“*Insh’Allah* we actually come out of here alive. *Betzrat HaShem.*”

He lets out a barely audible laugh. “Asking for God’s help in both your religions, Lik? Let’s hope that doesn’t turn against us.”

And we go in.

I’m not truly religious. I’m too attached to both my mom’s and my dad’s cultures and religions to pick one. Though it wouldn’t hurt to give a quick prayer, would it?

At first, there’s nothing but darkness. Dust tickles my nose as we move forward blindly. My palms feel sweaty, holding my gun so tightly I’m scared it’ll slip out of my hands the second I try to use it. In front of me, Sam is a calming presence. I see the outline of his body moving with precision and sharpness. With a confidence I can’t seem to match.

I grew up surrounded by violence. Xi was still young when he enrolled with the North Shore Crew; I was even younger. Our dad was alive, clueless as to what we were doing. Our mom could only pray we wouldn’t end up like the other kids on the block. We did.

They weren’t naïve. They were just too busy trying to put food on the table. It wasn’t an easy life for them to move from North Africa. They never made a place for themselves. In fact, some people on the North Shore had never seen anyone from Algeria or Morocco when my parents showed up there. Most of the families that grew up in America’s white poverty were racists, unaware of our beautiful cultures and religions. They treated my mom like she was stupid because she struggled

with English—Arabic and French were the only languages she spoke. They had only heard of us through war and the Western eye.

We grew up discriminated against. We grew up poor. We grew up with a need to defend ourselves constantly.

Violence. That's what made my brother and I who we are today. I lived through it and still live for it. I forged my personality through the gangs on the North Shore. It was the only way to fit in. I hurt, I killed, I almost got killed too many times to count.

So today, in this New York City townhouse, I am not scared for myself. But fuck, if I'm scared for the man I love, dragging us into the Wolves' den. Literally.

The Wolves aren't a petty gang. Their war doesn't consist of turf fights and who will sell the most to the impoverished population of the North Shore, who survives on heroin and stolen moments of escapism. No, they're a criminal organization. The Russian Bratva. They're skilled, dangerous. They're established and would never hide in a shitty townhouse waiting for us to close in on them.

So why does Sam think this is not going to be the end of us?

A noise resounds upstairs just as we reach the steps. Sam turns to me, putting a finger against his lips, telling me to keep quiet. We walk up as discreetly as possible, slowing down when old steps creak under our weights. On the upstairs landing, light comes through a curtainless window.

The place is old, with broken furniture and layers of dust that only proves no one lives here. Especially not the Wolves.

The small noise comes up again, a muffled cry followed by sniffing. I make sure my gun is loaded and the safety is off before following Sam into a room.

Light from the landing falls right onto the body of someone zip tied to a chair. Hands to the armrests, ankles to the legs. A very dead body. His head has fallen back, a bullet hole right between his eyes. The man is naked and covered in

blood, knife wounds covering his skin. A piece of paper is stapled to his chest. Sam is already reading it, and I come beside him to check it myself.

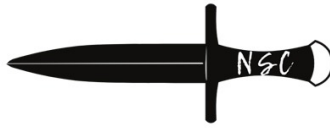
Keep looking if you wish, English man.

You'll only find me when I decide so.

And that'll be when I come to collect what's mine.

Aka, Rose.

LIK



Love Overdose – Daniel Di Angelo

Now close enough, I can see the dead man is wearing the necklace that had the tracker inside. The replica of the Faberge egg glints from the little light coming into the room.

“Who’s that?” I ask Sam.

“Mattia,” he huffs with no surprise in his voice whatsoever.

“Did you know we were going to find him here?” I finally understand he never thought we were going to find the Volkov brothers here in the first place.

“When we got the text, I thought we would find the body of Aaron Williams. They would never hide in New York, and I assumed they had killed the man who attempted to bring them a message from us.”

“But?”

“But then Mattia didn’t pick up...” He runs his knuckles along his jaw. Something’s bothering him.

“So, you did know he was going to turn up dead here? You knew you weren’t leading us straight to the Wolves? Straight to death?” I double-check.

“Malik,” he scolds. “The day I find the brothers, you won’t be coming with me. Believe me on that. This note is from Viktor, I know it. Aleksei is too stupid to set a trap for us.”

His patience is getting shorter by the minute, and I sense something else is bothering him.

“What’s wrong?”

He can’t reply. That noise we heard comes back. Fuck, I’d completely forgotten about that. Facing a corpse will do that to you.

Sam and I look around, pushing heavy furniture out of the way. He finds the source first, and he’s not happy. I hear it through the very distinct ‘bloody hell’ that comes out of his mouth.

In a dark corner of the big room, a girl is tied to a chair the same way Mattia is. Except she’s alive. Her shoulder-length pitch black hair is messed up and tangled, stuck to the sweat on her face. She’s gagged and blindfolded, but apart from that, she looks like she hasn’t been touched. Her clothes are intact, with no traces of blood. She’s sobbing through the gag, the noise we could hear. Tears cover her cheeks, snot and sweat on her lips.

Sam takes her blindfold off, and wide brown eyes look at us, terror causing them to dance between the two of us and the rest of the room.

The girl screams through the gag, more tears coming out of her eyes when Sam pulls out his knife. She fights against the zip ties aimlessly.

“Luna, you’re fine. It’s me, Sam,” he reassures her.

So that’s Luna. Mattia’s infamous apprentice. She calms down as soon as she hears his voice. She recognizes the British accent she must have only ever heard through a phone.

Sam cuts her binds and the rope holding a cloth that’s been forced into her mouth. She coughs and gags, her cries now loud in the room. That’s the reaction of someone who’s never been kidnapped before. Surprising for someone who works so closely with the Cosa Nostra.

Sam is careful with her, delicately helping her to a standing position and dusting her off.

“Is anything hurting?” he asks softly. Why does he care so much?

She shakes her head, sniffing and running her forearm against her eyes to wipe oncoming tears.

“I want Vito,” she sobs, seemingly incapable of stopping her desperate cries.

Sam takes a deep breath, runs his knuckles against his jaw, and nods. “Yes, I assumed so. I’m going to call him in a minute.”

Her face twists as she falls back on the chair, her head dropping into her hands. “I can’t believe it...he’s...he’s dead.” I notice the Italian accent in her voice. It’s strong, like she grew up there.

“Who was it, Luna?”

“The Wolves,” she cries out. “Who else?!”

“I meant...who was it exactly?”

“I do not know, Samuel. *You* put us in this situation. *You* should know!”

“Did they find you at Mattia’s place?”

She nods, wiping more tears. “It is one of Vito’s safehouses. I do not know how they find it.” Her accent elongates some of her vowels, her panic breaking her English slightly.

Sam pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “Fuck.”

“I want Vito,” she repeats desperately.

“Of course,” Sam nods. “I’ll call him.” He turns to me, and I hand him the burner phone he’d given me.

Before he can call, I pull him toward me. “Are we talking about Vito Luciano?” I check. Because I don’t understand why we would need to call the right arm of the Luciano organization for something as small as this situation. He ignores me, calling anyway.

The ringing resonates in the room as soon as Sam puts it on speaker. There's a tension coming from him that I'm not sure I understand. I know it has nothing to do with the dead body because he's seen too many to care.

"Samuel," Vito's voice is loud in the room, emotionless.

"Vito, ho paura. Vieni a prendermi. È successo qualcosa!" Luna screams.

"What the fuck?" he hisses. We hear a clatter behind him, like he got up suddenly and a chair fell behind him. "Dove sei?"

"She's fine," Sam cuts them off. "I got her."

"Don't tell me she's fine. Where the fuck are you?"

"Manhattan."

"Lucky!" we hear him shout away from the phone. *"Get the car. Now."*

"Mattia's dead," Sam continues as if nothing was wrong.

"You better be joking, Samuel."

"The Volkovs had him killed. They took Luna too, but she's fine."

"Are you telling me some of the Wolves had their hands on my girl?"

From Sam's silence, he keeps going. *"I let you use the services of Mattia and Luna regularly because I trusted you. Now you call to say my IT guy is dead, my girl hurt, and you're starting a fucking war against the Wolves in my name."*

"The Volkov brothers know this has nothing to do with you."

"Then why did they have their hands on my girl." Vito's voice is pure, uncontrollable fire. To say he is possessive would be quite an understatement.

"Send me your location. I'm on my way, and you better have explanations when I get there. Because Lucky is in a shit"

mood, and I have no reason to not allow her to skin you alive.
Luna, Piccolina, sto arrivando.”

He hangs up on us. “Guy’s in a mood,” I huff.

“Fucking Viktor,” Sam spits. “Fucking me over all the way.”

“You are playing a dangerous game, Samuel,” Luna murmurs. “Volkov brothers are merciless. Aleksei will torture you for his pleasure. Viktor will kill everyone you love before he kill you.”

But that’s a lie, isn’t it? Because he won’t kill everyone he loves. He might end me, but he won’t harm Rose. No, he’ll keep her all to himself.

“A wolf’s face is the last thing you ever see,” Luna repeats their motto like a well-learned lesson. I guess she must know it, being so close to Vito.

“And yet you’re very much alive,” Sam calmly replies. “I’ve got a first-aid kit in the car. Let’s go.”

Vito Luciano is quick when he picks up his precious *Piccolina*. He shows up in an all-blacked-out town car, a tall, red-headed woman following close behind him when he gets out. Rachel is feeding Luna some sugar cubes so she doesn’t crash and encouraging her to hydrate. We’re all waiting on the sidewalk, like sitting ducks.

The woman waits a step back while Vito talks, her hands behind her back and her gaze on Rachel. Luna crashes into him like she was drowning and finally found a life raft. He kisses the top of her head, encircling her in the protection of his arms. “Go to the car,” he tells her softly. She doesn’t wait to be told twice, out of view the next second.

“I must say you’re the last person I expected to put my family in trouble,” Vito tells Sam calmly.

“That was a misunderstanding. The Volkov brothers are angry at me. I can promise you they won’t hurt any of you.” His voice is just as still. It’s fascinating to watch two powerful men exchange.

“Mattia was an exception then?”

“An example,” Sam corrects him. “If he wanted a war, he would have killed Luna. She’s fine.” I have a feeling my boyfriend can’t stop repeating that she’s fine to reassure himself.

“Which one is your significant other, Samuel?” Vito asks with a composure I could never hope to have.

“So you know which one to kill?” my boyfriend replies, pretending to be cool and unbothered.

Vito doesn’t bother to respond. “Sort your shit out with the Wolves. If any of this touches my family again, he’s gone,” he says, pointing an index finger at me. “And she’s off to make me money in one of my houses.” Rachel shifts back at the sound of that. “Clear?”

Not liking the idea too much, I slowly slide my hand to the back of my jeans and grab the handle of my gun. The woman behind Vito isn’t even looking at me, yet her hand is already below her suit jacket, showing me her own toy like she’s got a sixth sense. She turns to me the next second, offering me a chilling smile.

“The brothers will be dead before you hear of them again,” Sam promises.

“Or so you say. You heard me. There will be no warning next time.”

He turns around. The woman looks at all of us individually, promises of chaos in her dark-green stare. She winks at Rachel before turning her back and leaving.

“Who the fuck was that girl?” I huff, relief relaxing my shoulders as I watch their car leave.

“That was Lucky. Vito’s personal enforcer.”

“She’s kinda hot,” I murmur more to myself. “Oh my god, am I becoming straight?”

“Doesn’t matter if you are,” Sam chuckles. “She is one hundred percent team women.”

“Ah, I did get the lesbo vibe,” I nod.

“Did you...Did you just say *lesbo*,” Rachel snaps.

Wincing, I pinch my lips. “I’m sorry. That was out of place. Sometimes some of my lesbian friends and I use shit terms as a joke. Just ‘cause we’re queer.”

“I’m not your *friend*,” she spits. “You don’t know what my personal experience is, and being queer doesn’t give you the right to use derogatory terms with me. So, get the word lesbo out of your vocabulary. Like yesterday,” she snaps.

I nod and apologize once more. She relaxes and shakes her head. “Just be careful next time, please. Being queer is a different experience for everyone. I don’t know yours, and you don’t know mine.”

I grab her hand, looking straight into her eyes. “You’re amazing, you know that? Fuck, you really are. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes me away playfully. “Stop it, will you?”

I take a step back but don’t release her hand.

“Anyway, not every lesbian is a cold bitch with a gun,” she scolds me playfully. “Don’t be so annoying.”

“Between Rose and her, could have fooled me,” I tease her.

Despite her trying to get away from me, I grab her by the waist and pull her to me, grabbing her cheeks in one hand and pressing until her lips are pouting. “Look at that big pout. I’m just joking, baby. I could never forget about my favorite lesbian with a soft heart and no idea how to use any sort of weapon.”

Letting her go, I turn to Sam. “Why does Vito Luciano ever hire you if he has a personal enforcer?”

“Why, because no one is as good as me, of course. Let’s go.”

During the ride back to Maryland, I sit in the front. Rachel is in the middle seat, in the back, her phone vibrating on repeat every minute or so. Sam is ever so silent, probably thinking of all the ways he'll kill Aleksei and Viktor when he finds them.

"Are you in trouble with the Lucianos now?" My man can be quiet all he wants, but he knows it won't stop me from going headfirst into the topics he wants to avoid.

"It's fine," he brushes me off. He runs his knuckles against his jaw, and I wrap a hand at the back of his neck, softly massaging the tension.

Rachel's phone vibrates again, and she declines whoever is calling right away.

"Vito seemed pretty pissed," I insist. "I bet you would be too if someone had put my life in danger."

Buzz, buzz. I try to ignore the sound of the nth call Rachel is getting and focus on Sam.

"So, you're sure it was Viktor and not Aleksei? He sent you a clear warning, Sam. You need to take it seriously." I focus on him and not the annoying sound.

Buzz, buzz.

"Just pick up the bloody phone, Rachel!" my boyfriend finally snaps. He turns to her for a split second before going back to the road.

"It's Conor," she murmurs, fear in her voice, and trembling through the vowels.

"Is he only calling now?" I ask her suspiciously. "You didn't come back the whole night, and he starts worrying the day after?"

"He must not have come back home until now. I don't know," she hesitates.

"Still too scared to leave, then," Sam declares in a way that shows apparent disappointment. He had hopes for her to be strong. "I show you how to find your strength, and you make sure to bury it back down when that abusive husband of yours whistles for you to heel."

“*Fiancé*,” she snarls in return.

“Abusive?” I cut off.

“It’s fine.” She waves a hand to dismiss me and the topic. “I need to go back home.”

“There’s something I still don’t get.” Sam doesn’t let it go. “How has Rose not killed him yet? She has many flaws, but she will always protect the ones she loves.”

It’s Rachel’s turn to be silent. But I’m not, because something clicks. Pieces of a puzzle I’m finally putting together.

“You lied to her,” I observe more to myself than anyone else. Then I talk louder. “Rose saw bruises on your body, and you told her they were from Sam and me. You lied to her to protect him.”

“Not to protect him,” she hisses at me. “To protect *her*, you idiot.”

Sam cackles a laugh. “You think your fancy Stoneview boy can hurt her? Think again. She’s had much worse than him.”

“I have no doubt Rose could truly hurt Conor if she found out. But I would never put her at risk that way. And even if she knew, she’d find him and then...what? Kill him? Get herself in trouble again? She’s had enough of that. No. She can’t know. Now I’m done with this stupid conversation. Drive me back home,” she demands like she has any authority over us.

“*Now* you stand up for yourself,” Sam fights back. “Pathetic.”

“Shut up!” she rages. “Shut your mouth!” She hits hard on the back of his seat with the heel of her hand.

I watch a smirk spread on Sam’s lips. Why does he enjoy bringing the fighter out of her?

“You think I care about your opinion?” she spits. “What, from the guy who ties up his boyfriend and forces him to fuck another girl? From the man who marks and bruises him? Do you think you’re any better than Conor?!”

Chilling silence follows, only punctuated by Rachel's panting as she tries to catch her breath.

I pull down the sun visor in front of me and check my neck in the mirror. I had forgotten entirely the bruises from Sam choking me yesterday. I run my fingers against my skin, relishing in the mark.

Rachel doesn't understand. Those bruises are wanted, requested. Hers never were. My stomach twists with pleasure, thinking of Sam's strong hands around my neck, and a semi quickly swells in my boxers.

"You can act stupid all you want, I know you're not," Sam finally says once he's taken the time to calm down from her insults. "Lik and I have an agreement. I don't remember you agreeing to be beaten up. That's the difference."

"I—"

"You don't know anything, but I'm willing to teach you." His gaze locks with hers through the rearview mirror. "The difference, Rachel. I can teach you that."

"I don't need you to teach me anything," she grunts back.

"Take my dick out, Malik."

My heart drops, not even sure I heard the words right.

"Now?" I rasp, lust already flowing freely through my body.

"You heard me."

"Don't you dare," she fumes from the back seat. Her phone vibrates again, yet another call.

"What are you going to do, Rachel? Call Conor for help?" Sam jeers.

I don't even wait for him to finish his sentence to undo his jeans and take his big cock out. It's already hard because dominating a situation is his biggest aphrodisiac. It's heavy in my hand, thick in my fist.

I start stroking him and he tuts me, his eyes on the road, his face completely serious. "Mouth."

Sam isn't a man of many words, but fuck, sometimes few are enough. I keep a tight grip on him as I lower myself. I lick the head once, twice, listening to his breathing relax and his heart accelerate. I go to the base with my tongue and lick the entire length slowly.

"Shit," Sam sighs. He readjusts slightly, falling a bit lower in his seat and tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

I lick my lips and smile. He tastes so delicious. Stretching my jaw wide, accustomed to his ridiculous girth, I slowly take him in, keeping my lips tight around him and my tongue flat against his now steel-hard dick.

His stomach tenses as I take my time going up and down. I angle my neck, bobbing my head and making sure to take him all in. I come up slightly, letting him go, and run my hand against his wet cock. I add more by spitting in my palm. Then I take him back in and grab his balls with my wet hand. When I go up, leaving the base free, I put my hand there and hold him tight. When I come back down, I make sure to move my hand away and push him to the back of my throat until I can swallow him down.

He grunts loudly, pleasure rippling through his body, and puts a hand at the back of my head. He grabs my hair tightly and pushes me down.

"Deeper," he orders in a hoarse voice. I choke around him, spluttering spit everywhere. My gag reflex kicks in and instead of letting go, he pushes harder.

I moan a complaint around his length, and he tightens his grip. "More."

When I feel like I'm past my limit, tears running down my face and an impossibility to breathe sending my heart into panic mode, he pushes further. My hands come up, one on his thigh, one on his seat, and I attempt to push back.

"Hands," he growls.

His training is embedded so deep inside me, that's all my body needs to shift into action. My hands move behind my

back, and I grab my left wrist with my right hand, losing all balance and control over my head movement.

“Good boy,” he grins.

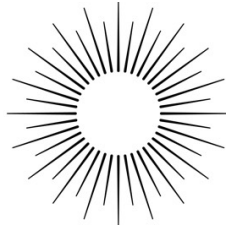
He uses my mouth further, one hand on the steering wheel, one tight in my hair. The noises reverberating in the car are loud and obscene, humiliating me and making me horny all the same.

“Rachel?” he croons.

“What.” While her answer is crisp, snapped, her voice is a low rasp, full of desire that I didn’t expect. I don’t need to see her to understand that this desperately turns her on.

“Touch yourself, love,” Sam orders with a finality that leaves no room for debate.

RACHEL



Often – The Weeknd

His words resonate in my head, hitting every corner of my brain until I'm dizzy from them.

Touch yourself, love.

He's not looking at me and I'm not making a sound, but he knows. He knows how wet I am from watching Lik choke on him. From witnessing the control he exercises on him. I'm baffled. Because I know it's not the men themselves who turn me on.

It's power.

I understand the need to submit to Sam. There is something about him that doesn't leave you a choice. Something that forces you to bow for him, to fall at his feet and beg him for mercy, all the while hoping he won't give you any.

But the authority? The control, the strength to convince someone to give away all their free will and give you complete ownership of them. It's thrilling.

My hand is halfway down my jeans before I realize I moved it. The sound of Lik going down on Sam, taking him all in and giving all he has to pleasure his boyfriend, brings electricity to my clit. It's like my whole body buzzes to the rhythm of Lik's bobbing head. He moans around Sam's dick, and that's all I need to slip my hand under my underwear.

I'm not thinking anymore, simply following my most instinctive need. I bring a finger to my entrance and spread the wetness all the way to my clit. A long sigh leaves me as I press the pad of my index finger to my clit. I start rubbing, doing it the way I love, pressing hard and changing the rhythm to match my needs. Lik chokes, and a moan escapes me.

"We'll come together, love," Sam grunts with pleasure. "Better hurry before Lik passes out."

"Shit," I sigh. My clit is so swollen and wet, my finger slips. I bring two to cover a bigger surface, rubbing and pressing harshly, ensuring I bring myself as much pleasure as I want.

Right now, I don't need someone to figure out what I like. No one to pick the wrong rhythm, the wrong pressure, to bring me close and accidentally lose the right spot. No, I know exactly what to do, and I don't tease myself. I go for it, flicking and even slapping when I feel I'm close. Sam's harsh breathing brings me to the edge, and my moans get shorter, sharper.

"Fuck," I let out uncontrollably.

"I don't think your husband can bring you that kind of pleasure, Rachel."

"*Fiancé*," I scream as I come.

Another meaningless word passes my lips. Whatever it is. I moan loudly at the back of the car, legs spread wide and my hands down my jeans while Sam goes seventy miles per hour on the freeway and his boyfriend chokes on his dick.

A loud grunt from Sam accompanied by a 'holy shit' follows a long moan from Lik, and I know they're done too.

"Swallow," Sam tells him breathlessly, and I know Lik obeys without thinking.

Lik straightens up in his seat, sinking into it while he catches his breath. My eyes lock with Sam's through the rearview mirror and he smiles at me. Like he won a secret battle we were fighting.

I move slightly, losing his face and catching myself in the mirror instead. My cheeks are blushed, my hair a little messy from rubbing my head against the headrest. And my eyes shine with infinite satisfaction.

“Not such a lesbian after all,” Lik finally says before turning around and winking at me.

It makes Sam chuckle, then he talks to me with that seriousness of his, counting his words to make sure he doesn't say too many. “See. I didn't need to force either of you. You both wanted it so badly. All I had to do was ask. And *that's* the difference.”

I hate him for being so right.

My phone buzzes again, and I look down. My heart drops three stories, worse than if it was Conor calling again. Guilt seeps into my bones, fear of betrayal crawling through my veins, and regret settling in my stomach.

“It's Rose,” I say out loud. Declaring the trouble coming our way.

What have I done?

My God, what have I done?

“Take it,” Sam answers. “And don't worry. I've got you.”

It can only reassure me so much. Clearly, he's never faced Rose's wrath when her sick jealousy shows itself. She might not be able to reach us right now, but she can still hurt us. *All* of us.

ROSE



Start a War – Klergy, Valerie Broussard

Cold sheets used to feel relaxing. Waking up knowing the person I slept with already knew they weren't invited to stay any longer was a peace of mind.

This morning, Sam's old cold bed froze my heart. And, as always, I'm all too happy to let it turn to stone like it's its most natural form.

But my stomach twists with pain, despite trying to protect myself and pretend I'm just the careless heartbreaker everyone loves to believe I am.

I look at my phone for the tenth time. Nothing.

What the fuck.

"Iced latte for Rose?" the barista shouts across the room. I walk to the counter, my pussy painfully reminding me that Lik's dick is a lot bigger than I ever expected it to be.

"Thanks," I mumble, grabbing the cup, my eyes stuck to my screen.

When I woke up, pleasure was still coursing through my body with the lethargy of exhaustion. Yesterday, Rachel abused me in the sweetest way possible. She made me feel more complete and loved than she ever had. Lik gave me his woman's virginity, and Sam...he ruled the whole event like we were all his puppets, pulling at our strings and ensuring we were all fulfilling our darkest desires.

And yet I woke up completely and utterly alone. After everything that happened, they all just *left*.

An uneasiness runs down my back in the form of a sweaty shiver.

No one loves you.

I stretch my neck, rolling my head to try and get rid of the nasty thoughts. When I was a kid, I used to imagine that if I rolled my head around, the thoughts would come out through my ears.

If they did, they always found a way back.

If your parents didn't want you...who will?

My ice-cold drink soothes the sting I feel on my tongue. I have this impression that my tongue is twice its actual size. Rachel didn't cut deep, but I still have the taste of blood and Lik's cum in my mouth.

I keep trying to think if I ever came so hard in my life. I don't think I have. We reached levels of depravity I had never realized I needed and yet don't think I'll ever be able to get rid of.

So why did they all leave?

Am I the only one who felt it? The electric love between us? Something deeper than surface-level lust. I thought if Lik and Sam left, Rachel would stay. She always stays.

But she's engaged now. And Lik and Sam are significant others.

Where do I fit in all that?

Nowhere. As usual.

No. One. Wants. You.

Not for longer than a good night of sex.

Why aren't any of them looking for me?

'All you are is the typical girl with abandonment issues.' Sam's words ring loudly in my head, forcing me to roll my neck again, stretching it and hoping for the thoughts to slip

through my ears and into thin air. They were such valid words. I could barely keep myself together when he spat them at me.

I take a seat by the window of the Bakers' café. My best friend Luke's dad owns the chain, and soon my friend will be CEO. How crazy. Everyone has been going on with their lives while I was away. And there's only one person who truly wants me.

I take another sip of my drink and check my phone. Nothing.

Fuck it, I'm calling her.

I won't give Sam the pleasure of receiving a call from me. But Rachel doesn't deserve my shitty mood and insecurities. What's a call to check how she is?

It seems to ring forever, and when her voice finally reaches my ears, it's low and raspy. Unusual for her.

"Hey," she simply says.

"Sunshine, I want to see you."

"I can't today. I'm busy."

The rejection stings, and jealousy for Conor McGill springs in my stomach. How can she stay engaged to this guy?

The problem that comes with rejection when it's about the woman I love, is that it brings out a nasty side of me. Bitter, possessive, *ugly*. But mainly? Uncontrollable.

"Where are you?" I bite.

"Rose," she huffs. *"I'm busy. Let's see each other tomorrow."*

"Busy choosing a cake for a fake wedding with a guy that couldn't find your clit armed with a map and a torch light?"

"It's got nothing to do with Conor. I have errands to run and—"

"The perfect little housewife," I mock her. "Send me your location."

"You're not hearing me."

Something scratches over the phone's microphone. Rachel complains something inaudible, and I get mentally ready to destroy Conor over the phone.

"She's with us," Lik's sweet honey voice invades my ears and my heart. The beat doubles, a drummer getting ready for the intro song to a rock concert.

I catch my breath, gather my thoughts and try to figure it out. Okay, so they all left somewhere together this morning.

"We went on a little trip to New York to kill the brothers this morning," he explains like he could hear my thoughts.

"What—"

"Don't worry, they're still impossible to find and very much alive. We just thought we'd release the tension by giving each other orgasms."

My blood boils, my ears ringing from words that I refuse to accept as truths.

"Actually...that's a lie. I'm the only one who didn't get to come. Maybe you can help with that, princess."

"Put Rachel on the phone," I hiss, sitting up in my chair. My legs start to bounce, my hand squeezing the cup I'm holding until my drink overflows.

"We can all hear you," Sam's voice rings out.

"Rose." Rachel's sorry tone pisses me off even more. *"I can explain."*

I cackle the most sarcastic laugh that's ever past my lips. Layers and layers of protection wrap around my heart, turning my body cold and freezing my veins.

"I'm not asking for any explanation. We don't owe each other anything. You want to let Sam use you in his revenge against me? That's your own decision."

Sam's mocking laugh makes me bristle. I resent him when he thinks he's smarter than me.

"Why are you still fighting, Rose?" he asks me. *"Yesterday was a great example of what could be. Be ours. All of us. Let*

us own you. Let us play with you however we want. We won't just own your body. We'll own your heart too. Your mind, your every thought. Your soul. And in exchange, I'll let you live. I'll tell you what. I'll even drop my contract on the Volkov brothers. Aleksei might be stupid enough to get caught. But you know as well as I do, that Viktor is the smartest and I might never catch him. He's the one who managed to keep you to himself for two years after all."

While the whole speech felt manipulative, his tone turns truthful when he repeats, "*I'll drop the contract, Rose.*"

I know he hates my silence because it gives him hope. So, I stretch it for as long as I can.

"Forget about the hate we share. You'll get the attention you've always craved. The certainty that three people would give everything for you. You'll be our queen."

This time, my response is instant, his words so deeply disappointing.

"I'm no queen." It's a hissed whisper gathering all the disgust I can muster. "Don't you think I've been through enough on my own to be something as tedious a queen? I was too many people's obsession to want to be something as docile as one. I am too strong to be so dull."

"Your pride will be your downfall." I've heard those words from him so many times, they make no sense to me anymore.

"I'm the supreme ruler, Sam. I own all of you. I own myself entirely. No one will ever bring me down. Not through fear or pain, and not through love. *I* am the king. I'm the king of my life, the king of my body, the king of my heart. And I'm saying this to every single one of you: you don't want to play games with me because I *always*. *Fucking. Win.*" My last words come through gritted teeth, translated into a furious tone I cannot control.

I hang up on them, desperately trying to understand the pressure building behind my eyes, the feeling of stabbing in my heart, and the excruciating pain crushing my bones.

I drop the phone on the table and let go of my drink, letting it spill. I wrap my hands around my thighs, just above my knees. I squeeze tightly, cutting the blood flow. Then I release. I do it multiple times, feeling a sense of relief every time I allow my blood to run freely again. Then the listing kicks in.

Salvator Mundi, Interchange, The Card Players, Nafea Faa Ipoipo, Number 17A...

I don't really notice the moment a strong presence sits at my table. I'm too focused on my own despair, selfish and uncaring for anyone else around me.

“Why do you look so distraught, Rosalind?”

It's his voice that takes me out of my own coping mechanism. My heart almost gives up before I can take my next breath. Even if I hadn't recognized the smooth and elegantly formed vowels, which I did, there would be no doubt from the use of my full name. The only person on this planet who uses my full name.

I look up, letting my eyes fall on the man who kept me from the world for almost two years. Desperately trying to gulp down some air, I watch him in complete shock. It's mixed with fear, admiration...and utter respect.

“Viktor.” I can barely whisper his name, like a curse that could kill me.

“It's time to come home,” he tells me. “I've been waiting long enough.”

I can't answer. I'm scared if I talk or make a noise, he'll disappear...evaporate.

And I don't want that.

Not after I've missed him so much.

To be continued...

AFTERWORD

Every time I cry to my partner that ‘I don’t fit in’ and that this world was not made for me, he tells me: ‘It’s a gift to not fit in. You don’t want to fit in, believe me.’

And after writing this book I realised that maybe it’s true. I don’t want to fit it.

This book was hard to write. It was a mix of healing, breaking, putting myself back together, *repeat*. I was torn between what people expected, what they wanted to read, and what I needed to write. I went with the latter.

So, I will keep writing things that tear me apart and push me not to fit in. This is only the beginning of our journey together, I hope you’re ready.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To the person holding this book, thank you. For reading the story these characters had to tell and for picking this book. Thank you for giving me a chance to pursue my dream and keep telling the stories I love to tell.

To all the readers who have been with me since *Giving In*. I am forever grateful for the trust you put in me and I hope you will always find an escape in my books.

Maman et Papa, thank you for your constant support and for sometimes *literally* forcing me to keep going.

Thank you to my partner for picking me up every time I am down and carrying me through every rough patch. None of this would be possible without you. You're the reason I know the sun can take a rest and the moon will take over.

Lauren, thank you for sticking with me despite everything I put you through. Thank you for turning my French weirdness into English and my British to American. Thank you for the debates and for pushing me to make my stories better when I think I'm too exhausted to do it any more. I am grateful for your help and our friendship.

Thank you Kat, my faithful beta reader who is always willing to read anything I throw her way and to encourage me through it all. I am aware of how lucky I am to have you.

Thank you Leah and Amy for beta reading without knowing anything about my books...that takes courage and it was a great help.

Thank you Angie for working through your illness and being such a great help on this book. I still can't believe the great difference you made!

Thank you Rosa Lee for the amazing cover and graphics. You are so talented!

Thank you to my amazing PA, Nikki, for literally *everything*. I know I require a lot of attention and babying, but I'm an author! What can I do...

Because she requested her own line, thank you to my younger sister for...I quote...'dealing with me every day and lending me her clothes'.

And again, thank you to every single reader who picked up this book. My life wouldn't be the same without you.

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* !

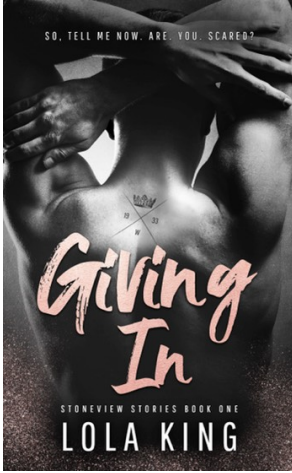


ALSO BY LOLA KING

Did you like the world of Stoneview? Did Jake and Jamie pique your interest? Check out their story in the Stoneview trilogy starting with *Giving In!* (Features Rose and Rachel)

Giving In

Jamie

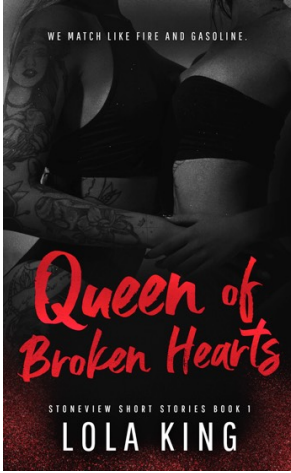


Jake White is our king. A king with a crown of thorns, a heart of stone, and evil in his soul. He hides it well though, under a beautiful smile and eyes that ravage your heart. But Stoneview Prep's golden boy has always had a dark aura around him. Like a well-guarded secret. A blackness that he never lets anyone see. "Curiosity killed the cat, Jamie." My mom always tells me. She never said it would get me in more trouble than I could handle. She never said it would throw me into the dark world of Jake White. And when I not-so-accidentally find out part of Jake's past, I finally learn the consequences of mischievous nosiness. Curiosity doesn't kill this cat. It turns it into a mouse to be played with. At least that's what Jake decided.

Jake

Three years. That's how much my twin and I got of freedom before our past caught up with us. We were doing well, we were being good, we were keeping out of trouble. Most of all, I was in control. But trouble always finds a reason to make its way back to us. And when it does, Jamie Williams is here to witness it. In the morning I learned of her existence, in the afternoon she was spying on me like a fangirl. This girl is desperate to find out what's behind the golden boy's facade I was kind enough to put on. So be it. I have time on my hands, darkness on my mind, and a hundred ways to make Jamie Williams bend to my will.

Queen of Broken Hearts



Did you like Rose and Rachel? Check out their FF novella!

Rachel

In another life, Rose White was the woman who brought kings to their knees. They started wars for her and burnt down entire kingdoms. All for her beauty, for her charisma, and her sex appeal.

I made a mistake by looking into her eyes. She caught me and cursed me into loving her. She trapped me in her web and has kept me to herself ever since.

Now I worship her altar. I give her my heart and my body, I bend to her will and let her use me as she wishes.

I would do anything for her love. The problem is... I'm not the only one.

So on this Halloween night, her birthday, all I ask is to be the only one.

Just for one night, Rose, let's play it my way.

And tomorrow, I can go back to being just another subject. Another heart the Queen breaks when she pleases.