



A SPEARCREST NOVELLA

SPEARCREST

Rose

AURORA REED

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*Audentes
Fortuna
Iuvat*



To all the mean, angry, bossy girls who only want to be praised if it's

To all the mean, angry, bossy girls who only want to be praised if it's in bed.

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PLAYLIST



Pretty Head – Transviolet

People I Don't Like – UPSAHL

STRUT – Emeline

Bitch I'm Cute – I'm Just Lex

Goddess – Jaira Burns

Filthy Rich – Evalyn

DICTATOR – REI AMI

Cherry Lambo – Evalyn

Billion Dollar Bitch – Mia Rodriguez

Love Like Mine – Stela Cole

cinderella's dead – EMELINE

cult leader – KiNG MALA

Siren – Kailee Morgue

Cravin' – Stileto

Bubblegum Bitch – MARINA

MoneyOnMyMind – UPSAHL

Dirty Thoughts – Chloe Adams

Liar – Jake Daniels

HONEY – LUNA AURA

Bubblegum Bitch – MARINA

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Dirty Thoughts – Chloe Adams

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HONEY – LUNA AURA

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

MOËT MISERY

WHO NEEDS THERAPY WHEN they have champagne and couture?

That's why I sit on my bedroom floor in vintage Vivienne Westwood gilded Gucci pumps, a bottle of Moët in my fist and tears running down my face.

Another day, another argument with my father. Because approving sending me away for seven years wasn't enough for him. Forcing me to leave my friends behind, to give up New York—the heart of fashion, art and culture—in favour of the most uptight and boring country in the world. Forcing me to adapt to the depressing British weather, stupid British accents and dry, annoying British humour—none of it matters to my father.

After spending my childhood and adolescence obeying his every whim, he has the gall to turn around and refuse to let me choose my own future.

“You're not wasting your time in fashion school, Seraphina!” Rosenthal screamed at me through the phone ten minutes earlier. “I'm sick of this stupid idea! If you want to spend every cent of your trust fund on clothes, then do that, but I'm not letting you waste time and money on anything else!”

some silly fashion school! You're going to stop these childish dream proper degree, and get to work, just like I did when I was your age."

"Silly fashion school?" Even though I wanted to, I didn't dare scream I know my father well—he's perfectly capable of cutting me something as petty as not liking the volume of my voice during a conversation. "I'm applying to the London College of Fashion! It's the best place in the world to study fashion."

"Clothes are for wearing, not studying," my father snapped. "I refuse you become yet another vapid New York heiress with a failed fashion You're better than that—the Rosenthal name is better than that."

Good and Fuck the Rosenthal name, I wanted to say.

own my There's a reason my mom didn't want it. There's a reason she I never came back, and there's a reason my father had two more marriages after she left.

arently, The Rosenthal name isn't the privilege and honour he thinks it is.

to leave It's a curse.

art and But I was too scared to say any of this to him.

world. "Please, daddy," I said instead in my most pitiful voice. "I just want spelling what I love."

ish and "Doing what you love is a hobby, not a career," he replied. "Most ny own can't afford an education—do you think I'm going to let you waste time money on a whim?"

Robert "But it's not a whim."

've had "The matter is closed, Seraphina. You're not going."

ist fund "Please, can we discuss it, if I—"

ney on "If you want to discuss it, we can talk after the Siddal Gallery Gala." I roll my eyes, thankful he can't see me. The Siddal Gallery in Lo

s, get aone of the many artistic and educational institutions my father pat
make himself seem less like a soulless Wall Street shark.

n back. Every year, they have a fundraising event that's supposed to be B
off foranswer to the Met Gala. The only thing they have in common is th
i phoneboth attract crowds of people who care more about being seen there t
only theactual art they are supposed to be supporting.

Every year, my father attends the event like he's the king of Versail
se to letevery year, I'm forced to be at his side. I'm not stupid—I'm little mc
on line.one of his trophies.

And like a trophy, he thinks I'm just an object for him to use.

“University deadlines will be during the same month as the gala,
eft andcarefully. “I can't afford to wait until then, daddy, so if we—”

failed “We'll speak then, Seraphina.”

And then he hung up without so much as a goodbye.

After that conversation, I allowed myself a full fifteen minutes of
After that, I dealt with my problem the way I always do: from the out
Standing in front of my full-length mirror, I dressed and put on my ma
it to docan only ever allow myself to be miserable so long as I look good doin

Now I sit on the floor in my couture, my long hair tumbling i
peoplegolden curls down my shoulders, sipping from my bottle of champ
me andpainted two lines of shimmer underneath my eyes so that my tears lea
glittering streaks down my face.

At least my angst is aesthetically pleasing. Social media onl
women's emotions when it's beautifully packaged.

I take a picture and post it with the caption “misery and moe
” Spearcrest bestie, Camille, comes in a few minutes later and rolls her e
ndon is “What now?” she asks, shaking her head and making her dark curls

rons to around her shoulders. “Another argument with your father? Is this the school thing?”

Britain’s “He’s just not even trying to listen to my point of view,” I say, letting my head drop back against the edge of my bed. “He just wants me to do whatever he says whenever he says. I’m like an object to him, a lump of clay he shapes however he wants. He doesn’t even see me as a real person and, besides, when I talk to him, I don’t even *feel* like a real person. I hate him.”

More than “I hate him too,” Camille says, flopping onto my bed and grabbing a bottle of champagne from my hand to take a long swig. “Do you remember when he tried to hit on me?”

” I say I crane my head to throw her a glare. “He did not try to hit on you.”

“Don’t lie, Rose. The very week after he tried to hit on me, did he not get a new girlfriend that looks exactly like me?”

He did—but how do I tell Cammie that the world is full of girls who look exactly like her? Deep tan, smooth skin, long legs, black hair cut to the side in perfection? She’s not the first girl to have a tiny waist and big, beautiful breasts.

Getting it. So my father dating Luana probably has less to do with Cammie and more to do with the fact that old men everywhere will always have a thing for beautiful girls with dark hair and luscious curves.

Give two “Leave Luana out of this,” I say finally. “Right now, she’s the only redeeming feature about my father.”

Why likes “Maybe you should ask her to withhold blowjobs until your dad goes to fashion school. A blowjob embargo.”

It”. My “Ew, Cammie! That’s disgusting!” I heave, covering my mouth with my eyes. “I wasn’t feeling suicidal before, I definitely do now.”

Bounce “Don’t joke about that,” Cammie says with a lofty shake of her head.

fashion Given Cammie spent most of her time in lower school breaking t
girls for sport, it's annoying that she's now become this self-titled a
ing myfor mental health and anti-bullying champion.

hatever But then again, Cammie would do anything to improve her self-in
gets toshe found out tomorrow that eating out of flowerpots was the new
when Ishe'd have her mouth full of dirt before I could even blink.

“What are you going to do, then?” she asks, handing me the b
ing thechampagne back. “Go back to New York like he wants? Get a real deg
number “As if. I'm applying to fashion school. That's a real degree.”

“I didn't say it wasn't.” Cammie tilts her head and gives me a little
smile. “I mean, all I'm saying is that Coco Chanel didn't go to
ot get aschool.”

“So? Vera Wang and Ralph Lauren did. What's your point?”
ho look “I'm not making a point, girl—calm down!” Cammie rolls he
rled to “Anyway, I thought your dad said no?”

bouncy “I don't care. What is he going to do, have me kidnapped and c
back to New York? Please. He's too pathetic to do anything.”

id more Cammie nods slowly, then asks in a lowered voice. “What if he c
ing foroff?”

I let out a loud burst of dramatic laughter. “Imagine!”
ie only



ets you
SOMETIMES, MY LIFE FEELS like a film.

1. “If I I am the main character: effortlessly beautiful and delightfully ch
Set against the backdrop of prestigious Spearcrest, polished Upper Ea
l. or the ever-changing array of cities and private beaches I holiday in, e

he new of my life is an aesthetically pleasing montage. The clothes are to-die-for, the supporting cast is glamorous, and the love interests are the purest candy.

age. If But sometimes, the film of my life takes a turn. Tragedy must strike something, heroine to learn lessons, I suppose. A cruel director uses foreshadowing and irony to make the heroine's fate feel inevitable—almost deserved, even if it's not.

ree?" But when my father calls me the day after we officially submit our university applications, it doesn't feel inevitable and deserved.

is bitchy It feels cruel and unfair, and it takes me completely by surprise.

fashion "You want to go to fashion school, Seraphina?" he roars into the room, forcing me to hold it at the end of my outstretched arm. "You go to fucking school. But you'll be making your own way since you think you know everything."

"What do you mean?" I ask in a trembling voice. I've just come back from my afternoon classes, and I'm standing in the middle of my room in my usual spot, frozen in shock.

uts you "Don't act stupid," he snaps. "You know exactly what I mean. I've just spoken to Rasheed about your trust fund."

"Daddy." My voice is low and high with terror. "Don't do this."

"Then change your application."

"It's too late. I've already submitted all my applications."

"Then you can kiss your trust fund goodbye. I've let you do what you want for too long. It's about time you remember who's in charge here. I've warned you. Spoiled brats like you only learn the hard way." I have known this would happen. Spoiled brats like you only learn the hard way.

ach day Terror and shock give way to a sudden flare of bright anger, blinding me.

for, the mercury explosion.

of eye “You’re not in charge of my life, daddy. I’m an adult now. You can’t tell me what to do, and using money to control me is so low of you.”
for our “Low?” My father’s laughter whips through me in a stinging blow. “You think I care? Do you think I got where I am by being afraid of you?”

I know little about my father’s business or about what he’s done in New York. But he works on Wall Street, where nobody has clean hands and a clear conscience.

So I don’t need to know the details of his career to know he’s telling the truth. He’s not the kind to joke or make idle threats. If he says he’s spoken to Rasheed, our attorney, about my trust fund, then he’s done that.

I never really thought he would ever cut me off because I never thought he’d sink so low as to force me to do what he wants by using money. When I’ve always done everything he asked—not when I was a child, but when I was an adult, when I was innocent, so *reasonable*.

With every year that passes, I discover new ways of hating my father, realizing what a horrible person he is. Ruthless, heartless, completely devoid of guilt or conscience or empathy for others.

But he’s forgetting one thing: I am his daughter. A true Rose, whether I like it or not. And just because I refuse to follow in his footsteps doesn’t mean I can’t learn from him.

“Fine, daddy. You’re right. You might not be afraid to go low—but I’ll go lower. You’ll see.”

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CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

SCANDAL MATERIAL

I NEED MORE ROSES. More roses, more tulle, more drama.

It's a recurring theme whenever I'm creating an outfit for a party today it holds particularly true. Today, there's a party in the peace and I'm finally going to get the boy I've set my sights on.

I have a plan and it's going to go perfectly.

"Oh my god, what's happening here?"

Cammie stands in the open doorway, her dark eyes wide. I glance up at the floor where I'm sitting, stitching roses onto a corset. It's painful work, the boning of the corset fighting the needle, which keeps stabbing my thumb free fingers.

"Obviously," I say, gesturing impatiently around me, "I'm making an outfit for tonight's party."

"Making an outfit?" Cammie says, aghast. "It looks like a florist had a psychotic episode in here! Why are there so many plants?"

"Because, Camille!" I glare at her, holding up my corset and its handful of roses. "Look at it! It's not ready yet—not remotely. It needs more roses!"

“Rose, we’re going to a party in the peace garden, not the MET Gala.” Camille steps over a pile of discarded fabric with a grimace and comes to me in my corner, kneeling next to me to place a concerned hand on my shoulder. “Is this about your dad? Or is this about Evan?”

I roll my eyes and smack her hand away. “It’s *not* about Evan,” I say, though it’s a little bit about Evan.

Evan Knight is the plan.

In fact, Evan Knight has *always* been the plan.

He’s rich, athletic and breath-takingly gorgeous. We’re both from New York and both our families operate in New York. We’re the picture-perfect couple.

I’ve always known we would end up together. It’s the ending that makes the most sense for us. I’ve been willing to wait for him to make his choice through the hottest girls in the year and get it out of his system. I’ve even conceded him to Giselle, for fuck’s sake, and I despise Giselle—so thank you, especially generous and patient of me.

But if there’s anything my English Literature GCSE taught me in high school, it’s that the best plans of mice and men often go awry. In this case, it went especially awry, because apparently, Evan fucking doesn’t have a clue what’s good for him.

If he did, he wouldn’t be harbouring such a weird and obscure obsession with the most annoying girl in school.

Sophie Sutton is everything I’m not: dark, moody, and poor. She’s morbidly academic, a teacher’s pet of the most obnoxious kind. She’s an obsessed prefect who wears her pin like it’s a medal of honour. She’s the epitome of British: serious, rigid and boring to death.

And to top it all, she can’t stand Evan. She hates him with every fibre of her being.

fucking And yet Evan can't seem to keep away from her.

id joins But I won't let that interfere with my plan. I've not sunk so far as
on my another girl over a boy. Or compete for one. Especially when my com
is some charity case who's only made it into Spearcrest because her
y, even are on the staff.

I'm Seraphina Rosenthal, for fuck's sake. And with Evan Knight
family fortune at my side, my father will have no choice but to swal
pride and let me do what I want—because I won't need his money any
the US, But for that, I need to drag Evan's attention away from Sophie Sutte
couple. to do *that*, I need to look amazing at this party. Not just beautiful—Spe
: makes is full of beautiful girls—but captivating. Sublime.

his way Show-stopping.

I even And for that, I need more roses.

hat was “Right,” I say, standing up so suddenly I startle Camille. “I'm going
greenhouse.”

back in “Now?” she exclaims, eyes wide. “Dressed like this?”

. In my She points at my outfit: a cute camisole and shorts set in pink sati
Knight my eyes.

“Ugh, I'm obviously going to put a coat on, Cammie. Wouldn't
session give Mr Morton any ideas, now, would I?”

Mr Morton is the old Spearcrest caretaker. He's got a full beard
. She's Scottish accent, and he just turned seventy last year.

A rule- But instead of looking disgusted, Cammie laughs and gives me a
ie's the grin. “I don't know, Rose. It would definitely piss your dad off if you
the gardener.”

fibre of “True.” I grab one of my silk scarves and tie it around my head to k
freshly-washed hair protected against the cold, then throw on my l

longest coat, wrapping it around my body. “But come on. I’d have to fight really desperate to fuck the help.”

petition

parents



and his ALTHOUGH I OFTEN VISIT the greenhouse to pilfer flowers for n
low his outfits or bedroom, I’ve never been to the greenhouse at night. It fla
more. Old Manor, its glass gleaming in the darkness of early evening. I p
n. And door handle, half-dreading it’ll be locked.

earcrest The door falls open without issue.

Inside, the greenhouse is dimly lit by the naked lightbulbs strung al
wooden beams. Beds of plants expand the length of the building in lon
disappearing into silent shadows.

g to the I suppress a shudder. It’s more than a little spooky in here, but if I t
roses quickly, I can just grab a bunch and run back to my room
getting killed or kidnapped.

n. I roll Hopefully.

I’m making my way under heavy leaves and hanging baskets when
want to sound startles me. I frown and stop mid-step. The sound become
distinct. A sharp, slicing sound, like blades rubbing against each other.

l and a I freeze for a second and then reach into my pocket. My hand clos
tube of lip balm and some hair clips. Shit. I left my phone back in my
wicked probably buried under a mound of tulle.

fucked What are the odds of a serial killer being right here, in the Sp
greenhouse? Surely pretty low. Maybe this is just a figment
eep my imagination?

biggest,

e to be I knew all this stress about fashion school and my dad and my tru
and Evan and Sophie was bad for me. I've not kept a healthy mind a

—

The second comes again, followed by another distinct sound.

Footsteps.

ly hair, "Who's there?" I call out sharply.

nks the I do my best to avoid sounding scared, but my voice is still
ush the squeakier than I intended. We can't all have husky voices like Sophie
Ugh, I'm doing it again. Why can't I stop thinking about her for li
seconds? Because she took the guy that should rightfully be min
ong the though she's plain, she's poor, she can't dress and—

g rows, "What are you doing here?"

I turn around so fast I practically give myself whiplash. Then I ta
find the steps back, not out of fear but out of genuine, utter and complete surpr
without There's a guy in the greenhouse.

Not the old caretaker, Mr Morton, or Colonel Owen, the beadle wh
the grounds at night to catch students trying to sneak around. It's a
a weird real guy.

s more He can't be more than a few years older than me. He's bulky an
haired and wearing a T-shirt and dirty black pants and hard gloves. His
es on a damp with sweat and there's dirt smeared on his cheeks and arm
y room, holding a rusty pair of shears in one hand.

For a second, we just stare at one another without saying a word. H
earcrest me right in the eyes, not saying anything. His eyes are a light, piercin
of my His expression is curious, almost amused.

I narrow my eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm Noah. You're not supposed to be here."

ist fund “Someone died and made you the king of the greenhouse?” I snap.
nd now He shrugs. He doesn’t even seem annoyed that I’m being r
Spearcrest guy would say something sarcastic, dark, or vaguely threa
A Young King would definitely not let my insolence slip.

But this is no Spearcrest guy. It’s clear from the clothes he’s wear
short, choppy haircut, his coarse accent, and the fact he’s doing—of al
slightly—*manual labour*.

Sutton. I draw a little closer to him, peering at him. He’s actually pretty
ke five looking, with good bone structure, grey eyes, nice thick arms. But
ie even also a half-faded bruise near his mouth, and it looks like his nose mig
been broken because there’s a slight dent in the middle of it.

“I need roses,” I say, looking insistently into his eyes.

ike two He points vaguely to another corner of the greenhouse. “That way.”

ise. I raise my hands, showing him my pretty fingers and impeccable

“Can you cut them for me? I don’t want to hurt myself on the thorns.”

io lurks “Sure.”

guy—a He sets his shears aside and reaches into a box of tools for a
secateurs. Then he walks away and I follow, watching him as he walk
d dark—not that much taller than me, but he has a nice figure: broad should
s hair is arms, tapered waist and hips.

s. He’s Staring at the nape of his neck, I call out, “I’ve never seen yo
before.”

e stares “I only work here on weekends,” he replies.

ig grey. “Since when?”

“September.”

So he’s been working here for a few months. I can’t believe I’ve
seen him before. Does anybody else at Spearcrest know about him?

not. I feel a bit like a girl in a kid's book who's just discovered a creature in the cupboard and doesn't want anybody else to know about it. "Do you live near Spearcrest?"

"Yeah," he says.

He stops by the rose bushes. They are sublime: gorgeous blooms in all things of cream, pink, peach and red. They are perfect for my look. He pinches them.

"Which ones do you want?"

"Um... a few of each colour."

He nods and gets to work: pinching the stems near the flower and pulling them low, making me a perfect bouquet with long stems—exactly what I need. He works in silence. Even though I have a million questions I want to ask, he seems to have none to ask me.

Which is frankly a little irritating, given I've just turned up in a greenhouse in tiny pink pyjamas, a massive trench coat and a vintage silk scarf.

This is the kind of scenario scandals are made of. Gorgeous young woman. He's semi-naked under her coat, dimly lit greenhouse in the dead of night. Big mud-streaked labourer.

In this scenario, the labourer wouldn't be able to contain his beast. He would want to touch her all over here for his beautiful social superior. He would want to touch her Chanel-scented skin with his big dirty hands, throw her over the counter, stifle her protests with his mouth, roughly spread her legs to—

"Do you want me to sort out the thorns for you?"

His question brings me snapping out of my thoughts and a plume of heat rises to my cheeks, echoing the trickle of heat pooling between my legs. I hope I needed my plan to go well tonight, even if it just means I get laid.

magical Because I must be hornier than I realised if my brain is coming up with it. kind of scenario and my body is actually responding to it.

“Pardon?” I ask, a little thrown, realising I barely registered his question.

“The thorns. Do you want me to remove them for you?”

I actually know how to get thorns off rose stems—there’s no art to it, just push on the side of the thorns and they snap clean off—but I’m shaky in the legs. I nod automatically. “Yes, please.”

He heads over to a large wooden table, sets the roses down, and begins to work without another word. I perch myself on the wooden table, facing him, cutting. As I do, the lapels of my coat part and fall aside, revealing my thighs. I wince, my lip, wondering if Mystery Manual Labourer will sneak a forbidden peek. He doesn’t—he’s too busy concentrating on the roses.

“Do you work here every weekend?” I ask suddenly, desperate to fill the stifling silence.

“Yeah.”

He volunteers no more information, so I have no choice but to go for direct interrogation on him.

“Well, what do you do the rest of the time, then? Are you in university?”

“No.” He doesn’t even look up. He snaps the thorns off my roses with deftly lustgloved hands, his expression blank. “I have another job.”

“What job?”

“I do deliveries for the local grocers and farmers. Sometimes I do some kitchen work.”

I can’t help the grimace of disgust on my face. “Why so many jobs?”

He shrugs. “My mum’s getting married in the summer. Just help with wedding costs.”

This sends a burst of warmth like an explosion of confetti inside my

with this I didn't expect such a...well—*wholesome* answer. It makes his attraction go from a soft five to a hard seven almost instantly. Now I really want to check me out.

Instead, he gathers the pile of roses and hands it to me.

“There,” he says. “All done.”

“Oh, uh,” I hop down from the table—my thighs have truly let me down—and grab the bouquet. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem.”

I take the roses and he turns and walks away without another word. I bite a strange sense of disappointment fills me as he disappears into the dark look of the greenhouse.

I don't even know why I'm disappointed; I got exactly what I can fill the for. I have enough roses to make my outfit for tonight's party look like Persephone herself brought springtime to it. Enough roses to make it impossible for anybody at that party not to notice me.

But as I leave the greenhouse, a new fear nibbles at my mind.

How can I possibly get Evan Knight to notice me when I couldn't even get the dirty gardener to check me out?

with his

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”

ing her

y chest.

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CHAPTER 3

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TORN TULLE

IF NOTHING ELSE, I'M the most beautiful girl at this party.

This isn't an easy achievement. This is a Young Kings party, so the most popular girls in Spearcrest are in attendance.

That means Kayana Kilburn, sparkling like a diamond and smelling like vanilla as caramel, her brown skin catching every light in its luxurious glow. It means Theodora Dorokhova, the ice queen herself, untouchably beautiful and unattainable from the height of her beauty and intelligence. It means Cammie, my best friend, with her curves and her night-black curls.

Still. As beautiful as they are, none of them can compare to me.

I enter the Peace Garden to audible gasps. When I left my room, I didn't even need to check my reflection to know I would have this effect. I checked it, though. I adorned my vintage corset with so many roses that my upper chest looks like a bouquet. My skirt, yards of pink tulle ruffled and gathered by hand, floats around my legs and trails behind me like ethereal wreaths of mist. Because my outfit is so decadently feminine, I've balanced it with fishnets and black combat boots.

Eyes follow me as I make my way through the peace garden in eight steps. I trained in ballet dancing until I moved to England to Spearcrest, so I know how to walk like I'm not bound to the earth by gravity. I know how to make an impression.

I *need* to make an impression tonight.

My plan depends on it.

Cammie finds me as I'm pouring myself a flute of champagne wearing see-through trousers embroidered with hundreds of tiny crystals, vertiginous heels and a black bustier. Her hair is a garment all of its own, draped over a luxurious black cloak on her shoulders. She's already tipsy, and she stumbles into my arms when I see her.

"Well?" she slurs into my ear. "Did you fuck the gardener?"

My mind flies straight to the mystery boy from the greenhouse. How do Cammie and I know about him?

"P—pardon?" I ask, nervous for no reason.

"Mr Morton!" she exclaims with a giggle. "Did you fuck Mr Morton?"

I roll my eyes and push her off me. "Would someone who looks like you ever need to sink so low?"

"Hey, don't come for Mr Morton like that," she half-yells through the music. "He might be a good time, you know." She leans in, almost into me, to whisper-yell into my ear. "I heard poor people fuck hard like rock stars."

Once more, my mind flies back to the boy in the greenhouse—what's his name again? I think about his big hands, broad shoulders, easy smile and calm demeanour. How does someone like him fuck?

Then, from the corner of my eye, I spot a familiar face. I turn and look at him with my gaze. Evan looks like a Calvin Klein model, effo-

graceful gorgeous in a white T-shirt and blue jeans. He pushes the loose blond hair from his forehead in a distracted gesture as he lurches across the grassy gardens.

I try to catch his eye but he's facing slightly away. He's striding with determination, his eyes fixed on a point. I follow the direct line of his gaze and my heart sinks.

She's Standing by a cluster of trees, penniless prefect Sophie Sutton is covered in diamonds, with her little friend, Araminta Wilson-Sing. Araminta isn't poor like me, nameless like Sophie is. She could be one of us if she wished, but I suspect she's a more charitable soul than I am. Why else would anybody spend so much time with someone as boring as Sophie?

Judging from the way Evan is staring at Sophie, she might as well be the most beautiful creature in the world. But when I look at her, all I see is a gangly young woman, with thick dark eyebrows and a serious face wearing a kind of dress someone might wear to an old relative's funeral.

"Maybe Cammie was right about poor people fucking harder than the rich like me. Why else would Evan look at Sophie like that? It's not even like he's attracted to her. If anything, they hate each other.

And yet he's walking towards her like he's being drawn to her by a magnet. It's too good for him to fight. I can't let him get to her. My plan doesn't matter. Sophie Sutton, and that meddling little shit of a prefect will wreck my careful planning and hard work.

Extricating myself from Cammie's embrace, I discard my coat and strength champagne and launch myself across the peace garden. I'm not one to do it's a perfectly vulgar thing to do—but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I run across the glossy lawns and towards Evan, and then all but

and curls myself into his path. He finally tears his gaze away from Sophie, and
settles down at me with some surprise.

“Won’t you dance with me, Evan?” I ask with my most innocently
begging with a siren smile. “It’s my favourite song.”

His gaze, I don’t even know what song is playing right now—I didn’t intend
this. My mouth is on automatic, my brain still catching up as my head
dancing drops slowly back down.

“Uh, I’m busy right now,” he says with a shrug. “Maybe later?”
I suppose this is typical Evan behaviour. He would never be rude to anyone
dependent on Sophie Sutton, but this is still a dismissal. This is his sweet
confrontational way of getting rid of me.

But I know how to handle men. Evan doesn’t know what he was
as a tall, really, but I can show him.

“Oh, you’re busy?” I draw closer, looking up at him through my eyes.
“Anything I can help with?”

If there weren’t so many people around, I’d try something bold
like they don’t want to end up on social media, filmed with the caption “de
socialite grabs star athlete’s dick.”

“Uh, no,” he says distractedly.

Then he has the audacity to side-step me and walk away. Just like
I’ll all my Without another word or a backward glance.

So much for my roses, my tulle, my perfectly made-up face. Am I
a puppet of my touch? Is Evan so desensitised by beauty that he can only be fas-
cinated by run—by buck-toothed girls with big eyebrows and no fashion sense?

Standing in the cold with my hands fisted at my side, I watch
and watch his body language as he speaks to Sophie, the way every part
of her seems to be drawn to her. I watch her too, the way she looks at him

looking those dark eyes of hers, the way she holds his gaze like a challenge, like daring him to fight her. The tension between them, hatred and desire alluringly mingled, is almost unbearable to watch.

But I watch anyway.

I don't say I watch, my stomach churning. My plan failed before it ever started because I never believed Evan and I would end up together, then it's only because I have been blind. I thought Evan was only obsessed with Sophie in that someone might get obsessed with something strong they're desperate for a breakthrough. But Evan isn't obsessed with *breaking* Sophie.

He's not, non- He's obsessed with *having* her.

I don't know why it took me this long to realise when it's so obvious, not now. So where does that leave me?

My father wants me to give in to him, to do exactly what he wants. I will follow the path he's set for my life. But that's all I've done so far. I let him ship me off to England, away from all my friends. I stayed in Spearcross, but I wanted—did *everything* he wanted. I was the perfect daughter. But I'm desperate for it.

This time, I won't relent. He wants a puppet, not a daughter, but I'm determined to cut the strings.

Like that. And Evan would have been the perfect tool to help me do that.

If only he wasn't such an idiot.

I'm losing him. I reach him just as Sophie and Araminta walk away, and he jumps and turns around and finds himself face-to-face with me. But the anger simmering inside me is now bubbling, boiling over.

Evan. I "Really, Evan?" I ask, my voice shaking with anger. "*Her?*"

of him He sighs and his shoulders slump. "I have no idea what you're mad without."

ce she's What a coward. He knows *exactly* what I'm talking about, but if he
sire allme to spell it out, then I will.

“Sophie. Fucking. Sutton.”

He hesitates, his eyes on me. He says nothing—he doesn't even try
ed. If Iit. Probably because we're surrounded by people, and he's being caref
: I mustI'm not.

he way “I'm not even angry,” I lie. “I'm just disappointed. Don't you kn
rate tocould do much better?”

His jaw clenches and his features shift into an expression I've nev
on his face before. Irritation, anger, but something else, too.

s to me Dislike. Raw, naked dislike.

My heartbeat lurches and stutters in my chest.

nts and “If I wanted to hear your opinion on anything, Rose, I'd ask for
let himvoice is hard. “But since you have nothing intelligent or relevant to co
st as heto a conversation, you might as well keep your mouth closed.”

m tired The words coming out of his mouth sound like they've come righ
Sophie's head. Maybe *he's* the puppet and *she's* pulling the strings a
n goingtoo stupid to realise. But if Evan is no longer trying to conceal h
thoughts and feelings, then why should I?

“Don't be so fucking defensive, Evan. It's a bad look.” I laugh an
my hand in a dismissive gesture. He wants to hurt me, but I want to h
when heright back, and I know exactly how to. “Over Sophie Sutton, of all j
umeringJust because she acts stuck up and dresses like she belongs doesn'
she's one of us, or that dating her would be anything more than a
charitable act.”

talking He stares at me, and suddenly, he's not angry anymore, the heat o
replaced by ice-cold calm when he speaks.

e wants “You’re really fucking pathetic, Rose,” he says in a low voice. This is the most genuine I’ve ever heard him. And he’s not done. He continues, looking deep into my eyes. “You might have the prettiest dresses and most expensive makeup, but it doesn’t hide what you really are: some vapid, bratty, jealous fucking baby. Grow the fuck up, yeah?”

And then, for the second time tonight, he simply turns around and walks away from me, from the party, from the peace garden. He doesn’t turn back to cast me one last glance, and this time I’m grateful for that because if he ever seen had, he would have seen me standing there frozen in shock, my eyes brimming with tears.

There’s nothing more embarrassing and classless than crying at a party. Nobody wants to be drunk and witnessing someone else’s breakdown. It’s a bad taste and poor party etiquette. So instead of standing in the middle of the peace garden and crying like an idiot, I run away, making sure I go in the opposite direction to Evan.

He’s the last person I want to see right now.

He’s the last person I want to see ever again.

It’s true



and wave

I RUN UNTIL THE lights and sounds of the party fade into the darkness.

I head to the south of the campus, staying on the smaller paths where I’m

less likely to get caught, creeping in the shadows of colossal trees.

Wiping my tears with the back of my hands, I stop and rest against a tree

trunk for a second. I know I should go back to the party. I should

forget about my sights on another rich boy and wrap myself around him.

s is the It's not like I can't—I've had other Young Kings before. I had
staring aristocratic French playboy Sev Montcroix, and I even had the cold-blooded
pensive Novus heir, Luca Fletcher-Lowe, who tied me to his bed and choked me
ainless, his belt. But just because I didn't like them doesn't mean I couldn't have
them if I'd chosen.

I walk I should do what I always do. Swallow back my emotions and find
around sadness away with someone powerful just because I can.

se if he Except I can't bring myself to. Right now, I don't *want* to go back.

is full of want to see Theodora Dorokhova, perfectly in control of her emotions.

Kayana Kilburn, glittering like a multifaceted gemstone, partying
a party. Careless glee because nothing ever gets to her. I don't want to see the
. It's in Kings—those rich, handsome assholes who think they can do whatever
e of the like just because everybody else is too afraid to challenge them.

o in the And most of all, I would rather throw myself off the top of the clock tower
than see Sophie Sutton in her matronly black dress, not caring a bit what she
looks like and yet still somehow capable of capturing the attention of the
most desirable boy in Spearcrest.

I don't deserve this. Life is too cruel to the beautiful.

I whimper softly in the darkness, letting the tears flow and the sob
my chest. Crying is a catharsis, I remind myself. It's just the body's
ness. I'm less processing negative emotions and releasing toxins. I need to let the
'm less flow through me on its way out. Tomorrow, I'll do my skincare routine,
meditate and detox, and I'll be back to my normal self.

it a tree Taking the long path back to the sixth form girls' building, I use the
set my to let out the tears. My skirt catches on the bushes and thorns from
overgrown path behind the Old Manor, the oldest building on campus.

I sigh. The destruction of my skirt feels appropriate right now—a m

had the for my plan.

flooded I turn the corner and let out a strangled yelp of surprise when a
one with suddenly appears from the shadow of the trees. I stumble back, n
ave had catching on a protruding root. My stomach sinks as I go flailing back
firm hand catches my arm, righting me.

uck the “Oh, it’s you again,” comes a calm, deep voice.

My eyes widen, adjusting to the darkness. I make out details: da
I don’t strong features and a thick frame.

ons, or The boy from the greenhouse.

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for my plan.

I turn the corner and let out a strangled yelp of surprise when a figure suddenly appears from the shadow of the trees. I stumble back, my foot catching on a protruding root. My stomach sinks as I go flailing back, but a firm hand catches my arm, righting me.

“Oh, it’s you again,” comes a calm, deep voice.

My eyes widen, adjusting to the darkness. I make out details: dark hair, strong features and a thick frame.

The boy from the greenhouse.

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

LADY CHATTERLEY FANTAS

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING lurking around in the dark like a creep? my voice shaking from the combined residual fear from first seeing h almost falling.

There are still tears in my eyes, but hopefully, he can't see them darkness. Our only source of light is a distant glow somewhere in th He points towards it.

“I was putting my tools away in the old shed.”

“Oh.”

I know the old shed he's talking about; everybody knows about it.

Whenever anybody new joined in Year 10 or Year 11, they had to : night alone in the old shed. It's a creepy wooden shack in the middle trees, next to the old greenhouse. The roof is full of holes and tangles cover most of its walls. Being a day-one original—a student who st the beginning of Year 7—I never had to spend a night there, but every Spearcrest knows about it.

“Are you alright?” the boy asks suddenly, stepping closer to me.

BY

The question immediately brings tears welling back up in my eyes. I can't even remember the last time someone asked me this question. It's a shame it has to come from this dirt-streaked random.

I narrow my eyes at him, raking him with a dirty look. If he's trying to be some sort of knight in shining armour, it would help if he actually had some shining armour.

"Yes," I snap. "I'm absolutely fantastic, thank you very much."

"Why are you crying, then?"

I step back, startled. My hands fly to my face and I hastily wipe tears from my eyes, hoping my crying hasn't ruined my makeup. This boy is a total dick. I ask, "Why would he check me out when I was wearing next-to-nothing, so why would he check me out when my makeup is streaking and my skirt is all torn up?"

Not that I care about him checking me out—I just don't think my self-esteem could take one more blow today.

I glare at him. "I'm not crying."

"Right," he says, clearly unconvinced. "Well, I have tissues in my car if you need."

There can only be one reason a guy like him could want a girl like me: I go back to his car. Just because I'm a pretty blonde doesn't make me completely stupid, which this guy clearly thinks I am.

"What are you?" I ask, wiping my cheeks. "Some sort of creepy pervert?"

He shrugs. "I was just offering. No need to be a dick."

"I'm not being a dick."

"Alright. Well, I'll leave you to it if that's what you want."

He nods, turns around and trudges away. Is he playing with my feelings? Does he genuinely not care?

"Wait!"

I can't I stand in my spot, waiting for him to turn around and come back. I
s just embarrassed myself by running after one boy tonight—I'm not doing it

Especially not for some townie with a shit job. He stops and turns around
ing to be "You alright?"

Ily had I cast him a haughty look. "I'll take that tissue since you're insisting
He nods. "Come on."

His car is parked in the staff car park near the dining hall.
embarrassment of a car: a battered old thing with a missing hubcap
ne tearsoldest number plate I've ever seen. He opens the passenger door and
7 didn't into the glove compartment for a packet of tissues, which he hands me
e check I take it with a grimace. "Um... thanks."

I pull a tissue out with the tips of my fingernails. His car isn't even
ly self-dirty inside, but everything about this guy feels rough and messy. I d
eyes and watch him as he loads his things into the boot of his car. Wh
done, he slams it shut and comes to stand next to me, leaning against
7 car, if and crossing his arms, his biceps bulging underneath the fabric of his T

"Feeling better?" he asks.

e me to "Do I look like I do?"

an I'm "You look like you need a cup of tea and a big hug."

I open my mouth to make a biting reply, but my mouth remains wo
vert?" open. His suggestion is so stupid, so off-puttingly British—as if a cup
could fix any of the problems I'm dealing with—but for some reason,
put off.

For some reason, the idea of a cup of tea and a big hug sounds pret
head or right now.

Tears well up in my eyes.

"Oh," he says, looking surprised. "Hey, I didn't mean to upset you r

already “Just stop talking.” I wince. “You’re making me feel worse.”
t again. He nods and stops talking. I look up at him. His expression is ca
nd. there’s a shadow of pity lurking in his eyes. As if a guy like him cou
feel pity for a girl like me. I want to glare at him—I want to slap him
.” his stupid face.

Instead, the biggest sob swells in my chest and bursts like a bubb
It’s anout a whimper and melt into tears.
and the He says nothing. Stepping into me, he wraps his arms around me an
reaches me into his chest.

. He’s warm.

He’s so warm, and his chest and shoulders and arms are big, wrap
all that up in a firm yet tender embrace. I bury my face in the dip betw
aub my shoulder and chest; he smells of damp earth, cheap cologne and l
en he’s detergent.

his car I cry with abandon, the way I haven’t cried in a long time. At Spe
Γ-shirt. it’s hard to find the privacy to cry properly, because crying is a private
Like hair removal or masturbation, it’s something everybody does yet
be considered completely vulgar to do in front of anybody else.

This boy, though, doesn’t seem to care. He holds me, one hand rub
rdlessly and down my back, tracing the curve of my spine. When my sobs
p of tea calm, he gently peels my face away from his shoulder. He pushes
I’m not strands of hair plastering my face aside, tucking the sodden strands
my ears. Then he swipes my cheeks with his thumbs, drying them. I l
ty good closing my eyes, soothed by his gentleness. I can’t remember the las
cried in front of someone—I can’t remember ever being comforted like
Nobody’s ever wiped my tears away for me.

more.” When my sobs finally subside with a deep, shuddering sigh, he look

at me with a small smile.

Im, but “Feeling better, yeah?”

ld ever Is he being smug? What if he thinks he’s got one on me now that he
i acrossme cry? Does he think I’m going to melt at his feet now? I pull away.

“Yes, thanks. You’ve fixed *all* my problems.”

le. I let He sighs. “Alright. No need to be rude.”

“Well, what do you expect me to do? Fall in love with you?”

ld pulls “A simple thanks would probably do.”

I throw him a dirty look. But since I always try to treat staff politely
works for Spearcrest, I suppose thanking him is the least I can do.

ing me “Thank you.”

een his “You’re welcome.”

laundry He points at his car. “I’m gonna head off.”

I look at his car, at him, and then over my shoulder at the dar
arcrest,surrounding the car park.

e affair. “I need to go back to the sixth form girls’ building,” I say.

t would “Right,” he says.

“It’s very dark,” I add, piercing him with a pointed look.

bing up He lets out a low laugh. “Do you want me to walk you back?”

finally “You’re the one who brought me here in this creepy car park. See
the wetleast you can do.”

behind “If you say so.”

let him, I glare at him but he doesn’t see it. He closes and locks his car, a
t time lleads me away from the car park. His hand rests lightly on my bac
e this. walks me through the trees and back to the main path. His touch is wa

Once we’re walking in the bronze glow of the old lampposts lin
s downpath, I can see him much more clearly. He has a strong jaw and a prett

aside for the slight bump I noticed earlier. He has dark beauty spots on his mouth and on his neck. His muscles are thick. He's wearing a T-shirt and a quilted gilet over it, but he doesn't seem cold. There's dirt smeared on his trousers and arms. My tears form a wet patch on both his T-shirt and

There's something about him I can't quite understand. So fascinating and earthy and disconcerting.

Is this how all the Lady Chatterleys of Victorian times felt when faced with their calm, unconcerned social inferiors? What is it about dirt-streaked trousers and a that makes rich women so flustered?

Maybe it's just because the rich women know society would not approve. The simple appeal of the forbidden fruit. Maybe the rich women want to have something they're not supposed to.

Maybe they just want to anger their fathers.

Because what could possibly anger a rich father more than see his precious daughter in the dirty hands of some working-class nobody's part-time gardener with—I'm guessing—no education, no pedigree, no prospects?

That would anger any rich father.

Especially mine.

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aside for the slight bump I noticed earlier. He has dark beauty spots near his mouth and on his neck. His muscles are thick. He's wearing a T-shirt with a quilted gilet over it, but he doesn't seem cold. There's dirt smeared all over his trousers and arms. My tears form a wet patch on both his T-shirt and gilet.

There's something about him I can't quite understand. Something fascinating and earthy and disconcerting.

Is this how all the Lady Chatterleys of Victorian times felt when faced with their calm, unconcerned social inferiors? What is it about dirt-streaked men that makes rich women so flustered?

Maybe it's just because the rich women know society would never approve. The simple appeal of the forbidden fruit. Maybe the rich women just want to have something they're not supposed to.

Maybe they just want to anger their fathers.

Because what could possibly anger a rich father more than seeing his precious daughter in the dirty hands of some working-class nobody? Some part-time gardener with—I'm guessing—no education, pedigree or prospects?

That would anger any rich father.

Especially mine.

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

HAUTE HOOK UP

BY THE TIME WE arrive outside the sixth form girls' building, my hair has dried and I have a brand new plan.

We stop at the foot of the steps, and I turn to face my silent companion. His hand drops away from my back where it had been lightly resting, behind the cold vacuum of his touch.

Before he can dismiss himself with a blunt goodbye, I ask him, “your name?”

He doesn't point out that I'd already asked him his name when I found him in the greenhouse; he doesn't seem to care that I've forgotten. With a little shrug, he says, “Noah. Noah Watson.”

I wave him off. “Well, thank you again, Noah. I'm sorry I don't have any change to tip you.”

Instead of giving me the satisfaction of looking offended, he merely turns away with a gruff, “Don't worry about it.”

So he would have taken money if I'd offered it to him.

I suppose if there's one thing poor people would never turn down is money. Good to know.

“Wait!” I command before he can walk away. I stick my hand out. “Give me your phone, Noah.”

He turns, pulls his phone from his pocket and hands it to me. I ask a question. It’s an old iPhone with a crack spider-webbing one edge. I run my finger across the screen—his phone isn’t even locked. His wallpaper is a picture of a pair of white boxing gloves.

How cliché.

I type my number into his phone and call it. After a couple of rings, he picks up and save my number. Without thinking, I put my name into his phone. I cry tears “Seraphina” even though nobody’s called me that in years, and even though I hate it when people call me that.

My companion. But I write Seraphina, and the red rose emoji, and press save.

leaving “Text me,” I tell him, handing him his phone back.

What’s He takes it with a slight frown. His serious expression reminds me annoyingly, of Sophie Sutton’s. Is this a poor people thing, always like there’s a problem they need to solve?

irst saw “Text you what?” he asks bluntly.

With a If he wants to be blunt, I can be blunt too. “Text me to ask me out.”

“What—on a date?”

’t have I raise my eyebrows at him. “As opposed to what?”

He shrugs. “I dunno. A hook up?”

ords and For a second, I’m too speechless to say anything. It’s not what I originally had in mind, and although hook-ups are a common aspect of dating in Spearcrest, nobody is ever this direct about it. We go out; sneak out; we love—we even fuck. But we never outright ask each other to hook up. It’s crass, vulgar, a little trashy...

It’s perfect.

it, palm “Yes,” I say boldly, stepping closer to him. “Fine, a hook up. Why r
He’s quiet for a second, staring down at me. He has nice eyes
without almost blue, with a darker outer ring. I realise, standing quite close
I swipenow, that he’s also bigger than I thought. Not as tall as Evan, for ex
per is abut *big*. Thick arms, thick neck, thick chest. There’s faint bruising r
jaw, and the bump in his nose is definitely from being broken.

He doesn’t seem to mind my searching gaze. He lets me look at hi
, I hangbit, and then he finally speaks.

hone as “Look,” he says, sounding reasonable even though this entire conv
hough Iis essentially little more than a fever dream. “You go here, right? Y
Spearcrest kid?”

A Spearcrest kid? I could slap him if I wasn’t certain slapping him
have about as much impact as slapping a marble statue.

ds me, “I’m in Year 13,” I clarify, throwing my hair over one shoulder.

looking “Right,” he says, “yeah. So I’m guessing you’re, what? A trust fur
—rich mummy and daddy?”

My daddy is a bit more than rich. He’s the kind of rich that mak
people stand up when he enters a room. But if I say that, I have a feel
it will only confirm whatever point he’s winding up to.

“I don’t have a problem with rich kids,” Noah says—how magnanir
him!—“but girls like you don’t hook up with guys like me.”

iginally Girls like me? I cross my arms and tilt an eyebrow.

here at “You’ve never met a girl like me.”

t; make He sighs, then lifts one hand to rub at his jaw thoughtfully. My eye
up. It’s his hands, and I resist the urge to bite my lip. He has nice hands, too
big hands, with short fingernails—surprisingly clean for a garden
prominent veins. His knuckles are a little bruised up.

not?” He thinks for a moment. Then, to my surprise, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone, swiping the cracked screen. “Alright, then. What do you want to do?”

I blink. “Do what?”

“Whatever you want to do. Hang out.” He tilts his head a little to the side, catching my eyes. “Hook up.”

There’s a quickening in my chest because before, this was just a possibility, now, it’s very much crystallising into reality. I thought if I gave him a chance to text him it would put him on the back foot, keep me in a position of power, but now he’s calling my bluff I’m the one on the back foot.

Now. This was my plan, right? It’s just going better than I anticipated. Given how disastrously my previous plan failed, I didn’t expect this to go so smoothly. Noah doesn’t seem to be interested in playing games or complicating things.

“You actually want to hook up?” I ask, just to make sure there are no misunderstandings between us.

He shrugs. “Yeah. Why not?”

Why not? It’s not exactly a passionate declaration of love—or lust—like how normal people date? This complete and utter lack of game-plan is throwing me off. If anything, this feels like it’s a game beyond a game on a level I’ve never experienced before.

I want to ask if he likes me, if he thinks I’m pretty, if he likes my clothes, if he wants to see me naked—but it would be too embarrassing to ask any of that. I want to ask him what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling, but I’m not sure. Nice, sure he’s feeling or thinking anything. And if I ask him why he wants to hook up—and up, he might return the question, and I don’t want him to know he’s messing with me—then I’ll have to get my trust fund back.

pocket The most important thing is to keep my cool.

When do Just because I've never done something like this without someone I doesn't mean I should allow myself to get flustered.

Besides, he seems pretty calm and collected, and I refuse to be less than the side, and collected than a gardener working part-time jobs to fund his wedding. That would be even more embarrassing than Evan's obsession with Sophie Sutton. Because at least Sophie goes to Spearcross, and she's smart enough to end up in a top university.

in control of This guy is not Sophie Sutton—and I'm not Evan. I'm going to be in control.

anticipated. "Alright," I say, throwing on my airy voice like a disguise. "What are you going to do tomorrow?"

or over- "I can't do tomorrow," he says, waving a hand. "I'm working."

"What about the evening?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

are no "I've got training."

I frown. "Training? What do you do?"

"Boxing."

. Is this I glance down at his hands, at the bruised knuckles. His phone was lying in his big arms, his broken nose and the faint bruising on his cheek made no sense now.

A boxer. That's so rough.

outfit, if My father is going to hate that.

any of "Fine," I say, even though I want to ask him a hundred questions. "Not even are you free, then?"

to hook He flicks through his phone. "Mm... Thursday evenings I'm free for ticket training. Town is going to be dead, but you can come mine if you like."

Everything is happening so fast I'm reeling. Thursday is a school day.

I'd have to sneak out, but there are plenty of ways to do that. How
like him make my way to his? I could book a taxi to pick me up on the main road
take me to his.

stay calm *His.*

mom's I've never been to someone's house. Definitely not like this. Definitely
weird with someone like him.

best, and "Alright," I say with a dismissive gesture. "Thursday's fine."

"Great."

the one My knees have turned to jelly, and my heartbeat is a chaotic, erratic
adrenaline pumping through me. I turn around with a casual wave
and you elegantly climb the steps to the girls' dorm. Once I'm inside and the door
firmly closed behind me, I clap my hands against my mouth, realizing
crashing down on me.

Have I just arranged to hook up with a gardener I only met earlier today?

Yes, I have. I smirk into the shadowy corridor. How's *that* for going
daddy?

the paper,

are all

"When

the after

"

night—

I'd have to sneak out, but there are plenty of ways to do that. How will I make my way to his? I could book a taxi to pick me up on the main road and take me to his.

His.

I've never been to someone's house. Definitely not like this. Definitely not with someone like him.

"Alright," I say with a dismissive gesture. "Thursday's fine."

"Great."

My knees have turned to jelly, and my heartbeat is a chaotic, erratic mess, adrenaline pumping through me. I turn around with a casual wave, and elegantly climb the steps to the girls' dorm. Once I'm inside and the door is firmly closed behind me, I clap my hands against my mouth, realisation crashing down on me.

Have I just arranged to hook up with a gardener I only met earlier today?

Yes, I have. I smirk into the shadowy corridor. How's *that* for going low, daddy?

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

UPMARKET NUDE

ONCE I'M BACK IN my room and able to process what happened, I'm feeling pretty good about it. If my father finds out that I'm sleeping with some manual labourer townie, he's going to go apeshit. I'm sure he can think of a worse fate for his daughter than this.

I just need to make sure he finds out.

And what better occasion for that than to bring my brand new lover to the Siddal Gallery Gala?

All I need to do is have Noah wrapped around my little finger enough so he'll agree to do with me. All I need to do now is to get him there—my plan will unfold naturally once my father gets there.

The mere anticipation of his anger is going to fuel my motivation then.

For now, I need to focus on Thursday. It's less than a week and I probably won't see the townie—Noah, I remind myself, his name is I don't know again until then, since he said he only works at Spearcrest on weekends.

In the meantime, I need to make sure I'm out of sight, but not out of mind. This way, I don't run the chance of him cancelling our plans.

Taking off my flower-embellished corset is an ordeal, but once I manage to pull the hooks loose and unlace the thin silk camisole underneath it, I'm completely unhappy with the result. I open my camera and hold my phone up, framing the image so my face isn't quite showing, and snap a picture.

The image is aesthetically pleasing and sensual. A corset corner, silk roses and scattered petals. Small breasts and pink nipples.

This isn't just a nude. This is art, eroticism softened by composition.

Without even bothering to save Noah's number, I send him the picture as a strategic move: a tasteful, artistic nude that will ensure he doesn't end up talking about me until Thursday. Besides, it'll give him something to look forward to. I can't

To my complete and utter annoyance, I receive no reply. The double-tick to tell me he's even seen the picture, but I know plenty of upper-class who turn their read receipts off. That's something I would normally consider a red flag, but I suppose the whole point of this poor-boy-lover endeavor is that Noah is one big red flag.

A flag red enough to draw my father's attention, and teach him he has more control over me than he thinks.

Tossing the corset and roses off the bed, I strip the rest of my outfit and get ready for sleep. It might have failed to capture Evan's attention, but at least the outfit wasn't a complete waste.

I just hope that naughty selfie was enough to fluster stoic Noah—

asleep hoping it does.



WAKE UP, a little groggy and blinking blearily in the n
I'm not sunlight, I roll over and open my phone. Notifications flood my scree
phone of them flurries of drunken texts and voicemails from Cammie. Fina
re. notification catches my eye.

A text from an unsaved number. I open it.

Unknown: Looks good.

Not the reply I expected. "Good" is not the word I would use to d
my pretty breasts in that artfully composed shot. I can think of a plet
ure. It's other adjectives he might have gone for—other responses with more e
t forget opinions.

But I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything different. It's not
like I chose him for his brilliant intellect and scintillating conve
re's no anyway. At least he didn't send me a couple of eggplant emojis.

I close my eyes. His text might have been underwhelming, but it
consider stop me from imagining how he might have reacted when he saw my s
avour is Did he like it? Did he stare at it, bite his lip? Did he grow hard loc
it? Did he picture his big hands parting the satin fabric and brushin
has less petals to squeeze my delicate breasts, fingers scraping the pink nipples
rush of arousal shudders between my legs and I squirm under the blar
it off to a shiver of mixed pleasure and embarrassment.

The door opens and the smell of coffee wafts in. I scramble up righ
flying open, heart beating like I've just been caught with my hand b
1. I fall my legs.

Cammie strolls into the room, carrying two cups of coffee. The c
spent hours shaping her hair into last night have transformed into a
tangles, and her eyeshadow is now two bright purple smears across h

morning The fact she hasn't cleaned her face tells me she didn't go back to her room, most last night.

lly, one At least she had a better time than I did.

“Fuck, that was a crazy night,” she groans, handing me a cup of coffee.

I take it gratefully, sitting back against my piled pillows like a complacent patient. “Thank you, baby.”

describe She puts her coffee on my bedside table and climbs into bed next to me. “I’m never drinking again.”

loquent “You say this every time.”

She groans. “I mean it this time. I ended up playing spin the bottle with Year 12s. Year 12s, Rose!” She buries her face in her hands and sobs through her fingers. “I made out with, like, three different Year 12 boys.”

“Shit,” I say, trying to hide my laughter behind one hand. “At least they probably won’t remember, right?”

elfie. “Um, quite the opposite, actually. I doubt they’ll ever forget getting me to make out with one of the hottest girls in Year 13.” She narrows her eyes at me. “Where did you disappear off to, anyway? Last I saw you, you were on your way to Evan. Then nobody saw either of you for the rest of the semester. Did you finally make it happen?”

I groan. “No. Evan is a waste of my time, anyway. He’s always been a waste of my time.” “Oh.” Cammie blinks. “What about your plan, then?”

etween “I have another plan now.” Sitting straighter, I smirk at her. “You know what my plan is, actually.”

urls we She frowns. “What plan?”

ernet of I open my phone and brandish it in her direction. She props herself up on her elbows and narrows her eyes to peer at the screen. “Is that a picture of your tits?”

“Mm-hm.”

er room Camille lowers her voice. “Oh my god. Did you send it to Evan?”

I shake my head. “Not even!” I lower my voice too—I don’t know we’re whispering, since we’re alone in the room. “I sent it to some guy I bumped into last time in the greenhouse.”

ospital “A garde—what?” Camille gives me a look of unutterable stupefaction if I just told her I was abducted and impregnated by aliens. “A garde to me. How do you even have his number? I don’t understand. You’ve sent a picture of your tits to Mr Morton?”

“No, obviously not—Jesus!” I gesture, flapping my hands. “The other guy with another guy in the greenhouse. He works part-time as a garde on weekends, apparently. I bumped into him when I was leaving the party last night. His number—can you think how mad my dad would be if he thought I was dating some random guy who does part-time gardening? Anyway, so I sent him a picture of my tits.”

“I mean... that’s better than Mr Morton.” Camille pulls a face. “I mean, Rose, I mean come on. The help? Really?”

Heat rushes to my face. After all the shit I’ve been talking about in the night. Sutton, I sort of deserve to be judged for sending pictures of my brother and his townies working part-time jobs to make ends meet and fund their wedding.

But not by Cammie. I glare at her. “You’re the one who said it would really piss my father off if I fucked a gardener.”

She gives me an unimpressed look. “And *you*’re the one who said I have to be desperate to fuck the help.”

“Well, my dad cut me off from my trust fund. If that’s not desperate, then what is?”

Cammie nods, her face softening in sympathy. She glances at the picture

my hand, then leans forward, lowering her voice.

Why? “What’s your agenda, then?” She waggles her eyebrows. “You’re going to fuck Mr Morton?”

“I’m not going to fuck Mr Morton, Cammie, ew.” I give her a sneaky grin, and then admit, “I’m going to his house on Thursday, though.”

“What?” Her voice rises to a piercing scream of shock.

“Don’t overreact,” I snap.

“Overreact? Um, have you ever heard of *stranger danger*? Of kidnappers, rapists, stalkers and serial killers? You’re going to his house? Alone? You’re the only daughter of Robert Rosenthal—your dad doesn’t even let you go anywhere in New York without a security detail, and you’re going to a random gardener’s house—*alone*?”

I shrug. “Well, it’ll get Daddy’s attention, won’t it?”

“Do you know what will get his attention?” Cammie exclaims, eyes wide. “The news report when they find your dead body in some ditch!”

“He’s a part-time gardener,” I laugh, “not a serial killer.”

“You won’t know until you’re naked with a knife to the throat,” Cammie whispers darkly.

“Please.” I roll my eyes. “I’m going to Noah’s house, not Luca Fazio’s hotel room.”

We both shudder. Finally, Cammie sighs. “Well, you better send me the location. And take my mace with you. Jesus, you really are desperate.”

“I am,” I say. Then I throw back my long hair over my shoulders and give her my sweetest smile. “Cheer up. It might not be so bad. After all, Cammie, you’re the one who told me that poor people fuck harder than rock stars in a hono-

going to

my look,

nappers

I're the

you go

o some

s wide.

Sammie

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nd give

ammie,

s.”

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

VILLAIN VIBES

I STAND IN THE middle of a city street, in the rain, in my Al McQueen coat, and wonder if I'm the victim of a cruel prank.

Darkness and rain obscure the concrete block of buildings in front stifling the flickering lights of nearby lampposts. I've been pressing intercom button for the past five minutes at least, to no result.

As if I wasn't already nervous enough coming here. What if Camn right? What if I was fooled by Noah's bone structure and warm en What if he actually is a serial killer, and I've fallen right into his trap?

Sheltered—barely—by the doorway, I take my phone out of my and check the address for the tenth time. I'm definitely at the address sent me—the one I sent to Cammie with instructions to call the police doesn't hear back from me. I checked with the taxi driver and I checked location (which I also sent to my best friend in the US, just in case the police fail to find me and the FBI has to get involved).

This is the right address—so why is nobody answering?

“Hey!”

I'm so startled I almost drop my phone. Whipping around, I turn to see a dark, bulky figure running down the pathway from the busy street. The rain is falling so thickly that I can't make out the figure straightaway. I whip my hand around the small, sparkly mace in my coat pocket. I'm a Rose and I'm *not* going down without a fight.

Then the figure draws closer to reveal a pale, concerned face under a mop of sodden hair.

"Shit, I'm so sorry!" Noah runs the rest of the way and hastily types into the keypad and the door clicks open with a tinny noise. He pushes the door open with one arm but gestures me through, letting me go in before I can think of anything. "Thought I'd be back in time, but the coach kept us running laps because someone left their wraps on the gym floor—" He spots my look of rising icy fury and blank confusion. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. Sorry you wait."

He leads me up a set of concrete stairs (apparently poor people don't have elevators?) and down a white corridor with grey tiles. It's barren and cold but at least it's clean. I repress the urge to stand close to him and bask in his body heat while he fishes in his pocket for his keys. Luckily, warm air fills the room as the moment we walk into his flat.

Once we're inside, Noah dumps his enormous training bag and takes my coat. I stiffly shrug it off and watch as he places it on a coat rack above a small, noisy radiator. He probably has no idea this coat is priceless. It's worth more than everything in this apartment put together.

I follow him through the small corridor and into the flat. It's not what I pictured it somehow—I'm not sure what I pictured exactly. I guess I pictured it sort of like the student dorms at Spearcrest.

Instead, it looks... well.

to see a It looks like someone poor lives there.

rain is It's a studio flat, for one—but not like a New York loft. More I rap myroom with everything crammed inside of it: the kitchen, the bed, th nthal—The walls are white, the threadbare carpet is grey, and the furn: mismatched.

er dark, In one corner, there is a small sofa in front of a tiny TV set. Next t some boxy shelves crammed with big tubs of protein powder, paperba s a codeshoe boxes. In the kitchen area (I couldn't bring myself to think of tl ashes itcorner as an actual kitchen), bowls and glasses are drying on a metall him. "The windows are wet with condensation.

because As for the bedroom... It's just a mattress on what seems to be some ntingledbox with drawers in it. The covers are a little rumpled, and some clot I madetossed on a chair at the foot of the bed.

Normally, I would be put off by how ugly my surroundings are, but on't dofeel put off. Instead, I feel a sense of curiosity and excitement, d ugly,explorer. I want to peel open the box of Noah's life and rifle thro e in hiscontents for information. I want to open cupboards and look at all his r greetsRoot through the shoe boxes to see what they contain, flip through the

What do poor people own? What do they read?

urns to I'm surprised they read at all.

hanger Noah doesn't seem concerned about my impressions of his robablycondition. He doesn't seem ashamed of the way he lives—but then I s

it's not like he would know any different. He heads into the kitchen, t how Iplastic kettle with tap water and turns it on. Looking over his shoul icturedraises an eyebrow at me.

"Aren't you cold in... *that*?"

He gestures vaguely at my outfit.

That is an outfit which took me hours of planning, curating and like one *That* is a cropped satin bustier with puffed sleeves, high-waisted trousers with embroidery I stitched myself down the sides, and vintage Gabbana gilded gold heels. My long blonde hair is lightly waved and gathered in a ribbon of blue satin, and necklaces of gold and pearls complete the look.

I could be freezing to my literal death in this outfit and it would be worth it.

I wave a hand at Noah. “Don’t be silly.”

“Alright. I can lend you a jumper if you need.”

“Maybe,” I say—not because I have any intention of ruining my outfit, but because I don’t hate the thought of leaving him with a trophy of some kind.

He smiles and points at the kettle. “I need to go shower, but I can make you a cup of tea if you like?”

Brits in their tea. Ugh. That’s not my main concern, though. I know that when he disappears to shower, it would give me the perfect opportunity to look around, but equally, I don’t want to risk the potential soul-crushing embarrassment of being caught snooping around. So I say, “Yes, that’s fine. Can I look around?”

“What, at my flat?” He seems a little taken aback. He looks surprised.

“Then I can look?”

“I mean, yeah, alright. It’s pretty boring, though. I’ve only been here a year.”

“Where did you live before?” I ask, following him as he makes his way back to the corridor.

styling. “I lived with my mum in Fernwell.”

velvet “Right.”

e Dolce He opens the door to a small bathroom and stops just as I’m a
nd halffollow him, his hand on my shoulder. I look up at him.

omplete “I’m going to shower.” He gives me a pointed look. “Unless you
stay for that.” He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head with a slight
still be“Or join me.”

I swallow, suddenly a little more flustered than I should be, and sh
head. “I just want to look around.”

“Then go look around,” he says with a half-smile.

fit with Noah’s smile suits him. It makes a crease appear in his right cheek
is placelittle too deep to be a dimple, and it brightens the autumnal grey of his

Spearcrest boys don’t smile—they smirk and sneer and grin. Eve
n makethey do is calculated to give them the appearance of control and sup
over everyone around them. They think smiling will make them look v

f Noah But Noah’s smile doesn’t make him look weak.

o snoop It makes him look like I want him to kiss me.

rushing He waves. “Right. Have fun looking at my boring stuff, then. See y
:’s fine.sec.”

He closes the bathroom door behind him. I don’t know why, but
around,something attractive about the fact he doesn’t seem to have any urge
things private or hidden from me.

The men I normally sleep with are all about protecting their priva
here attheir self-image. Even casual dating comes with its own set of bour
you can text but never call, you can post pictures but never tag them; y
his waygo to their hotel rooms but never to their homes.

Noah has me in the heart of his home, and yet he doesn’t seem to

all about his privacy. I suppose he set a boundary by not letting me
him into the bathroom, but even then, he's not forbidden me to go i
bout tofrom the sound of it, he hasn't even bothered to lock the bathroom doo

The fact he doesn't seem at all protective of his personal space fe
want to don't even know. Sexy in a way I can't explain. Like his life is a t
t smile. chest he's opened for me, and I just get to plunder those treasures as I

With a little shiver of excitement, I go back into the main room.
ake my small chest of drawers near his bed. It's covered with bottles of body
shampoo, deodorant and sprays. Next to it is a wardrobe with a hoodi
over one door.

that's a Against the wall, there's a yoga mat with an assortment of e
eyes. equipment—weights, jump-ropes, ab-rollers—and a massive gym bag
rything full of creased, peeling boxing gloves. So he wasn't lying about his bo
eriority I open his drawers and peer inside. Boxers, socks, white T-shirts a
weak. tops, shorts, sweatpants. A black baseball cap hangs from the corner
drawer. Like the rest of his flat, his drawers are pretty tidy. I pick up hi
—no brand, just a standard aftershave with a neutral name, Deep Ic
you in aspritz the air with it.

It smells like Noah.

there's I spray my wrist, mixing his scent with my trademark Chanel N
to keep perch myself gingerly on the edge of his bed. The mattress is firm. I br
hand over the rumpled duvet. It's soft and cool. I lie back on the b
acy and then I roll over, burying my face in the duvet. It smells like deterg
ndaries: Noah's spray.

you can I would never have guessed someone so poor, who works so hard
smell this good.

care at Face still buried in the blanket, I close my eyes. What would it be

follows sleep in his bed? I've never really slept in a boy's bed before. I've
in. And hotel rooms—some of the most luxurious hotel rooms in the world—
r. I snuck into Luca's dorm room once, briefly.

els... I But this isn't some hotel or dorm bed. This is a *real* bed—a real p
reasurereal bed. Noah sleeps in it every night. He dreams in it, and m
wish. I probably—even touches himself.

, to the I squeeze my thighs together. This train of thought is turning me o
y wash, than it should. I toy with the idea of taking off my clothes and waiting
e slung on Noah's bed just to see what he'll do. But I must have used up
courage just getting here—I have none left.

exercise With a sigh, I stand and continue snooping. The bedside table gives
stuffed couple of old paperbacks (a mystery, an autobiography by some
xing. fighter), a broken watch, some packets of chewing gum and a gumshi
nd tank little plastic case.

of one Despite Cammie's fears about Noah turning out to be a secret seria
is spray it's pretty obvious Noah has nothing to hide. He didn't lie about boxin
e—and evidence is everywhere: old boxing gloves, rolled-up wraps, training g
coiled jump ropes. He seems pretty tidy, his clothes are plain and unb
It's easy to tell how little money he has just from the quality of the s
°5, and downs and the size of his tiny flat, but he's not living in complete
ush my either.

ed, and My stomach squirms uncomfortably, and I have a sudden sinking fe
ent and came here to seduce Noah because it's going to drive my father c
know I'm having sex with some broke, trashy guy. But Noah isn'
l, could broke, trashy guy. He's just a normal person, working hard and living l

So what does that make me? The shallow rich girl who judged h
like to came here just to use him? The spoilt, petty princess who's taking adv

slept in of the honest working-class hero?

—and I I've always thought of myself as the heroine of the story, but right
don't feel like that at all. Right now, I just feel like the villain.

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of the honest working-class hero?

I've always thought of myself as the heroine of the story, but right now, I don't feel like that at all. Right now, I just feel like the villain.

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

SOB STORY

BY THE TIME NOAH emerges from his shower, I'm sitting in his room (if you can call it that), debating what to do.

Part of me wants to leave before I do anything I'll regret. Part of me feels guilty for being here at all. Part of me wants to carry on with the plan I know it'll succeed. And part of me just wants to stay out of pure curiosity.

Noah comes into the living room wearing grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt. His T-shirt is baggy, but not enough to hide the thick muscles on his arms and chest. His hair is still wet, his skin is clear and shiny, and a towel is draped around his neck. There's a new bruise on his face I didn't see earlier, a little smear of bright purple near his left eye, and a scratch on his jaw.

He looks quite hot. Well—I guess I'm staying now.

Oblivious to the effect his appearance has on me, Noah ambles into the kitchen and calls out to me, "Tea or coffee?"

I stand from the couch and go to him, propping my elbows on the counter that separates the kitchen from the living room. "Do you have wine?"

“Uh, no,” he says. “I don’t really drink.”

My mouth drops open. “You don’t?”

He shakes his head. “Not really, no. I’ll have a beer every once in while with mates, and I’ll drink at my mum’s wedding this summer, but after that I’ll be training to compete.”

“Oh.” I’ve never met anyone this young who didn’t drink. Even Sutton drinks, for God’s sake. I stare at him. “You’re not allowed to drink while you train?”

“It’s not good for you,” he says. “Messes with your weight, too. So I’ll have coffee? I have orange juice if you want.”

“Orange juice?” I raise an unimpressed eyebrow. “I’m not a five-year-old.”

He lets out a low laugh. “Alright. No orange juice.”

I gesture at him. “Coffee will do.”

“Milk? Sugar?”

Noah doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who’ll have almond milk in his fridge, so I shake my head. “Just sugar, please.”

He nods. “Instant alright?”

“Um, sure,” I say, suppressing a wince. “I’ve never had instant coffee before.”

He gives a short laugh, dimples forming in his cheeks, their darkness contrasting with his strong bone structure.

“Yea,” he says, “I forgot you’re rich.”

I’m not sure how he forgot, given I’m wearing vintage runway Dolce & Gabbana. But then again, I strongly suspect Noah might not even have a coffee counter of Dolce & Gabbana.

That’s fine though. This is all part of the experience. It’s not like I’m here expecting anything else, after all.

I watch him as he makes the coffee. The tiny spoon in his big heaping brown nuggets into a cup, pouring water from the kettle. I have a while intention of drinking whatever disgusting concoction he's just created, but he isn't making a move yet, and I'm nervous to do so myself.

Sophie “What happened to your nose?” I ask suddenly, gesturing at his face. “It looks like you broke it.”

“I did,” he says. “I got mugged when I was fifteen.”

“Oh.” My heart sinks a little at the thought. “You did?”

He takes both cups and leads us away from his kitchen and toward the old brown couch, talking as we sit down.

“Yea. I was coming home from training and these guys stopped me and asked for my stuff. I'd been boxing for a couple of years by then, so I thought I could take them. Turns out I couldn't.” He gives a little rueful smile. “I was in a fight with five guys at the same time isn't as easy as it looks in the movies. Anyway. They broke my nose and took my stuff.”

“That's awful.”

I stare at him, wide-eyed, my heart beating a little faster.

My thoughts are a jumble: I want to strangle the guys who beat him and I'm impressed he told me this story even though it's quite embarrassing. I also admire the humbleness with which he admitted he overestimated his ability to fight at fifteen. I want to hold him and comfort him and I want to kiss the bump in his broken nose.

Okay, not just the bump on his nose. I want to kiss the rest of him. I really want to kiss his mouth. And if you think about it, isn't that what I came here to do? Kissing isn't the actual plan, but it's plan-adjacent.

And anyway, why *shouldn't* I kiss him? Why isn't he kissing me?

g hand, not a lot of distance between us on the couch. I'm within arm's reach
ave no He could just grab me and pull me to him, so why isn't he doing it?
ated. I "It's only a broken nose," he's saying with his customary calm,
I'm too oblivious to the direction my thoughts have taken. "It's fine now."

Silence falls as I gather myself. I lick my lips, peering nervously
ace. "It What would I need to do to get him to make a move? What if he's too
do so? He doesn't seem to have the sort of confidence Spearcrest boys
with girls, that uncanny ability to claim a girl just because they
they're entitled to her.

ards the What if Noah is waiting for *me* to make a move?

I'm a Spearcrest girl; I'm used to boys approaching me. Being cor
e. They a party, or having a guy put his hand on my thigh in the back of a lin
thought never had to approach a guy before. I've never had to ask a guy to
"Turns move. They just did.

movies. Impatience and annoyance simmer through me, making me shift res
I didn't come here for a spot of poverty safari. I know girls who do tha
not those girls. I came here with a plan, and I won't allow yet another
go up in flames.

aim up, "Well?" I end up bursting out. "Did you not invite me over so we ca
rassing up?"

ated his "Yeah," he says. He doesn't even seem surprised by my sudden outl
kiss the annoyed that I'm moving on so swiftly from his sad story. "I thoug
might prefer making the first move."

l, too. I "What? Why?"

I came He shrugs. "It was you who approached me first? Asked me to h
Sent me that picture?"

There's When listed like that, it sounds pretty incriminating. "Oh."

of him. “You seem like a girl who knows what she wants, so I thought you prefer to be in control.”

clearly The thought of letting me be in control doesn’t seem to faze him, and that somehow makes him more intimidating than every powerful, domineering man I’ve ever slept with.

so shy to “Well, what do you expect me to do?” I glare at him. “Just start making a move with you?”

believe “Yeah.” He sits up. He’s not smiling, but there’s a sort of quiet intensity in his eyes that sends a shiver through me. “Why not? You scared?”

A mad momentum moves me forward, like when you’re running a race and realise you can no longer stop. I climb onto his lap, balancing myself with my hands around his neck as I straddle him. His hands immediately move to my waist, his fingers on the exposed skin between my bust and the high waistband of my velvet trousers. He pulls me closer. We’re looking at each other face-to-face, with mine a little higher than his.

at—I’m For a second, we just stare at each other.

plan to My heart is in my throat, making it harder to breathe. I’m so nervous my skin tingles as if there’s electricity trapped underneath it.

an hook Noah reaches up to brush a long strand of blond hair from my forehead. His fingers tickle the skin of my neck, then his hand falls away. He looks at me with a slight smile.

ght you “Seraphina,” he says.

My heartbeat stutters. “Nobody calls me that.”

“Why not?” he asks. “It’s a pretty name. Beautiful and posh, like you.”
Now we’re so close, the conversation feels strangely intimate, even though it’s not really—we’re only talking about my name. But his skin is touching mine, and his voice is low and a little deep, and I can smell him, so

the detergent and his stupid spray, and the fragrance of him wraps around a silk scarf.

at all— People don't call me Seraphina because I always thought my name was hungry, embarrassing. When I started at Spearcrest, I always introduced myself as Miss Rosenthal instead. People started calling me Rosenthal and eventually, everyone started shortening it to Rose. I have some friends that don't even know my real name, friends who think my name is just Rose. I insist to "Rose Rosenthal."

But I don't want to tell Noah I'm Miss Rosenthal, and I don't want him to call me Rose. I don't want him to call me by the same name as everyone else.

Immediately "It's just a bit... over-the-top," I try to explain.

Heier and "Well, what would you prefer to be called?" he asks. His voice is dealmost calm. I wish I was as calm as he seems. His eyes glint with a spark of amusement. "Shall I call you Sephie? Darling? Angel? *Princess?*"

"I absolutely don't want you to call me princess," I say, frowning at him. "That's a name for a pet, not a person."

"But you look like a princess," he says, running his fingers down my shoulder. gold strands resting on my shoulders. "All that golden hair..."

He tilts his head. He gives a little half smile, showing me that long dimple in his cheek. My heart twists in my chest. I open my mouth to assure him I'm no princess.

But then he reaches up and kisses me and the words on my tongue are nothing.

u."

though

reaching

nap and

detergent and his stupid spray, and the fragrance of him wraps around me like a silk scarf.

People don't call me Seraphina because I always thought my name was embarrassing. When I started at Spearcrest, I always introduced myself as Miss Rosenthal instead. People started calling me Rosenthal and then, eventually, everyone started shortening it to Rose. I have some friends now that don't even know my real name, friends who think my name is literally "Rose Rosenthal."

But I don't want to tell Noah I'm Miss Rosenthal, and I don't want him to call me Rose. I don't want him to call me by the same name as everybody else.

"It's just a bit... over-the-top," I try to explain.

"Well, what would you prefer to be called?" he asks. His voice is deep and calm. I wish I was as calm as he seems. His eyes glint with a sparkle of amusement. "Shall I call you Sephie? Darling? Angel? *Princess?*"

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But then he reaches up and kisses me and the words on my tongue fade to nothing.

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 9

BLUE BALLS BELLE

NOAH KISSES ME SLOWLY but not lazily. And there are no fire earthquakes. It's not like in movies, with two people holding on to each other as if their kiss is their lifeline.

It's not like that at all.

Instead, it's... soft. Soft and warm and slow. Noah's mouth is unyielding and tender. Small kisses, to begin with, the pressing and clinging of lips. One of his hands caresses my waist, the other rises to cradle my head. His fingers hold me firmly, pushing on my chin to tilt my head as he tastes me. He opens his mouth against mine, slowly, sweetly. His tongue presses against my lips, against my tongue. His fingers dig into my waistband a little harder.

I melt against him like butter on warm bread.

I melt in the heat of his slow kisses, his skin on mine, the wet warmth of his tongue.

Wrapping my hands around his neck, I pull him closer, deepening our kisses. I can't quite believe how good this feels. Heat floods my cheeks, my

my stomach. Heat pools between my legs, where I'm hot and tight, pulsing.

I can't quite explain it, but this feels like a first kiss. Like being you kissing for the first time, that sensation of doing something life-changing forbidden—almost taboo. I squirm on Noah's lap and arch closer to him. It's honestly a miracle I'm managing to hold back the whimpers of pleasure rising to my throat.

Noah finally breaks the kiss, pulling away softly. My lips tingle, alive with a new sensation. His warm breath ghosts over my wet mouth. He speaks in a low murmur.

works or
with other

"Where do you like to be kissed, princess?"

I blink down at him, dazed with pleasure and surprise. I barely register his nickname—his question smoulders in my mind, casting shifting light and shadows over my thoughts. Nobody's ever asked me that question before. I try to respond, but my voice breaks. I swallow hard and answer.

hurried
I closed
my face.

"Anywhere you like."

tilts his
brushes
a little

"But where do *you* like?" he asks, low and soft. He swipes his thumb across my cheek. "There?" His hand slides to my neck, tracing the side of my column. "There?" Then his fingers drop to my shoulder, tickle my collarbone, glide over the hollow at the base of my throat. "There?"

rmth of

Everywhere he touches me, my skin comes alive, seems to glow like fire. I bite my lip.

"All of those," I tell him, my voice almost a moan.

ur kiss.

He gives a low, deep chuckle. "Yea?"

y chest,

"Yes."

He presses his mouth to my cheek, right where his thumb was, and his kisses trace the path sketched by his hand. He kisses the side of my neck,

ght and tongue swiping over the delicate skin. I shudder against him and tip n
to the side, allowing him better access. His mouth slides wetly from n
ing and to my throat, and he drops a line of tiny feathery kisses over my collar
ing and It feels so good I can't help myself: I roll my hips into him, pressing
im, and My heart skips a beat when my hips meet his, and I let out a tiny
pleasure surprise.

He's hard.

ve with *Really* hard.

ks in a Before I can even process this, Noah wraps one arm around my wa
lifts me against him. Then we're falling back onto the couch, me on n
and Noah on top of me, his weight propped on his elbows. His hips r
ster themine, not hard, but deliberate. His erection presses between my le
ght and sends a wave of arousal shuddering through me. I let out a moan of p
efore. I which he stifles underneath his mouth when he kisses me again.

Even though it's pretty obvious how turned on he is, his kisse
change. He doesn't become more aggressive or more urgent. Instea
thumbslow, lingering, insistent. His mouth leaves mine, his lips sliding to m
ensitive He sucks on the sensitive skin, then soothes it gently with his tongue.

de my Wherever his mouth touches me, waves of pleasure radiate through
ripples in water. And now that we're here, now that I'm underneath hi
e neon. his skin to my neck and his erection pressing against me, then I know
where this is going. I reach between us and my fingers fumble for t
pearl buttons of my bustier.

But Noah's mouth pulls away from my neck, and his hand falls o
He takes my fingers in his, stopping me from unbuttoning my top.

and his I blink up at him. My face feels so hot—I can only pray and hope I
eck, his gone bright red.

my head “What are you doing?” My voice comes out hoarse, con-
my neck embarrassing me.

bone. Noah’s face is very serious and earnest as he stares down at me.
; closer. stop here. I’ll call you a taxi.”

cry of The heat pulsing through my entire body suddenly runs cold.

“What?” I push him off me and he immediately moves away, sitting
edge of the sofa while I pull myself up. “What are you talking about?”

“Let’s call it a night here,” he says—even though his lips are litera-
aist and gleaming from kissing me. “I have training tomorrow, and I’m sure you
my backclasses in the morning.”

roll into “Class? Who cares about that?” I’m flooded with a myriad of em-
ngs and Annoyance. Anger. Embarrassment. And of course, I’m still inc-
leasure returned on, which somehow makes everything worse. “I don’t understa-
you...”

s don’t I stop myself and swallow hard. I have the sudden urge to cry, even
d, he is there’s nothing to cry about.

y neck. But instead of watching me or ignoring me or playing it cool, No-
something I don’t expect.

me like He explains himself to me.

im with “Seraphina.” My name is soft and sibilant in his mouth. “I think you
exactly gorgeous girl. I’m sure you can tell, but I find you really hot, and the-
he tinyton of things I could think of doing to you on this couch right now. So

not calling it a night because I don’t want to do this, or because I don’t
n mine. you—because I *really* fucking fancy you. I’m calling it a night because
the first time we’ve hung out together, and you’re still in college, and
I’ve not want to take advantage.”

“You’re not taking advantage,” I say quickly.

pletely “I’m not saying I am,” he says. “But I’m not going to fuck you when
our first time hanging out. I haven’t even taken you on a date.”

“Let’s “A *date*?” I cast him a look of disgust. “I’m not the dating kind.”

“We don’t have to go on a date if you don’t want to.” He scoots
closer to me on the couch, raising his hand in a reasonable gesture
; on the we’ve just met, and I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

“I’m eighteen,” I say, sitting up crossly. “It’s not like I’m a kid.
illy still what I want.”

ou have “I’m twenty, and old enough to know that sometimes we do things
heat of the moment that we might later wish we hadn’t.”

otions. I push him away and stand up. “I wouldn’t have regretted sleeping
redibly you—but you’ll regret rejecting me!”

nd—do He looks up at me, his calm unbroken. “I’m not rejecting you, Seph.

“So what’s the problem, then?” I narrow my eyes at him. “Why
though playing games?”

“No games,” he says. “Take a week to think about it. If you still
ah do have sex with me, then come back—you know where I live now. Con
and I’ll do anything you want me to do to you.”

It’s the most condescending thing I’ve ever heard in my life—as if
ou’re at to take time to decide who to sleep with. I cross my arms and spea
re are a “What makes you think I won’t just find someone else to sleep with?”

o we’re “If that’s what you want. I’m not in control of your life. You are.”

’t fancy *If I was, then we’d be having sex right now*, I want to say. But I don
e this is to give him the satisfaction. If Noah wants to force me to wait a wee
I don’t that’s fine. It’ll be easier for me than it’ll be for him.

I’ll make sure of it.

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CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 10

CATHOLIC QUILT SLUT

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, I go out into London with Kayana and Cammie. On the way there, I give them specific instructions to take as many pictures as they can of me dancing with guys. My silk slip is outrageously short and outrageously thin. Underneath it, I wear a pearl harness instead of a bra, and my only other accessories are long white gloves and strappy heels.

I drink champagne all night, and I accept every drink men send me. Young men and older ones alike. I let two boys sandwich my breasts on the dance floor, and I let an older man with silver hair at his table rest his hand on my waist as he watches me drink dainty sips of his whisky.

Kayana and Cammie watch me in delight, taking pictures of me. The men don't get anything from me other than flirty smiles, but the pictures suggest scandal and debauchery. I even let Kayana take a picture of me tugging on my pearl harness with her teeth, her face between my breasts while I tilt my head back and laugh.

I planned to stockpile the pictures and dish them out torturously c week—really make Noah pay for playing with my feelings and my But by the time we leave the club, I’m too drunk for careful strategy.

I lie draped across the limousine seat, my head in Kayana’s lap, my phone above my head. I cackle to myself as I scroll through my roll, sending Noah the most outrageous shots I can find.

“Who are you sending those to?” Cammie asks in a suspicious tone evil giggle of yours is creeping me out.”

“Probably Evan,” Kayana smirks down at me. “Isn’t that the end Rose and Evan, sitting in a tree, f-u-c-k-i-n-g?”

Kilburn
take as
dress is
delicate
; gloves
y way.
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emples
s gross

“Not anymore,” Cammie snickers. “She’s got a new boyfriend now.

“No, I don’t,” I mutter half to myself.

I’m busy sending Noah a picture of me bending over in front of a banker with blue eyes and a flushed face. In the picture, my back is my ass pressed against the banker’s crotch, his knuckles white as he c my waist, his expression greedy. Noah should hate that. I follow the in with a text.

Rose: Wonder if he’ll give me what you couldn’t?

Then I send him a wink-kiss emoji.

“Didn’t seem to me like she has a new boyfriend,” Kayana says. “ way she was acting in the club.”

antics.
ictures
Cammie
breasts,

“She’s trying to make him jealous,” Cammie says, narrowing her me. “I can tell.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that gamble,” Kayana says, checking her cinnamon-coloured nails. “I tried the same thing with my ex and he sw love, fucked everything that moved, and now he’s engaged.”

“That engagement doesn’t count. It’s arranged,” Cammie points ou

ver theyou fucked everything that moved first.”

needs. Kayana waves her fingers at Cammie. “Yes—to make him j
obviously. Which didn’t work—*obviously*.”

holding Three dots finally appear underneath the wall of photographs I’ve
camerathe screen with. I bring my phone closer to my face, biting my lip as h

A message finally pops up.

o. “That **Noah**: He won’t give you what I’ll give you if you come b
Thursday.

dgame? I squeeze my legs together, wishing it wasn’t so easy for him to t
on, wishing I’d let someone take me back to a hotel instead of going

” Spearcrest to spend another night in the throes of grinding sexual frustr

Still, I refuse to give Noah the satisfaction. I reply to his text.

t young **Rose**: Only one way to find out...

arched, Then I send him a kiss emoji and turn my phone off.

clutches

nage up



THE NEXT MORNING, I sit at my dressing table—well, my
repurposed as a dressing table—with my facemask on and my head i

Not the on top of my head. Sipping my detox tea, I finally turn my phone bac
smirk at the screen, waiting for the angry texts and panicked missed

eyes at flood in.

I’ve pulled this trick before; it never fails.

er long, Until now, apparently.

vore off Notifications pop up, but only one from Noah.

His reply to my last text, sent a couple of minutes after mine.

t. “And **Noah**: Please stay safe. Call me if you need me.

I glare at his text, floored by the unspeakable audacity of this man. Jealous, only is he acting like he doesn't care if I fuck somebody else, but apparently still enough of a gentleman to worry about my safety? To flood pick me up if I need help? The types. He can't possibly mean that. Noah Watson, with his ugly flat nose and embarrassing honesty, has got to be the biggest game-player I've ever met.

No guy is this secure in himself. Not even that: no guy is that nice. Noah is pretending, like everybody else. He's somehow fooled me into thinking he's not playing games, but I can see right through him. Unlucky for him, I've been playing these games far longer than he has with far tougher opponents. If I've survived three Young Kings, I think I can handle some simple part-time gardener.

Time to call his bluff.

Ignoring his last text, I send him a message.

Rose: My father wants me to come to this charity gala in London. Need a date. Fancy it?

By the time he finally replies, I've rinsed off my facemask, moistened my hair, finished my detox tea, completed forty-five minutes of yoga and thirty minutes of journaling, painted my nails, and stitched flowers on the pocket of Cammie's vintage denim jacket as per a request she made months ago.

Noah: Not really my scene. When is it?

Rose: January.

Noah: I'll be working.

I glare at my phone but make sure my reply has a bunch of smiley face emojis to project sweetness.

an. Not **Rose:** Take the day off. I'll pay you if you want.

it he is **Noah:** I don't care about the money.

offer to I smirk. Liar. Everybody cares about money—especially those wh
hate it.

broken **Rose:** Then what's the problem?

er I've What excuses is he going to make? I know he won't want to
Someone like him would stick out like a sore thumb at the Gala.

That's exactly why I want him to go. It's probably going to take s
with him to get him to agree, but that's a sacrifice I'm more than h.
ne intomake.

n now. His reply pops up a few minutes later.

is—and **Noah:** Send me the date and time so I don't forget, then.

ik I can For a moment, I stare at my phone uncomprehendingly.

Rose: You're coming to the gala?

His reply is just a thumbs-up emoji.

I stare at my phone for ages, filled with a confusing mixture of t
n and Iannoyance, worry, surprise and admiration.

Noah isn't just a secret game-player.

turised, He's an *expert* game-player.

fifteen

sleeves

go.

ON THURSDAY, I SKIP classes and dedicate my entire day to plann
outfit, bathing, exfoliating, waxing, moisturising and repainting my n:
toenails. Dusk has just fallen outside by the time I emerge from the ba
in a fluffy pink bathrobe and take a seat at my dressing table to get sta
my hair.

id heart



Camille comes in when I'm halfway through my hair routine—morning ritual—with a pile of textbooks under her arm. She enters without knocking as she usually does, and stops as soon as she sees me. Her eyes narrow in suspicion.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“You’ve skipped classes all day and you’re glowing like you’ve spent the day in a spa. You’re definitely going somewhere.”

“I’m not,” I lie.

She flops onto my bed and opens her mouth wide.

“Oh. My. God. Rose. You’re going back to Mr Morton’s house. Are you?”

“Shut up, I’m not going to Mr Morton’s house!” I flap my hand.

“You’re so stupid. I’m meeting Noah.”

“Who the fuck is Noah? You’re actually making this shit up, Camille. Triumph, swear, because how do I even know this guy is real?”

“Jesus, Cammie, why would I lie?” I grab my phone, turning off the music playing on it. “Here!”

I shove Noah’s profile picture in her face and she grabs my phone, looking at the screen. Her eyes widen and her mouth falls open as if I’ve just shown her the most scandalous photograph ever taken. I don’t see why, but Noah’s picture is small and blurry, a simple selfie of him smiling. Camille looks between me and the photo.

“That’s him?”

“Yes! I told you it wasn’t Mr Morton.”

I snatch my phone from her. Her eyes narrow.

“Well?” she asks imperiously, crossing her arms. “So what, then

“Are you like you two fucked? You argued with your dad and now you’re fucking help?”

Her school shirt is unbuttoned, and tiny crimson hickeys pepper her collarbones underneath the gold chain of her cross. To think this obsessed hickey-riddled slut is trying to Catholic-guilt *me* is laughable.

“I’m not fucking the help,” I snap at her. “You’re so judgemental.”

“I just don’t want you to make a mistake,” she says in a gentler tone.

“I’m not, okay? I know exactly what I’m doing. The gala is in a couple months, and Noah’s agreed to come with me. Once my father sees us, he’ll be so furious he’ll do anything to make me break up with him.”

Cammie nods slowly, but there’s a dubious pout on her mouth.

I roll my eyes. “Ugh. What?”

“Well, if he’s already agreed to go to the gala with you, then why aren’t you going to see him?”

“My father’s not going to let me have my money back if I just bring a random stranger to the gala, obviously. He needs to believe we’re a couple together, and for that to happen, Noah needs to believe it, too.”

“And that’s why you need to fuck him?”

I turn back to my mirror and nod at Cammie through the reflection. “Exactly.”

Cammie tilts her head, her eyes fixing mine through the mirror. “Cammie, not fucking him because you fancy him?”

“Ew, obviously not.”

I drop her gaze and look at my reflection.

All I see is golden hair in gleaming waves, crystal-blue eyes, glasses, and a liar’s mouth.

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CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 11

MEAN GIRL KINK

I DRINK TWO GLASSES of wine before getting into the taxi, just to me relax. It only works a little, because I spend the entire taxi journey looking out of the window with my chin in my palm, tapping my bubblegum nails against my cheek, my stomach in knots.

No matter what Cammie is trying to get at, fucking Noah is imperative to the plan. If Noah doesn't think I'm his by the time we get to the gala, my father will know immediately. He'll work out exactly what I'm doing and maybe even try to call my bluff.

No. By the time we walk into that gala, every single person needs to know Noah is fucking me. Even perfect strangers need to know. It needs to be palpable, undeniable.

I have to fuck Noah—but if I also *want* to fuck him, then so what?

I've fucked people I didn't want to fuck before. It's not something I'm exactly fond of. And just because I've faked most of my orgasms means I don't deserve real orgasms.

And Noah gives the energy of someone who would definitely make me come. Maybe it's the fact we're so different, or the taboo of being

someone I shouldn't be with, or maybe it's his big body and bold attitude makes me feel this way. I'm not sure.

But I don't see why I should feel shit about wanting to have sex with

The taxi pulls up outside the hideous block of flats. I tighten my seatbelt around me and step out. Now I'm here, my heart becomes a scared rabbit in my chest, desperate to escape. I take a deep breath and walk up to the door, pressing Noah's buzzer. He answers almost straight away, buzzing me

I take the steps slowly up to his flat, taking deep breaths. When I get to the door, I want to seem cool and collected. I don't even know why I'm so nervous anyway—he's the one who should be an anxious mess right now.

Because when I was getting ready, I made sure Noah wouldn't be able to reject me this time. That's why I'm wearing a full-length black trench coat over the prettiest pink lingerie I own—French lace and pearls—and matching pink heels. I look like a million dollars, like a gift from the gods.

Noah should be the one who's nervous to see me. Not the other way around.

Once I get to his door, I raise my hand to knock, but the door opens before I can. Noah's in grey sweatpants and a black sweatshirt—but I barely have time to even look at his face. He pulls me to him, lifting me into his arms and dragging me into his flat. His door slams shut and he pushes me against the wall, pressing his body into mine and claiming my mouth in a hungry kiss.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and have to stop myself from moaning into his mouth when his tongue glides against mine. He's kissing me like he's starving for it—starving for *me*. He's kissing me like he wants to own me.

Maybe he was more jealous than he let on.

He pulls away with a husky intake of breath, but I catch his bottom lip

side that between my teeth and bite—hard. Hard enough to draw a gasp of sharp pain from him. He swipes his thumb over his lip and looks at it.

to him. “You drew blood.”

my coat I smirk at him. “So?”

abbits in His eyes darken, but he speaks with a half-smile. “You’re one vicious door, bitch.”

in. “You shouldn’t have made me wait.”

st to his He lifts me up against him, hands under my ass, and I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms circling his neck.

ow. Pressing a kiss against my neck, he murmurs, “I’ll make it up to you, princess.”

ch coat “How?”

l bright “However you want.”

Heat floods through my body. It could be the alcohol or the sudden rush of air from the doorway or the heat from his body—it’s hard to tell.

But the hottest thing is Noah’s assertiveness. The way he carries me through his flat and drops me on his bed. The way he stands over me, shirtless, pulling off his sweatshirt from the collar up, in a boyish and inelegant way. His shirt lifts slightly, dragged by his sweatshirt, and I glimpse hard abs and a well-defined V-line.

“Go on,” he says, looking down at me. “What would you like me to do for you, princess? I know how bossy you can be. Order me around.”

Wetness trickles between my legs, my core clenching at his words.

Untying the belt, I pull my trench coat open and prop myself up on my elbows. “Kiss me.”

His eyes rake over my body: the diaphanous pink bra and panties that are barely hiding me from him, my long legs, my feet in their glossy pink Louboutin shoes.

rock or can't quite read his expression, but there's colour in his cheeks and hunger in his eyes.

He drops one knee onto the bed, right between my legs, and falls forward, propping himself up on his arms, his hands framing my head. "Where? I'm a little nervous now. I expected him to fall apart at the sight of me, but his confidence is so at odds with how mild his manners are that it's a little disconcerting. But I'm Seraphina fucking Rosenthal. If he thinks I'm just around going to melt into a puddle and become an incoherent mess, he's mistaken.

to you, I point at my lips. "There."

He obeys, kissing me slowly on my mouth.

"Where else?" he murmurs against my lips.

I point at my jaw, then my neck. "There. There..."

warmth He kisses both in wet, lingering kisses.

"Mm." His voice is a low, deep murmur. "Where else?"

ies me I point at the place between my breasts, where tiny pearl buttons are pulling the centre of my bra. "There, too."

His T- "Mm." He slides his hand to my waist, tilting me up to him, and presses his mouth between my breasts. "Where else, princess?"

Looking right into his eyes, I point at my breasts.

to do, He looks at them, still covered in pink lace. For a moment, I expect him to stumble, to fumble around looking for the clasp, struggling to unhook it.

But he doesn't. Instead, he leans down, and kisses the base of my nipple. Then he follows the line between my breasts, kissing there too.

And then he kisses my breasts through the lace. At first, I can barely feel his lips, but then he closes his mouth on one nipple. He presses his lips against it. I

I naked against it so that I can feel both the wet heat of his tongue and the texture of the lace. My eyes roll back as I close them with a sigh of pleasure.

forward, Under his mouth, my skin becomes oversensitive, every nerve springing into life. My nipples tighten and arch my back, pushing into his chest. He craves more.

But he pulls away, leaving nothing but the wet lace of my bra. I catch my breath and look up at him.

“Do you want me to take it off?” I ask, gesturing at my bra.

“No,” he says, to my surprise. “Leave it on. Take your coat off.”

I do as he says, tossing the black trench coat away. Neither of us notices where it lands. When I lie back, Noah lowers himself to me, but I press the sharp heel of my glossy pink shoe against his chest. He raises an eyebrow at me and I push harder, digging the heel into his skin.

The corner of his mouth curls in a half-grin. “You have a right streak, you know that?”

I laugh, low and soft. “You think?”

“Mm, yeah.” He takes my foot in his hand, but instead of taking my shoe, he kisses the delicate ridge of my ankle, kisses up my leg. “I think you’re not scared, are you?” I ask mockingly, even though my skin hitches with every kiss, even though my heartbeat is a frantic flutter against his chest, even though I’m so turned on I ache.

“No,” he says, kissing the inside of my knee. “I’m not scared.”

“You like girls being mean to you, Noah?”

“No, princess,” he says, looking up at me with hooded eyes and a sly grin. “I like *you* being mean to me.”

He presses his tongue

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CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 12

DIRTY TALK DARLING

NOAH KISSES MY INNER thigh, working his way up. With his p hands, he presses into my other leg, forcing me to spread my thighs f As if he'd ever need to force me. I do so without resistance.

He settles between my legs, looking down at me. There's somethi and unabashed about the way he looks: with admiration, desire, hunge him, there isn't any worrying about whether he's into it, there's no s guessing myself. Under his gaze, I feel beautiful, desirable, delectable.

I arch my back again and bite my bottom lip as I look up at him. Hi dimly lit, but it's still bright enough that I can make him out perfect short dark hair, his grey eyes. He holds my gaze when I look at him, his hand from my thigh to my stomach. He runs his strong fingers over it, making the muscles twitch under his hand. Then his hand lower, to the delicate lace of my panties. He tugs on the waistba doesn't pull it down. Instead, he runs his thumb over my pussy, throo panties.

The lazy grin from earlier returns and widens. "You're wet."

I lick my lips. "Obviously."

“I want to taste you,” he says.

For a moment, I’m speechless from his honesty and candour. He moves away from me and gently rolls my panties down my hips, sliding them over my legs, making sure they don’t get caught on my heels. Then he tosses them aside. Lifting my hips with his hands, he moves me on his bed like I’m nothing, pulling me to him as he kneels by the bed.

Instead of lowering his head between my legs, he licks his lips, then travelling slowly over my body, my breasts still in their bra, lingering on my hard nipples, visible through the sodden lace, then resting on my face.

I glare at him, wriggling my hips in his hands. “Come on.”

“I like looking at you,” he says. “It turns me on.”

Then he looks down, slides his hands up my thighs, raising my frame his face.

“You’re pretty all over,” he says thoughtfully.

He kisses me on my pussy, a soft, lingering kiss. He kisses the wet tongue parting between the lips, teasing me. But there’s nothing intense

Noah, about anything he does. He doesn’t press too hard or go too fast. He kisses me slowly, taking his time, enjoying himself, as if there’s nothing he could enjoy more than going down on me.

He pulls away for a second and slowly licks my juices off his lips, then the corner of his mouth with a thumb. A low groan rumbles in his chest.

“You taste as good as you look.”

Goosebumps ripple through me, and I squeeze his head with my thighs, my pussy clenching at his words.

Without waiting, he puts his mouth on me once more, kissing and licking me with enthusiasm. I watch him, the way he closes his eyes in pleasure as his tongue traces up and down my slit. His pleasure only heightens mine.

back on his bed and dig my heels into the mattress, anchoring myself. I
move, raise my hips to meet his mouth.

He finds my clit, but there's no aggression, no triumph, only gentleness as he uses the tip of his tongue. His gentleness drives me wild. I squirm under him and a low whimper emerges from my lips. I try to cover up the noise as soon as I do, Noah stops short, lifting his mouth off me and raising his eyes to mine.

Sliding my fingers into Noah's hair, I grip the short dark strands. I want to punish him for moving away, for stopping, but Noah doesn't groan. He looks up; his lips and chin are gleaming wet, and he's gripping my legs. "Ouch," he says without a hint of sincerity.

I glare down at him. "Don't stop, you idiot."

"Then don't cover your mouth. I want to hear you."

"So *you*'re the boss now?"

He laughs quietly and then, his eyes still on mine, drags his tongue about the length of my pussy. A shudder rips through me, making my hips twitch. He uses his hands.

"Never," he replies. "But be a good girl for me, princess. Let me hear the pretty voice of yours."

"Fine," I snap.

"Good," he murmurs. "Now, since you're so bossy, why don't you tell me how you want it? Come on, princess. Show me what a dirty, pretty girl you can be. Fuck yourself on my tongue."

I bite down hard on my lip, but there's a challenge in his eyes and I can't deny it. Fisting both hands in his hair, I roll my hips against him, rubbing myself on his tongue. He scoops my hips in his hands, supporting me: I lie on my back, but let me move my hips as I want. Low moans of pleasure rumble

so I can his throat, and they're like gasoline thrown on the fire of my desire.

faster, so close I hardly dare breathe.

e flicks Then Noah moves one of his hands out from under my hip. I glance against him: his eyes are closed, his face smeared with wetness, and he's surprised, but his hand into his pants. The movement of his hand under the soft fabric of his sweatpants tells me he's touching himself, and the thought of it—the

of his hand working his cock while I fuck myself on his tongue—seems so hard. I hurtling over a vertiginous height.

t wince I come with a gasp of surprise; I come so hard lights burst behind my eyelids as I squeeze them shut. My thighs clamp around Noah's head, his hips squirm erratically against his mouth, moving in time with the waves of pleasure pulsing through me.

Then I fall back to the bed with a whimper. My eyes fly open. I stare at him, shocked by the force of my orgasm. I don't remember the last time I've come this hard. My thighs shiver uncontrollably. Noah doesn't even flinch. He licks his lips—his hand is still working his cock in slow circles.

He's looking straight into my eyes.

ear that "Fuck," he says. "That was fucking hot."

I laugh weakly, propping myself up on my elbows. My legs are jelly. I'm pretty certain I'd fall over if I tried to stand right now.

u show "What are you doing?" I ask breathlessly, even though I already know.

pretty girl "I'll show you."

His eyes on mine, he stands from the bed, and pulls off his tights, kicking them away from him. His cock, just like him, is big and hard. Moisture beads the thick tip, and I lick my lips at the sight of it. But he's not taking his cock into his hand, his eyes still on mine. He doesn't look away from

I'm embarrassed to be standing naked in front of me. He moves his fist in firm strokes, and I catch my breath as I watch him.

He leans down. "You like this, do you?" he asks in a thoughtful murmur. "Watch me slipping touch myself when I'm so hard for you?"

For such a calm, unassuming guy, Noah sure has a confident, commanding thoughtside to him. The way he strokes himself is so self-assured, so confident, it's almost intimidating.

"Yes." I breathe. "I like it."

"Does it feed your ego, princess? To know you've got me so turned on as I have to touch myself?"

I wonder if this is part of the mind games he's so good at. Making me feel like I'm the one in control when he's the one with all the real power. I lean up at my leg and place the sharp tip of my heel against his chest, where his muscles are thick and where his skin is slick with sweat.

"It does," I admit, digging my heel deeper.

"Fuck." His eyes roll close and his stomach muscles tense. His hand moves a little faster.

"Stop," I say sharply, punctuating my command with a jab of my heel against his chest.

He does exactly as I say. I sit up slowly and move to the edge of the bed. I lick my lips, staring a little nervously at his cock—the intimidating thickness of it.

Normally, I don't give out blowjobs. They're a lot of work, and I don't really enjoy them. But right now, all I can think of is wrapping my lips around Noah's cock, tasting it on my tongue.

I slide down to the floor, kneeling in front of him. He watches me; he's no longer smiling. Instead, an expression almost like pain is on his face.

in long, closer, until my mouth is inches from his cock, until I can almost feel the warmth of it. I keep my eyes on him the whole time. His throat shuddering as he swallows. He licks his lips and runs two fingers down my cheek, lifting my chin to look up at him.

standing “Are you sure?” he asks in a hoarse voice.

full of What a thing to ask when my lips are this close to his cock. The question is sexier than dirty words. It makes me squeeze my thighs shut, feeling the deep pulsing between my legs. “I want to.”

ed on I He lets go of his cock. He cups my face and tilts it up gently. “You’re fucking beautiful, you know.”

me feel Heat pools in my cheeks. He slides his thumb across my lips. I feel it. I raise slightly on my bottom lip. I open my mouth, eyes still on his. His expression is curious, almost thoughtful, as he gazes down, his eyes moving from my mouth. He slides his index and middle fingers past my lips, pushing his fingers against my tongue.

l moves I close my lips on his fingers and suck slightly. He tilts his head, watching me. His cheeks are flushed, his lips slightly parted. He’s turned on, his body feels huge and bouncing with each twitch, but he doesn’t look satisfied or pleased. He looks...

e bed. I Hungry. Desperate. Almost broken.

ickness Moving slowly, I slide my mouth up and down his fingers—a little taste of what I’m about to do. I move down until my lips touch his knuckles. I rarely to peer up at him, and then slide back, sucking on the tips of his fingers. He groans and his “Fuck,” he whispers, his voice rough. “Ah, good girl.”

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth. A string of saliva connects his fingers to my lips for a second, then breaks. Scooting closer to him, I feel his hands on my hips. I draw

feel the cock gently in one hand. He's thick and warm, filling my grip satisfiers as and his cock twitches when I wrap my fingers around it.

, gently I lick the tip first, tasting that tantalising bead of pre-cum. He sending a surge of pleasure and pride through me. Eager to drag more out of him, I lick the length of his cock, then take the tip into my But the sucking on it.

ut over His hands are on my head. Not gripping my hair like I gripped I surprisingly gentle, guiding my head as I slide my mouth up and down 'You're cock, taking him deeper. I build the rhythm, not fast, but steady, until cock touches the back of my throat. I swallow around him, forcing my He tugsto cough, and tears blossom in my eyes.

ssion is "Fuck!"

mine to I look up in alarm at the sound of Noah's hoarse voice. He slides his hand out of my mouth, cradling my chin in his hand, wiping saliva off my lips with a swipe of his thumb.

atching "You need to stop," he rasps. "I'm so fucking close. If you don't stop, his cockgoing to come in your mouth."

leased. "I don't mind."

He laughs softly, helping me to my feet. "You're a living wet dream, do you know that? But I didn't get to fuck you last time, and I've not been able to stop thinking about it ever since."

, pause "Have you really?" I ask, wrapping my arms around his neck.

s. He lifts me against him, moving us both to his bed. "Oh yeah. I've not been thinking about it ever since you sent me that picture of your pretty legs. I thought about it that entire night when you sent me all those pictures of you taking his clubbing. I think about it almost all the time now."

He drops me against the mattress and I glare up at him. "Why did

fyingly,tell me?”

He shrugs. “I’m telling you now.”

groans, “Ugh, you’re so annoying.”

sounds Kissing my neck, he takes his cock in his hand, slides it against my mouth, caressing my clit and tracing the slippery slit.

“Go on,” he murmurs against my neck. “Why don’t you tell me mor his, but how annoying I am?”

own his “You’re so fucking irritating,” I say. He pushes the head of hi ntil his against my entrance and my breath hitches, catching in my thro self no heartbeat is an erratic flutter. What if he doesn’t fit? What if he’s too me?

“Keep going,” he says, gliding his lips from my neck to my cheek.

his cock “You’re so fucking irritating and—” He pushes against me. “Your ps with technique is shit. I’m surprised you get any girls, and—oh, *fuck!*”

There’s pressure, unbearable pressure, and then he’s inside me. He op, I’m slowly, pushing deeper, slowly, giving me time to adjust. My br trapped in my chest, which feels too small. Every part of me feels to right now. He pauses when his hips finally meet mine. Propping him m, you on his elbows, he looks down at me.

able to “You alright, princess?”

I nod. Looking up into his eyes when his cock is buried inside me hilt is a whole new level of intimacy. I try to look away, but he cups : ve been in one hand and gently moves my head so I’m facing him.

y tits. I “Look at me, gorgeous girl.” His voice isn’t commanding, but of you almost tender. “You feel so good on my cock.” His fingers trace my move to my neck, to my lace-adorned breasts. “You’re so fucking bea n’t you He thrusts in and out slowly, catching his breath. “Pretty little :

princess.” His voice becomes rough as he takes my waist in his hands, arching my back, fucking me deeper. “Pretty, dirty little princess.”

My thighs quiver uncontrollably, my back arched off the mattress. I moan around his cock with each stroke, his words making me so wet that I’m dripping full of obscene sounds. Noah pumps in and out of me, one hand against my waist, one thumb stroking my clit.

He watches me with a mixture of pride and desire, biting his lip as he fucks my back. His eyes roam my body, lingering on my mouth, my breasts. My stomach.

With a hard thrust, he drops over me, grabbing my wrists to pin my arms by my head. He’s so deep inside me I can feel him grinding down against my clit, and I swallow a gasp, overwhelmed by sensations.

“You fucking love it, don’t you?” he asks low against my ear.

I nod frantically. “God, oh god, yes.”

He kisses my lips and rocks into me, fucking me deeper, grinding his hips against my clit. He laughs, a rumble against my skin.

“You love it when I talk dirty to you, don’t you?” he asks. “Pretty little girl—you just want to be worshipped. So you love the way I’m talking to you and you love the way I fuck you.” I nod desperately, my voice trembling in my chest. “You love being fucked like the gorgeous little slut you are, don’t you?” His thrusts become hard and short, and my entire body is tensed and shaking. My jaw is poised on the edge of another orgasm. He punctuates each slam of his hips against mine with a growl. “My dirty. Fucking. Princess.”

I come with a cry, my back arching off the bed, my breasts crushed against my cheek, chest. My hips move of their own accord, but they are pinned under his hands. “Beautiful.” He thrusts into me, his thick cock inside my clenching pussy heightening each pulse. His breath becomes sharp gasps and his thrusts become harder.

hands, hold my breath, waiting for his orgasm, craving his pleasure as much as my own.

He suddenly pulls out of me and fists one hand around his cock, his other hand still keeping my arm pinned above my head. He pulls and comes against my deep groan, spilling himself across my stomach, my abdomen, and my tits.

For a moment, the room is silent except for the mixing of our breaths, my breaths. Noah slumps down at my side, his arm across my chest, his head pressed to my temple. When I finally catch my breath enough to speak, I press my hands against his head.

“You should’ve come inside me,” I mutter in the tiniest voice. “I don’t want birth control.”

He lets out a sigh that flutters the moist hair on my temple and kisses my cheek. “I’m so sorry, princess. I should’ve asked beforehand—I meant to. I got carried away. I’m sorry.”

I point at my body, the ropes of come painted across my skin and the little of my bra.

“Look at the mess you’ve made.” My tone is mean, but I can’t quip in the smirk of satisfaction curling my lips at the sight of my body covered in the evidence of Noah’s desire for me.

“Mm, I’m sorry princess.” He tilts my head to his with a finger and kisses my mouth. “I won’t do it again.” He speaks against my ear, lowering his voice to a growl. “Next time, I’ll come inside you and send you to his *dripping*.”

With that, Noah rolls off me and hops to his feet, offering me his hand. I take it, too flustered to speak, and he helps me up, catching me with a smirk. I

as my trembling legs buckle and I almost fall. We both let out panting laughter as he guides me into his bathroom.

I stand, naked and shivering, in his bathroom as he unhooks my pants and soaks a flannel with hot water. He wipes his come off me with gentle, even movements and then he runs his shower and makes me step into his bathtub.

My chest swells with a bubble of emotion. I've never had a guy climb on top of me panting up after sex. Normally, I slink off to the bathroom and take care of myself. But Noah doesn't just wipe me off: he showers me, washing my hair, turning my skin, rinsing me off. His shampoo and shower gels smell just like him—fresh and clean and masculine. He's gentle and patient, running hot water through my long hair until it's free of suds.

When I'm showered, he wraps me in towels and dries my hair. He doesn't use anything aside from a hairdryer, and this is a far cry from the meticulous steps of my skin and hair cleaning routine, but there's something so incredibly sweet about the way he takes care of me. Firmly, but tenderly. He asks nothing of me. He doesn't even make me say anything.

When we're done, he takes me back to his bedroom and hands me a glass of water to drink. We get into bed and he gathers me right against him. He's warm, and the muscles of his chest and shoulders form a cushion for me as I press my face into his neck as he wraps his arms around me. I tuck one of my legs between his thighs and close my eyes.

“You were right, you know,” he whispers just as I'm about to fall asleep. His lips are pressed to my head.

“About what?” I ask sleepily.

“I've really never met a girl like you before.”

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CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 13

THURSDAY INDULGENCE

THURSDAYS SOON BECOME NOAH days, and Noah day soon becomes my favourite day of the week. To avoid missing classes every Thursday I get into the habit of doing all my waxing, skincare and preparation on Wednesday nights. On Thursdays I sneak off campus, hop into a taxi and spend my evenings with Noah.

Sex with Noah is addictive because it's not like any of the sex I've had before.

And that's not because I've never had good sex before. I've had good sex before—most girls have—but I've had decent sex too. Sex with experienced men. Sex with partners who tried very hard to make me come.

But I've never had sex with someone like Noah before.

Noah has sex like he doesn't worry about me coming because he trusts I will. There's no pressure, and I never feel like he's hurrying me to the finishing line. Noah is unhurried and tender and seems to be a stranger without a care in the world. All he seems to care about is the pleasure he gives me.

He'll get on his knees if he has to and beg if I ask him to. When I'm rough with him, pulling his hair or grabbing his neck or clawing at his chest or back or hips, he lets me, moaning softly. He wasn't lying when he said he liked it when I was mean. He *loves* it when I'm mean.

But he also loves it when I'm a whimpering, trembling mess, too. He's feasting on my pussy until I'm writhing against him and moaning loudly for so long. Sometimes he looks up at me, eyes bright, cheeks and chin sodden with so much pride in his expression I want to give him a pat and a treat.

And other times, it's like he can't even control himself. He'll have me on my stomach with my ass in the air, fucking me with abandon, his hands rough and primal against the back of my neck, muttering strings of words and curses. Times like these, Noah fucks hard—harder than anyone has ever fucked me.

He fucks harder than a rockstar.

He fucks like a *god*.

And Noah doesn't just fuck. Noah cleans and cooks. He talks and cares.

He runs his fingers up and down my back while I fall asleep plastered to his chest. Noah, as crazy as it sounds, almost seems to *enjoy* spending time with me.

One snowy evening in early January, after I've returned from a week with friends in Aspen, I'm lying on my stomach with my head resting on my arms. Noah lies next to me, playing with a long strand of my hair, smoothing it between his fingers and letting it drop on my back before picking it up again.

"You really have the prettiest hair," he says thoughtfully.

"Like a princess?" I ask with a laugh.

"Yeah, like a princess. Hair for girls who live in castles and don't have to work or do anything."

a little “I work and do things!” I protest, propping my chin up to glare at his arms. “Yeah?” He laughs, and there’s a little mocking edge to his laughter. “Said hewhat?”

“I want to design and make clothes,” I tell him.

He leans over to kiss my shoulder. “Not just wear them and take them out and to seduce poor innocent guys like me?”

“No.” I push him away. “Obviously, I like doing that, too. But I don’t have my own label someday. I’m going to fashion school next year.”

“Are you?” He looks at me with an appreciative nod. “That’s fair.” He moans—I take it back, princess. “What are you going to name your label?”

For a moment, I think about it, chewing on the inside of my cheek. I’ve wanted my own label for a long time—I want my own fashion label someday—but I’ve never thought about a name before. I guess it never really occurred to me.

Now, with only half a year of school left, it’s starting to feel real. I’ve never felt like this before.

“I’m not sure yet,” I answer finally. I roll over against him, pushing myself onto his back so I can lie with my cheek on his shoulder and my leg awkwardly draped across him. “Do you have any suggestions?”

He thinks for a moment, scrunching up his brown eyes. There’s a small beauty spot near the corner of his eye I’d never really noticed before. A pale scar near his eyebrow I’ll need to ask him about.

“Well,” he says finally. “Shouldn’t it be your name? Your surname?” I grimace. “Rosenthal?”

“Your surname is Rosenthal?” he asks.

I’d forgotten I’d never told him my surname. I’d never planned on telling him at all. Now, he knows my full name. All he would need to do is

m. me and he'd find my social media, all the stupid blogs and articles about me. "Like I'm wearing, where I'm holidaying, who I'm reportedly dating."

But I don't want him to know all that. I want him to just know me, me right here in front of him.

them off "Yeah," I say sullenly. "But that's my father's name, not what I want to call my label. I want a name of my own. Something feminine but I don't want to edge to it."

The label name isn't even that important, but I want to move on from this enough topic of my name. Part of me wants to command him to never look at me but I'm afraid that would encourage him to do it even more. If someone were to ask me to veto forbid me from looking them up, it would be the only thing I'd want to do. Hopefully, Noah forgets my name by the time I leave. He opens his mouth to make another suggestion, but I slide on top of him and cover his mouth with mine, kissing him deep and slow. His arms immediately wrap around my waist. He kisses me back with enthusiasm, his tongue sliding into mine, sucking on it. Something hard and thick pokes against my stomach. I pull away from him with a smirk and lick my lips. "Don't get too far away. I've already booked a taxi."

He laughs. "You just love torturing me, don't you?"

as a tiny erection, looking down at him with my most innocent smile. "I don't know what you mean."

"Then I hop off him and climb out of his bed. He watches me get changed. As I roll on my stockings, his hand strays down the smooth ridges of my legs and across his belly, sliding under the blanket. I glare at him.

telling "You better not touch yourself."

google He frowns but pulls his hand from under the blanket. "You think this

ut whatgoing to go away?”

“Of course, it will.” I pull on my dress and fetch my shoes from the
the realwhere they landed when Noah stripped them off me and threw them
earlier. “It’ll go away when I do.”

want to “And if it comes back?”

with an I shrug. “Ignore it.”

“Are you serious?” He sits up suddenly. “I’m not allowed to wank
om thesee you?”

me up, “Mm-hm.” I finish dressing and lean down to kiss him. “You be
ne triedwhat you’re told, or I’ll know.”

t to do. He throws me a half-hearted glare that’s more petulant than angry.
; mouthare you next coming over?”

mouth “Same as usual.” I put on my coat and pull my hair free from the
around“Next Thursday.”

against “Are you punishing me?” he asks in an almost pitiful tone. “I have t
ch. and train and not see you for a week and I can’t even wank? That
carriedcruel.”

I wink and blow him a kiss. “Just testing how much you like me.”

In reality, I have no way of knowing if he’ll touch himself while I’r
inst hisBut judging by the stricken look on his face, he’ll definitely feel guilt
’t knowdoes—and that gets me off. I hope he sends me a picture of him doin
vicious, perverse part of me wants Noah to be touching himself
lressed.thoughts of me and feeling bad about it. I only wish I was there to see
his abs



s is just

I SNEAK BACK INTO my room to find Cammie waiting for me on the corner. She's lying on her back in matching pink shorts and cropped sweater, awaywearing one of my facemasks. My amethyst face roller is in her hand, she's rubbing it over the facemask, her phone in her other hand.

She looks up when I walk in and close the door behind me, looking like a ghost with her milky facemask.

“Well?” she asks imperiously. “Is this a thing you're doing now? Spilling your face every night with your new townie boyfriend?”

“Only Thursdays,” I say, tossing my hair back. “And he's my new boyfriend.”

“When?” “No, you're just *acting* like he is.”

“I just need him to think he is.”

Facing away from Cammie, I take off my coat and slowly undress into my pyjamas. I don't want to look her in the eyes, and I'm not ready to work the mood for this middle-of-the-night interrogation she's ambushed me at. I should just have stayed at Noah's.

“When's the gala, then?” Cammie asks.

“At the end of the month.”

“And has he given you any hints he's thinking of not going?”

As if. Noah would probably step in front of a car if I asked him to. I would never tell Cammie that. She'd probably just jump to the conclusion that I'm going to run away with Noah and marry him and become one of those hard-eyed, red-faced, three-baby-stroller women you see interviewed on British news.

I shudder at the thought.

“He's definitely coming, alright?” I say with a sigh of annoyance. “In my case, Cammie.”

ny bed. “If you’re so sure he’s coming, then why do you keep going back to that shirt, house?”

ds, and *Because I don’t need to fake orgasms with him. Because nobody gone down on me with such shameless abandon. Because fucking him feels like a divine. Because I like the way he cleans me up and brings me cups of coffee and cuddles me afterwards, like he cares, like I matter. Because being with him feels effortless and warm and comforting.*

“It’s just part of the plan,” I say with a shrug.

not my I throw on a long silk kimono and fasten the belt, taking a seat at the dressing table. Hopefully, once I finish my skincare routine and get in the shower, Cammie will take the hint and just fuck off.

“What about after the gala, then?” Cammie asks, sitting up.

s to get “What about it?”

eally in My question is dismissive, and my tone is breezy, but my heart isn’t with it. little. I hadn’t thought that far. I don’t *want* to think that far. And Cammie a little for forcing me to think that far.

“If your plan works and your dad lets you go to fashion school with the trust fund, then what will you do?”

I roll my eyes at her through the mirror. “I’ll go to fashion school with the trust fund, Cammie. God, you’re so dumb.”

clusion She glares at me. “I’m not dumb. You’re *playing* dumb. You know what I’m asking.”

being Setting down my things, I turn to face her with an exasperated sigh. “I’ll break up with him then, alright? Is that what you want to hear?”

“Rose.” She pulls herself to her feet and comes to kneel in front of me. “Get off your hands on my thighs. “I’m only asking because I care about you.”

“Really?” I raise my eyebrows at her. “You’re just coming across as

to his judgemental bitch right now.”

“I’m not, I’m not judgemental—you know I do a lot of stuff with c
’s *ever* Her voice softens. “But I don’t want you to get hurt, Rose. That’s all.”

m feels “I know what I’m doing, okay?” I snap, trying to turn away.

f water “I’m sure that’s exactly what Evan Knight is thinking. And look
around He’s become an absolute joke.”

For a second, I’m too speechless to reply.

“What the fuck are you talking about? How am I like Evan?”

at my She waves her hand in the air, looking away for a second. “You l
to bed, you both seem to have a... thing for low-class people.”

“*Excuse me?*” I can’t even control the outrage in my voice. “I
nothing like Sophie Sutton!”

“Well, no, because at least Sophie is a Spearcrest student, and a j
sinks and I hear she’s applying to Ivy League universities. But Noah... we
I hatedoes he do again? He’s a part-time school gardener?”

I open my mouth in protest. I want to tell Cammie that she’s l
th yourcomplete asshole, that Noah works several jobs, that he’s saving up
mom’s wedding, that he works harder than anyone I know and trains
with mytime. That Noah is self-motivated and independent, that he doesn’t
anyone for anything he needs, and that he still has it in his heart to help
w whatwhen he barely has anything.

But I can’t say any of these things.

. “Ugh, Because if I do, Cammie will think I admire Noah. She’ll accuse
r?” romanticising his poverty. Worse, she might even accuse me of fall
me, herhim.

And I’m not falling for Noah. I’m just using him.

s like a I’m *definitely* just using him.

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CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 14

WHOLESOME MASOCHISM

THE WEEK BEFORE THE gala, I arrive at Noah's flat in a dark and mood. A dark cloud hangs over me, heavy with dread. I have the sense that I'm running out of time, or that I'm headed towards some cliff's edge.

Like I'm going to be forced to jump off that cliff to my certain death.

Noah opens the door and pulls me into his arms. I melt against him from the warmth of him, filling my lungs with the rich, clean scent. When he holds me like this, it's strange, but I feel safe, like nothing ever hurt me. He kisses me and I kiss him back hungrily, tugging his sweatshirt.

I'm ready for him—I'm always ready when I'm near him. He could push me against his front door and fuck me right here and now, and I would probably come just from the sensation of his body on mine.

But to my surprise, he doesn't let me pull his shirt off. Instead, he takes my hand and says, "Wait, I want to show you something first."

He leads me into his bedroom and we both stand in front of his wardrobe. There, hanging from the door, is a black suit.

A plain, completely normal black suit.

I look up at Noah, who smiles proudly. “What do you think?”

“About what?”

He beams. “The suit. I got it for your fancy gala thing.”

“Oh.” A lump rises in my throat. I don’t even know why, but I want to cry. That would make me look completely crazy. “Well, it’s not a tuxedo. Most of the men will be wearing tuxedos, though.”

“Right.” His beam wavers, and he looks from me to the suit. “A tuxedo isn’t a tuxedo...?”

I laugh. “No. This is a suit.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, the collar for one... you want, like, satin accents, things like that.”

“Oh.” He hesitates, running a hand through his short, dark hair. He

has a small cut on his lip he got from training and then sighs. “I just didn’t want to embarrass you at your posh event. Since you’re always so well-dressed, I thought I’d dress like you. I’ll change everything...”

We stare at each other in silence for a second. The moment feels so full of a sort of tension I’ve never experienced before. It’s not quite the tension I’m used to, but more like... *tenderness* tension. Like I want to grab him and smother him in kisses and caresses.

My heart sinks.

Fuck. I don’t *like* him, do I?

“Look,” I say, looking quickly away from him. “You’re not going to embarrass me, you complete idiot. Let me take your suit with me to my wardrobe—I’ll see what I can do with it.”

“Aw, great!” His face brightens up. “Are you sure that’s not too much to ask for?”

“No.” I turn back to him. “I’ll need your measurements, though, so I can make sure it fits perfectly.”

He nods. “Right. I don’t have a measuring tape, but I’m sure my coach has one.”

Suddenly “Or I could do it,” I say, smiling slowly. “I’m going to need your help to get your clothes off, though.”

Without hesitation, he pulls his sweatshirt and T-shirt over his head and then tosses them on the bed. Then he drops his trousers and kicks them away. He stands in black boxers. For a second, I just watch him, drinking in the sight of him and savouring it like the most delectable wine.

His broad shoulders and chest, padded with muscles. His flat stomach and hard abdomen—not ridiculously defined, because he’s not the type of guy who gets dehydrated, but thick and strong. His creamy skin and the dusting of dark hair disappearing into the waistband of his boxers. His thick thighs, his big ass. Everything about him is luxurious with strength, power, and health.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Hm?” I step into him and run my palms over his shoulders, feeling the bulky muscles of his arms, then back up, touching his shoulders, his chest, and his stomach.

“Aren’t you going to measure me?” he asks.

“That’s what I’m doing,” I lie, trying to hide my smile.

“Without a measuring tape?”

I look up at him. “Real designers just use their hands.”

“Oh, yeah?” He cradles my face in his hands and smirks down at me. “Does that mean you feel up all your models, huh?”

I poke out my tongue. “Why? Are you jealous?”

“Oh, so fucking jealous.” He nods. “So jealous I could go mad. So

o I canI could rip off all your clothes and fuck you so hard you can never le
bed ever again.”

ach will “You better not rip off my clothes!” I shove him off me. “These t
alone are worth more than everything you own.”

to take “Then you better take them off quickly.”

I unbutton my silk shirt and show him what I’m wearing undern
ead and“Even my bustier? I made it myself.”

way. He He tilts his head, watching me as I slide my shirt off my shoulde
sight ofbustier underneath it is a creation of sky-blue satin that barely hi

breasts, inspired by the stays of the early nineteenth century. Althou
ach andhistorical reference might be lost on Noah, I can tell he very
in andappreciates what the garment is doing for me. He licks his lips, h
ark hairlingering on my breasts, and nods slowly.

; hands. “Keep the bustier on, then,” he says. “And the heels. I like you in he
“You just like being stepped on.”

“I like it when you’re mean to me. Makes me hard.”

ling the “That’s because you’re a shameless pervert.”

rest, his He grabs his bulge in one big hand and growls. “Mm, yeah. Like tha

I laugh and push him back, forcing him to sit back on his bed. Tak
face in my hand, I force him to look up, digging my nails into his che
jaw. “You like it when hot rich girls are mean to you?”

“Only when you do it.”

Climbing onto his lap, I push his face harshly away, forcing hin
ne. “Soback. Balancing myself over him, I rub myself lightly against the har
of his erection.

“What if I get myself off like this but forbid you to come?”

jealous He grabs me by my waist and rolls me under him so fast I let out a

ave mysurprise. For such a bulky guy, he can be frighteningly swift and ag
pins me under him, spreading my legs with his hips, grinding his ha
rouusersagainst me.

“You’re not going to forbid me to come,” he says, looking down
with a wild, triumphant grin.

leath it. “Why not?” I pant.

He roughly yanks my bustier down, revealing my nipples. They
rs. Theinstantly under his gaze, and he grabs one, pinching and tugging on it
des mydraws a whimper of pain from me.

ugh the “Because you’re a pretty little princess who wants to be fucked like
muchslut,” he says huskily. “Because you want me to fuck you with my b
is eyesand make you squirm and scream. And because—” He lowers his m
my ear. “—you like it when I come inside you, and you like leaving m
els.” still dripping with my come.”

My face burns. I try to reply in my usual mocking tone, but my
comes out breathless and broken. “You’re flattering yourself.”

Slipping one hand between us, he slides two fingers between m
it.” Satisfaction flashes on his face like lightning.

king his “Girls with such wet pussies shouldn’t be such dirty liars.”

æk and “Guys with no money in their bank accounts shouldn’t be so co
retort in a rasp.

Freeing his cock, he rubs it against me, coating it in my juices. “
n to liefancy school had educated you well, you’d know mean little princes
d bulgepunished by the nice big peasants they mistreat.”

“You couldn’t punish me if you tried.”

My breath hitches as he pushes against me. He pauses for a n
yelp of looking down at me with a dangerous grin. “I’m still going to ma

file. He scream, though.”

rd cock He impales me with a single, harsh thrust. It’s a brutal invasion, the thickness of him filling me up completely. I bite down on a scream, and he smirks at me up at him proudly. He doesn’t move for a second, letting me adjust. He leans down to kiss my mouth, deep and slow.

“So fucking proud,” he murmurs against my lips. “How long do you think you can harden you can keep quiet, my prideful princess?”
until he “Longer than you’ll last, dirty peasant.”

He pulls out in a hot glide and thrusts back inside, slamming his hips against a dirty mine. I close my mouth, but a tiny whimper slips out. He smirks.
big cock “Oh, we’ll see,” he says roughly.
mouth to I smirk back. “Give me your worst.”
my place He does.

my voice



my legs. THE NIGHT BEFORE THE gala, I’m unable to go to his place, so I arrange to meet in the staff car park after he finishes work. Carry a dark, altered suit in one of my garment bags, I wait near his car. He emerges from the trees looking like the first time I met him: in a T-shirt despite the heat, work trousers and boots, dirt smeared on his thick forearms.

If your He grins when he spots me, and the way his face immediately brightens at the sight of me sends a flutter like butterfly wings through my stomach.
ses get “Hi, princess.”

I laugh. “Stop calling me that.”

moment, He points at my hair, which is in braids pinned around my head.
ke you don’t wear your hair in a crown.”

“You’re such an idiot. Here.”

on, the I hand him the garment bag. He takes it and places it carefully
staring passenger seat, hanging the hook on the ceiling handle above the wind
le leans “Thanks,” he says, straightening up when he’s done. “I appreciate
Dirty Princess creation. I’ll hold on to it until you’re a famous designer.
You think I’ll sell it to a fashion museum or something.”

“Dirty Princess?” I laugh and shake my head. “Since when did we
call you that?”

He shrugs. “It’s a working title.”

“Just so you know, you won’t get any credit if I end up using that name.”

“I’ll trade you the name for a single kiss,” he grins, wrapping his arms
around my waist and pulling me to him.

I lace my arms around his neck, plastering my body against his.
“What kind of kiss?”

“Any kind,” he murmurs.

We kiss—and our kisses quickly turn breathy and hungry. I arch in
to feel his erection pressing insistently against my stomach. We pull a
we can catch a breath, and my hands drop to his waistband. I’m n
ashamed of how much I want him. Noah looks around, licking his lips.
Then he takes my wrists and pushes my hands away. “I should be
princess.”

I’m tempted to ignore him, to pull his dick out and beg him to fuck
right here, against his car in the Spearcrest staff car park, but he shakes
his head as if reading my thoughts.

“I mean it, sweetheart.” He takes my face gently in his hands. “I’ll see you
tomorrow, though, right?”

I nod. Tomorrow is the gala, though. Tomorrow, if everything

according to my plan, is when my father sees me with Noah and
on his give me anything I want if I dump him. That was the plan. I'd never
ow. to fail.

te it. A But now, I'm not so sure I want to succeed either.

ner and "Hey, don't look so miserable," Noah says with a grin. "You only
wait one day, alright? If we're lucky with your gala, we can sneak off
decide let you do whatever you want to me."

He thinks I'm sad because we're not fucking tonight—and I guess
about that, too. But if he knew what I'm really sad about, how would
me." react?

ne arm He'd probably be angry. Hurt. Betrayed.

I would be.

"What I nod and try to look like I'm cheered up.

"Promise?" I ask with a smile.

"Scout's honour," he says, and kisses my forehead.

nto him "I don't even know what that means."

away so He releases me and walks over to the driver's side, opening his car
ot even "It means I'll fuck you any way you like, princess."

"Really?"

uld go, "Of course." His voice suddenly becomes solemn. "I'd do anything
you."

uck me He gets into his car and waves at me. I step back and wave back.
akes his him until his car disappears into the darkness, and then I turn away
sigh.

see you When I step on the path that leads back to the sixth form girls' building
voice reaches me from the darkness—Cammie's voice.

g goes "Wow, Rose. You've really fucked up."

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ntended

have to
and I'll

I'm sad
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ur door.

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I watch
with a

lding, a

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 15

BITTER PILL

I TRY TO IGNORE Cammie, barging past her and walking away, follows me, her hands fisted at her side.

“I fucking knew it!” she calls from behind me. “You actually like th
Have you seen the car he drives? He’s a part-time gardener, for fuck
and he could probably get fired for what you two are doi—”

Stopping in my tracks, I whip around to face her. “Are you *thre*
me?”

Her dark eyes widen to an almost comical size. She’d look stupid
wasn’t so hot. “Of course not, Rose! I’m your friend. I’d never betr
but—”

“If you were my friend, you wouldn’t be fucking stalking me!” I e
my voice high and suffocated by anger.

I turn around and set off again, but this time Cammie stops me, g
my arm. “I was only following you because I was curious—and just l
I’m your friend doesn’t mean I’m going to let you fuck your own life u

“How am I fucking my own life up?”

Cammie rolls her eyes and throws her arms up in frustration. “You plan thing—Rose, it won’t work if you’re actually in love with this guy

“I never said I was in love with him!” Even as I speak them, the taste like lies in my mouth. “You’re jumping to conclusions! Just because your relationships are fucked-up doesn’t mean—”

“So you admit this is a relationship?” she says, almost shouting triumph.

“Lower your fucking voice!” I hiss, pulling her closer. “*Obviously* relationship—it has to *look* like one, remember? Doesn’t mean it’s real

but she “Does *he* know that?”

She seems incapable of saying his name—and maybe she’s forgotten his name, but I can’t say it either. Saying his name would make it all feel too real, like saying his name would hurt too much.

“Of course he doesn’t know that. Don’t be fucking stupid!”

“This whole thing,” Cammie gestures with her hands, “is fucking stupid. You’re spending all this time with this guy because you like him, and it’s pretty clear he likes you too, and now you’re telling me you’re going to dump him when your dad gives you your money back?”

“It’s *my* fucking life!” I cry out, my voice thick with contained rage. “I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

“Can’t you see I’m trying to protect you?” Cammie says. “You’re going to ruin everything just for some trashy townie who thinks with his dick and doesn’t have a single thing to offer—”

I slap her so hard my palm stings. There’s a moment of silence, the wind shuffling the leaves of the trees surrounding us like the soft murmur of a watching crowd. For a second, we stare at each other

r wholedismayed. Cammie's face goes red straight away. She cups her cheeks
y!" shakes her head.

words "You think you're so much better than everybody else," she says, her
ause alltrembling. "But you're just some spoilt, vapid daddy's girl."

I squeeze my hand into a fist to stop the tingling in my palm. My
in hershaking too when I reply. "At least I'm not a hypocritical, judgemental
asshole."

y it's a "Guess what, Rose?" Cammie sneers. "Fucking someone just because
l." they're poor is just as bad as *not* fucking someone because they're

You're just as judgemental as I am—you've just fetishized your prejudices
ten it— And with that, she turns around and walks away.

real— I let her. For a long time, I just stand on the path, the trees crowd
around me, hiding me in their shadows. At first, Cammie's words
register. I stand like a mannequin, expressionless and emotionless. The
ked-up feels real. Everything feels cold.

and it's But as soon as I get back into my bedroom, I burst into tears. I
; to justmyself on my bed, burying my face in my pillows, and sob so hard my
body convulses. My pillows stifle my pathetic wails, and my chest hurts
sobs. "The sobs wracking it.

I don't cry because I've fought with Cammie, or because we've fallen
going to and might never be friends again. I don't even cry because of her insul
ick and because she stalked me and betrayed my trust.

I cry because, no matter how ugly what Cammie said was, she said
the icy what I couldn't.

shocked She spoke the truth.

r, both

ek and



er voice

THE FOLLOWING DAY, MY dad sends a taxi to pick me up in Spearcrest and bring me to the hotel where we're both going to be staying. He's out for meetings, but his girlfriend, Luana, meets me in the hotel lobby and we have brunch together.

ecause

Everybody's always expected me to hate Luana. She's tall, Brazilian, and ridiculously beautiful, and she's only six years older than me. And I don't like her. "I don't like her," I tell my father. "I don't like her." "But only because I genuinely believe she could do so much better than him."

owding

Her smile is blinding when she sees me, and we hug like best friends. Her arms wrapped around her waist, hers around my neck. She always smells like vanilla—always—divinely delicious. We finally pull apart and she bends to kiss my cheeks, her hair soft as Angora silk when it brushes against my face.

I throw

"You're looking very sad today, Fina," she says when we sit down together for brunch. "Are you not excited about the gala?"

y entire

"Not really," I sigh.

rts with

I really want to tell Luana the truth—to tell her everything and ask for her advice—but she's too close to my father. It would be a mistake. Because I don't know if I could trust relationship advice from someone who's been purposely chosen to date my asshole father.

still did

"Is it because of your *papai*?" she asks cautiously. "You two are going to make up tonight, yes?"

"We'll see," I mutter.

Making up with my father is never as simple as just talking it out. He's so manipulative and power-mad that everything with him needs to be a game.

a fight, or a manoeuvre. That's why I was forced to do what I've done.

Noah doesn't deserve this. He doesn't deserve to be dragged in
stupid skirmish. To be used like a pawn in a chess game with a maniac
p from I'm mad at my father because I shouldn't have to involve some in
staying, person in something so ugly just so I can follow my dream. But mo
l lobby, anything, I realise, I'm mad at myself.

For being just as horrible as my father. For using people around me
azilian, get something I want.

do hate "I just don't want to become like him," I admit to Luana. "I v
Luana, become my own person, live my own life."

"I know, *miga*," she says, reaching across the table to take my
nds, my Around us, the hotel restaurant is quiet, the music stifled by the sof
alls—as carpets, the bleak daylight softened by the bronze lampshades. "Just s
kiss my to your father—he will understand."

"You know he won't. He wants me to do what he wants—he *always*
t down to have his way. I'm so sick of it, Lu! Have I not done everything he
so far?"

Luana's hazel eyes are sad as she listens to me. She would help m
her for could, I know that. But she's as stuck as I am, and now I'm just mak
sides, I sad for no reason. I tuck my hair behind my ears and shake my head,
who's a smile.

"I'm sorry, Lu, I didn't mean to bring the mood down. I've miss
joing to you know."

"I've missed you too," she says, squeezing my hand. "You loo
beautiful every time I see you."

He's so "Thanks." I give an airy laugh. "You always know how to cheer me

ame, or "Yes," she says, raising a finger. "Champagne, compliment

massages. It's the Fina cocktail!"

to this We spend the rest of our morning talking about other things. I do
to enjoy all the things I love: the beautiful hotel, the luxurious s
innocent treatments, the expensive champagne. But a bitter taste remains in my
re than It's the bitter taste that's left behind every time I remember I'm a
betray Noah.

just to



want to

GLOWING AND PERFUMED FROM the spa, I return to my room

hand. check my phone to find a text waiting for me.

white **Noah:** Can't wait to see you tonight, princess x

say that My heart sinks. I drop into the velvet armchair next to the en
bouquet of lilies. The luxury of my hotel room only makes me th
s wants Noah's flat, the unadorned walls, the threadbare carpet. One night
wanted hotel room probably costs more than his rent.

e if she work. A reminder that we live worlds apart. A reminder that this could

ing her I glance down at my phone, my stomach in knots. It's such a
forcing message—sweet and honest, just like him. What should I reply?

ed you, If I replied with the truth, I'd have to say that I can't wait to see him.
That I want to see his face and kiss his mouth and let him hold me in
arms and make me feel safe.

k more But the truth is also that I'm going to bring him in front of a cr
predators who'll sniff out his poverty like sharks smelling blood. A

up." I'm going to bring him right in front of the biggest predator of all, the
shark—my father, Robert Rosenthal.

is, and

And I'm going to use him as bait to get what I want.
And if I get what I want, I'll be sending him home on his own. The
him away like an empty wrapper once I'm done using him.
There's no way I can justify it to myself. What I *should* do is not
to *want* to do. What I *should* do is not something I think I *can* do. I should
admit the truth, tell him not to come, tell him it's just a trap. But I can
myself to do it. It all comes down to what I value more: my trust in
Noah's feelings. My plan or my principles.

Money or love.
I text him back.

Rose: Me neither x

ormous
hink of



I TOOK FIVE DIFFERENT options for what to wear at the gala, but
as I start getting ready, the perfect choice is obvious.
Four of the dresses are designer: an ephemeral Elie Saab beaded
thousands of crystals, two Dior gowns from the same collection, one by
sweetone silver, and a two-piece Miss Sohee in rose-petal pink.

The fifth is of my own creation.
It marries elements from all the other gowns. It has the structure
and elegance of Dior, the dramatic silhouette of Miss Sohee, the
femininity of Elie Saab—and most of all, the character of a Dirty F
look. The long skirt is layers of diaphanous material which will reveal
the legs whenever I walk past a light source, and the plunging V-neck of the
bodice is adorned with embellishments that look like petals.

And it's not just a dress. It's a piece I've worked for hours on. A symbol showing what I'm capable of achieving—a message to my father that this isn't just a hobby, something to do to pass the time when I'm bored or an attachment I'm giving myself a personality.

This is my passion—my art. I constructed the rigid structure of the dress by stitching myself, stabbing my fingers with needles over and over again. I painstakingly stitched and gathered the fabric at the collar to imitate flowers, and I made the skirt so that it would both obscure and reveal.

This is my dress—my creation—and I'm proud of it.

And if my father can't accept that this is what I want to do, then that's his problem. I'm done letting him pull my strings. I'm done letting him control me just like he tried to control my mother. It's time for me to stand up for myself.

And even though this night can only end with a broken heart, I'm as soon glad I won't be alone to do what I know I must.

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CHAPTER 16

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COCKTAIL HOUR TORTUR

NOAH IS A LITTLE late, but he meets me in the hotel lobby just as I expect him to do. I notice him as soon as he walks in, not because he stands out or seems out of place—he doesn't. Not as much as I expected him to, at least. It's obvious he's made an effort, and with the work I did on his suit, he looks just as well-dressed as any of the men ambling in and out of the hotel lobby.

I notice him because his eyes find mine straight away, and his face brightens up like he's standing in the middle of a sunrise. His joy at seeing me is palatable; it fills the space between us like summer sunshine, warm and comforting.

He hurries to me, and even though we're surrounded by the luxury of the hotel—marble and gold and crystal chandeliers—it's me Noah sees and is most impressed by.

“Wow, you look like a real princess,” he says, taking my hand and twirling me slowly in front of him. “Are you sure you're not royalty? Tell me your full name again, Seraphina Rosenthal? You might be the future queen of some European country.”

E

I laugh, a little flustered that he's remembered my name, but comforted by his admiration.

"Please. I'm just a simple American girl."

"No, you're not." He leans forward to kiss my cheek. "Nothing about you, Seph." He pulls away and runs his hand up the nape of my neck. "You look nice with your hair up."

"I do?" I ask, my cheeks flushing with heat.

"Mm-hm. You should wear it up more often."

I give him a look. "You'd only mess it up, anyway."

He smirks. "That's the point."

I asked
s out or
nyway.
e looks
ar.

What part of Noah would I miss the most if I chose money over his strong body, his embraces, his kisses? His warmth, his shameless adoration and admiration? Talking to him, being with him, or fuckin' laughing with him, teasing him, being teased by him?

is face
: seeing
rm and

All of it.

I'd miss all of it.

He gives me his arm. "Well? Shall we go? You know I've never been to a gala, right?"

7 of the
ms the

"It's basically like a super fancy dinner party, but journalists take pictures when you go in."

He laughs. "You know I've never been to a dinner party either, right?"

making
What's
ueen of

"You haven't?"

"No!" He jabs his elbow into my side with a boyish guffaw. "I'm not a princess, not some middle-aged banker. I do normal things, like going to house parties and bars with my mates."

I raise an eyebrow. "I do normal things too, you know."

"No, you don't. Come with me to the next house party I go to, and

mostly you'll see how normal people do it."

My heart skips a beat. I grab his arm. "You want to introduce me friends?"

simple He grins. "Got to show you off, don't I?"

y neck. For a second, I'm speechless. Speechless that he's thinking about things together in the future, speechless that he clearly wants me in l Speechless at how much I want what he's describing. Going to norma parties, letting him show me off. Meeting his friends—being part of hi Cammie was right, after all. I really *have* fucked up.

"Of course." I lace my arm through his and put on my shiniest m? His "Anyway, just follow my cue. You'll be fine."

s, open We're heading out of the hotel when I notice something. I stop ig him?tracks. "Noah."

"Yea?"

I cover my mouth with my hands. "Why are you wearing a backpack

"Because," he says, gesturing at his backpack like I'm not already æn to aat it in horror, "I needed it to carry my stuff on the train."

"The *train*? But you have a car."

ce your He lets out a guffaw of disbelief. "Drive? In *London*? Christ, you re American."

t?" I want to comment that I never drive in London—I just get driven but I guess that would only strengthen his argument, not mine.

twenty, "Well, what stuff do you need, anyway? What on earth do you l oing tothere?"

"You know, standard stuff." He slides the strap off his shoulder and his backpack. "Like... charger, headphones, water—normal stuff."

nd then "Normal stuff?" I pull out what essentially looks like a blue plasti

with a handle. “God, what’s that?”

to your “That’s my water bottle. Got to keep hydrated.”

“I know about the importance of hydration, Noah. This is just...”

I watch him as he slowly places his gigantic water bottle back into his backpack. His expression is bemused. He clearly doesn’t understand why it’s so ridiculous for him to bring a gallon of water to a charity art gala. As I close the space between us, I press a kiss to his mouth.

“You’re so cute,” I say against his lips before pulling away. “Come have the staff take your backpack up to my room. You can come and see me later. Let’s hurry, the limousine is waiting for us.”

His eyes widen as we hasten out of the hotel. “Limousine?”

I smirk. “Let me guess—you’ve never been in a limousine before.”

“Obviously not. You’re the first rich girlfriend I’ve ever had.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh, the *first* one? Or how many?”

He laughs. “Depends how long you keep me around, doesn’t it?”

“Can’t believe you’re already planning to replace me with another girl.”

He wraps his arm around me, squeezing my waist as the limousine pulls up in front of us. “You’ve given me a taste for the lifestyle.”

We laugh, and it’s not until we’re both getting into the limousine that I realise he’s just called me his girlfriend.

But isn’t that the plan? For him to think we’re in a relationship?

What’s not part of the plan is how much I like it. The way it makes me want to smile until my cheeks ache, the way it makes my skin feel tingly and warm as if bathed in sunshine, the way it makes my heart feel so full it wants to explode.

Oh god. I’ve really, truly fucked up.



side his THE ART GALLERY IS everything I knew it would be: glittering
why it's celebrities in designer dresses, influencers in couture and high society
Closing who have more money than they could spend in a lifetime.

on, I'll Arm-in-arm with Noah, I walk up the carpeted steps in the direction
pick it gallery atrium. Cameras flash around us, social media reporters with
mics clutched in their long acrylics crowding the edges of the steps.

Noah's arm tightens around me.

"Why didn't you tell me this was going to be so fancy?" he mutters
my ear.

"It's not that fancy," I reply against his cheek. "Don't worry, I won't
your side, okay?"

er rich We are ambushed by a famous influencer wearing an exquisite two
in hot pink satin.

pulls up "Seraphina Rosenthal—babes, you know I love everything you wear
I smile back graciously, and we exchange some cheek kisses. "Right
at you!"

e that I "Will you tell all the fashion gurlies out there who you're wearing
tonight?"

kes me "Of course." I turn to her camera, giving it my best social media
gly and "This dress is designed and created by yours truly. I'll be going to
it might school in the fall, so watch out for more designs from Dirty Princess
Seraphina Rosenthal."

Noah's arm tightens almost imperceptibly around my waist, a
encouragement I didn't know I needed.

The influencer gushes about my dresses and quizzes me about my label. I answer all her questions until she jabs her mic in Noah's direction.

"And who is this fine bit of arm candy?"

ig with He has the wide-eyed expression of a deer in headlights. "Um—
y types Noah Watson."

"And what do you do, Noah?" the influencer reaches for him and seizes his arm. I throw her a look and she immediately backs away. "What work out, huh?"

"I, um, do some boxing," Noah says. He looks at me and mouths *help*.

against I laugh and lead him away.

"Talk to you soon, girl!" I call over my shoulder without looking back.

't leave "If this is what being rich is like," Noah mutters against my ear, "I'd be poor."

o-piece "You get used to it," I sigh.

"I don't think I could," he replies.

r." I can't even blame him. This life could take some getting used to—I've been living this way since I was born. The disorienting flash of camera mics pressed into my face, the complete lack of privacy—they've always been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Even in Spearcrest, and we're more or less sheltered from the real world, we've still somehow created a smaller-scale version of what high society life is.

fashion I've never known anything else, but if I could be anywhere right now, I wouldn't be here. It would be somewhere small and remote and quiet. Noah. No cameras, no mics, no social media and no eyes on me.

waist— Because the moment we enter the gallery, that's all I can feel. Eyes piercing me from every direction. It's a particular sensation, like someone

7 futurebeing stuck to you. Not painful, but uncomfortable and relentless.

ion. Especially since I can tell they're not looking at me because beautiful gown. They're looking at me because of Noah. They stare—Noah's face with slight, polite frowns, trying to place him. Asking their questions. *Where have we seen him? Do we know him? Who is he?*

queezes Cocktail hour is in full force, so everyone is drinking and pretending to look at the artwork when they're looking at anything but. My father is nowhere to be seen. I've barely wrapped my fingers around a drink. I'm accosted by three couples of rich New Yorkers.

They all kiss my cheek and tell me how much I've grown, how beautiful I look, what an amazing young woman I've become. Then they ask why I'm wearing—out of duty. Then they ask about Noah—the real reason I'd rather come over.

“This is my boyfriend, Noah,” I say sweetly. “He lives in Dore, a small town near Spearcrest.”

They all exchange looks, communicating without speaking. Their eyes meet I've seen a woman I grew up seeing at events and who goes by the name Marshara, then they look to Noah with a sweet smile and the cold dead eyes of a viper about to strike. “And what do you do, Noah?”

Although Noah shrugs. “Um, a couple of things at the moment. Some garbage collection work and some deliveries. Sometimes, some kitchen work.”

I look at Noah and my heart swells in my chest, an almost unbearable sensation. I never had to instruct Noah to tell the truth about his jobs but it would never have occurred to him to lie about them. It would never have occurred to him to be ashamed of what he does for a living.

on me, “*Right,*” Marsha says with the restrained delight of someone finding something their enemy is dead but not wishing to appear callous. “How interesting.”

With an insincere smile, I excuse myself, pulling Noah away by the arm of myWe immediately get intercepted by another couple, then a group of women who are probably each other's best friends and eventually simultaneously, then some people my age, then some of my father's business partners.

It's almost an hour later when we manage to escape and catch our breath in a quiet corner of the gallery, half-hidden by a massive pillar of pink marble. We stare at each other. Noah's cheeks puff with air, and then he lets out an exhausted breath.

"Fuck me," he says. "Is it going to be like this all night? Who I'm interrogating every time we bump into someone?"

I slump back against the marble pillar. "Uh-huh."

"Bloody hell." Noah tugs on the collar of his shirt with a finger. "I mean, come on, or is this place also making you feel claustrophobic? I'm pissing someone off."

I laugh and shake my head. "It's not the place that's making you feel claustrophobic. It's the people."

"Right—well." Noah runs his hand through his choppy dark hair. "I've been here for a while now, right? How long until we get to leave?"

"Oh god, I wish. We're barely halfway through cocktail hour."

He raises his eyebrows. "What's after cocktail hour?"

"There'll be a dinner, some talks, then entertainment—knowing how painful that'll be an up-and-coming young singer in a tight dress—and then because there'll be an after-party."

Noah nods and takes a deep breath, puffing his cheeks with air and releasing it slowly. "Right. Shit, I think I'd rather spend an hour in the gym taking punches from Tyson Fury."

"Please don't say that out loud. If my father hears you, he might

his arm. make it happen.”

of older Noah looks genuinely impressed. “Your dad knows Tyson Fury?”

enemies “He knows everyone.” I shake my head. “Probably because he’s
business himself.”

“Oh.” Noah draws closer and cups my cheek. “Do you not get a
breath in your dad?”

marble. I lick my lips, suddenly nervous. “Not really, no.”

out an “Do you want... is he going to be here tonight?”

“Yes.”

Police He nods as if I’ve just said something very serious and important.
look, don’t worry, princess.” He points at my drink. “Down your drink
do the same. Then we’ll get more drinks. We’ll greet all the nosy fuck
s it just a buzz on, avoid your dad, get through the dinner, and the moment yo
weat.” to go, you give me the signal, and I’ll whisk you out of here. We’ll
ng you bar, or dancing, or back to your hotel room—whatever cheers y
Okay?”

“We’ve Why is he so kind? If he wasn’t so kind—if he wasn’t such a good
—then I could’ve done this.

But I can’t. The pain inside my chest tells me I can’t. My heart is
at me to tell him the truth, to save him, to *choose* him.

ny dad, “That sounds amazing,” I whisper. “It sounds amazing, Noah, but
there’ll There’s something I’ve got to tell you.”

“What is it?” He frowns, tilting my face gently up to his. “Hey—
beforealright?”

he ring “Yes, I... look, I’ve not been honest with you, and I wish I had bee
didn’t know how to say it, so I...” I gaze into his eyes. There’s no
t try to there, not even fear—only concern. Noah doesn’t seem to fear for a

that I'm about to hurt him—he seems to only care that I'm okay. A makes what I have to say even harder, but I need to say it now, while s Satan still a chance, before it's too late. "I don't know how to say it, and want you to hate me, so—"

on with "Seraphina," my name in Noah's mouth is gentle and warm as sunli brushes a thumb over my lips, quieting me for a moment. "I could nev you. You can tell me anything."

He leans down to kiss me on my forehead, but he's suddenly pulle by his shoulder, startling us both.

"Well, "Get the fuck off my daughter," snarls a voice.

lk—I'll A deep, angry voice, with a thick New York accent. A voice that ers, get my stomach drop and my skin spike with nerves.

ou want My father steps around the pillar. His face is red and his eyes are go to a with fury. But he's not looking at me. He's looking straight at Noah.

rou up. "And who the *fuck* are you?"

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that I'm about to hurt him—he seems to only care that I'm okay. And that makes what I have to say even harder, but I need to say it now, while there's still a chance, before it's too late. "I don't know how to say it, and I don't want you to hate me, so—"

"Seraphina," my name in Noah's mouth is gentle and warm as sunlight. He brushes a thumb over my lips, quieting me for a moment. "I could never hate you. You can tell me anything."

He leans down to kiss me on my forehead, but he's suddenly pulled back by his shoulder, startling us both.

"Get the fuck off my daughter," snarls a voice.

A deep, angry voice, with a thick New York accent. A voice that makes my stomach drop and my skin spike with nerves.

My father steps around the pillar. His face is red and his eyes are bulging with fury. But he's not looking at me. He's looking straight at Noah.

"And who the *fuck* are you?"

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 17

UGLY TRUTH

NOAH IS REMARKABLY CALM as he faces my father. I've seen men and women, regardless of wealth or status, crumble in the face of Robert Rosenthal's fury—I've done it myself. But Noah meets my eyes, watching him for a moment before answering.

"I'm Noah Watson, sir."

He extends his hand, but my father doesn't take it.

"You've got a labourer's hands, *Noah*," he sneers. "Not the kind of hands that should go anywhere near my daughter."

Noah shrugs and drops his hand. "Seraphina is standing right here and she wants me away from her, she'll tell me so, and I'll obey *her*."

For the first time, my father turns to look at me. He doesn't acknowledge the fact we haven't seen each other in months, or how I look, or my dress, or even that I'm here at all. His gaze slides off me like I'm an object, a stupid, some lesser artist that's not quite deserving of his attention, and he turns back to Noah.

"Watch how you speak to me, boy. I'll have you thrown out on your ass faster than you can fucking blink."

“I’m sure you will, sir. But I wasn’t trying to be disrespectful.” I Noah as he speaks, in awe of how calm he is, how quiet and level he stays. “I’ve come here with Seraphina and I’d prefer to leave with her.

My father laughs, high and false.

“You’re never going to see my daughter again after tonight.”

He’s too angry to realise guests are trickling into our section of the I was hoping he wouldn’t do this in front of everyone, but now I can he can’t even help himself. His fragile ego is wilting at the sight of calm, unconcerned demeanour—and I’m sure that the size disci between them is adding nothing but fuel to the fire of my father’s ire.

grown

This is all my fault.

of my

I’ve engineered this moment—and it’s about to blow up in my face.

father’s

Since I’ve created this mess, I need to be the one to fix it. I’m the o who can.

of hand

“Please, daddy,” I say, raising my hands in a pacifying gesture, “I do this here. We’ll leave if that’s what you want.”

. If she

“No, *you*’re staying,” my father snaps without looking at me. H Noah an ugly smile. “Do you even know why my daughter brought y tonight?”

wledge

“No,” Noah answers. “Your daughter is a free-thinking young wom can do whatever she likes without owing me an explanation.”

ess—or

atue by

ns back

“You stupid bastard,” my father bursts out. “You poor, stupid, unec bastard. You’re not here because you respect my daughter, or becau love her. You’re not even here for sex. You’re just here because you stupid to know better—too stupid to know you’re getting played.”

our ass

I step between my father and Noah. “Daddy, please, don’t.”

Luana lays her hand on my father’s arm and murmurs, “Robert, plea

stare at I hadn't even noticed she was there. I hadn't even noticed the room
is voiceup. All I notice now is my father's twisted, snarling face and Noah's
" handsome features, his dark eyes watching my father, taking him in.

"My daughter here is a beautiful girl," he snarls, "and I'm sure it ma
feel really good to show up here with her on your arm. But she's not l
gallery.you here for your looks, and she's not brought you here because sh
see thatyou, or even because she likes you. So I'll tell you why she's broug
Noah'shere."

repancy He finally turns his face to look at me. "My pretty little empty-
daughter thinks she's going to be a fashion designer, and she wants to
years of her life and thousands of dollars going to fashion school. Bu
she can't do that without my money, and since I cut her off from h
nly onefund, she tried to find a nice little way of blackmailing me. What wa:
said again, honey? *You're not afraid to go low, but I can go lower?*"

et's not My face burns and every organ inside my body feels like it's melt
black, bubbling mush. I'm suddenly thankful I've not eaten anything
e givesbecause if I had, I'd be throwing up right about now. I glance at No
ou hereNoah is still watching my father.

He's still calm, but there's a dull flush in his cheeks now.

an. She My father's voice is trembling with barely repressed triumph as h
into Noah's eyes. "Clever little Seraphina went ahead and found herse
lucatedlow-class bum to bring here, hoping, no doubt, I'd be willing to do a
ise you to spare us both from the embarrassment she's causing the Rosentha
i're tooBut you know what, honey?" My dad turns back to me. "You win. It v
You really *are* my daughter, after all. So yes. You can have your tru
back and still go to fashion school, just like you wanted."

ise." He bats his hand at Noah in a dismissive gesture. "As for this poor

filling here, you can just send him crawling back to whatever shithole you please. Stay calm, him from.”

I blink, and tears drop from my eyelashes like cold pearls. I touch my cheeks and look in surprise at my wet fingers—I hadn’t even realised I was crying. Noah finally speaks.

“I’ll leave if Seraphina wants me to leave.”

“She must really have you whipped, boy—where’s your pride?”

My father’s face is red with anger. “If you won’t leave, I’ll have you tossed out like so much trash.” He looks around, ignoring the crowd that’s formed outside the wasteroom. “Security!”

I force myself to speak. “Daddy, please don’t—we’ll both leave now. I’ll never trust—”

My father grabs my arm, startling a cry out of me. He’s not holding me hard, but he’s not grabbed me like this since I was young. I stare at him, stunned into shock.

“You’re just going to do what you’re told for once,” he grits out.

Before either of us can say anything else, Noah steps calmly up to my father. He takes my father’s wrist in his hand and squeezes. It barely hurts, like anything, but my father releases me with a grunt of pain. Noah, however, doesn’t let him go straight away.

“Don’t ever lay hands on Seraphina again, Mr Rosenthal,” he says in a voice colder and harder than I’ve ever heard it. “I won’t tell you again.”

He drops my father’s arm as if it disgusts him. He turns to me. “You’re warm, princess—shall we get some fresh air?”

I nod, tears streaming down my cheeks. My voice comes out so small and pathetic.

“Yes, please.”

plucked



ich my

and I was EVEN THOUGH WE TAKE a fire exit out, we still walk out to the cameras. As far as they're concerned, this is juicy gossip happening time, but I don't feel that way. This is my life—my problems—served

?" My a platter with everyone helping themselves.

sed out And for once, I wish they would just leave me alone.

d in the Noah, holding me firmly against him, barges past the ravaging Neither of us has any wish to stay outside the gallery, so we dash through the cold, orange lights of London. We walk until we lose ourselves in the crowd, and then we follow the dark, glimmering ribbon of the Thames

ling me We finally stop in a small park lit by garlands of fairy lights. Near him in old man ambles down the pebbled path, smoking a pipe and walking like He tips his head at us as we sit side by side on a bench. His dog giddily up to us, sniffs Noah's hand then scampers off just as giddily. I shiver

to my Noah takes off his tuxedo jacket and places it around my shoulders. I doesn't speak.

y looks He's not said anything since we left.

though, His silence is more terrifying and heartbreaking than anything he could say, his saying.

” “Aren't you going to say anything?” I ask finally, peering up at him.

ou look He looks at me. His cheeks are a little flushed from the cold, and he's rubbing his hands together, but he still seems, despite everything, astoundingly calm.

all and “I'm not sure what to say, to be honest.” His voice is quiet and thoughtful. “This is the first time I've ever been in a situation like this.” He lets out

chuckle. “You rich people are pretty complicated, huh?”

“We’re not complicated, we’re...” I sigh. “Just not very nice.”

“Yeah, I kind of noticed.”

flash of We look at each other. My tears stopped and dried up while w
in real-walking through London, but now I’m looking into his pretty grey eye
up like well up again. My lips tremble.

“I’m so sorry, Noah.”

He rubs my shoulder comfortingly. “Hey. Don’t worry about it.”

crowd. The fact he’s the one comforting me after everything that ha
h away somehow makes me feel a thousand times worse. I shake my head an
elves in speak, but my voice comes out in a pitiful whine.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

erby, an He tilts his head and gives me a soft, sad smile. “You sure?”
his dog. I hesitate. If I could lie to him and make everything okay, I would
ily runs anything to take back what happened, to make things go back to ho
er, and were before this horrible night. But I can’t—and I owe him the truth
ers. He was too much of a coward to tell him when I should have.

So I do the thing I should have done all along.

I tell him the truth.

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chuckle. “You rich people are pretty complicated, huh?”

“We’re not complicated, we’re...” I sigh. “Just not very nice.”

“Yeah, I kind of noticed.”

We look at each other. My tears stopped and dried up while we were walking through London, but now I’m looking into his pretty grey eyes, they well up again. My lips tremble.

“I’m so sorry, Noah.”

He rubs my shoulder comfortingly. “Hey. Don’t worry about it.”

The fact he’s the one comforting me after everything that happened somehow makes me feel a thousand times worse. I shake my head and try to speak, but my voice comes out in a pitiful whine.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He tilts his head and gives me a soft, sad smile. “You sure?”

I hesitate. If I could lie to him and make everything okay, I would. I’d do anything to take back what happened, to make things go back to how they were before this horrible night. But I can’t—and I owe him the truth since I was too much of a coward to tell him when I should have.

So I do the thing I should have done all along.

I tell him the truth.

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 18

PRETTY GIRL TEARS

“NOAH...” I TAKE A deep breath, squeezing my hands together. “What my father said was true, about him cutting me off, and he was right. It’s the only reason I invited you to the gala. I thought he would be angry, and let me have my trust fund back if I broke up with you.”

Saying it out loud makes it sound even uglier than when my dad said it. I can barely look him in the eyes. Part of me wishes he would stand up and shout, throw accusations and insults at me, storm away. But he doesn’t do those things. Instead, he gently slides his arm away from my shoulder and sits, watching me, and listens in complete silence.

I continue painfully. “I *did* intend to use you and throw you away, just like he said. I’m so ashamed to admit it. And I don’t feel that way now, but it doesn’t make it okay still. And I know I should have told you the truth. I should never have brought you here. I fucked up. I betrayed you and you, and you don’t deserve it. You’re the last person in the world who deserves it.”

The tears flow freely down my cheeks now, but it’s getting easier to

“You’re so kind and hard-working and patient and selfless and yourself. You’re like nobody I’ve ever met, and you’ve treated me better than any other man I’ve been with. I picked you because I thought my dad would think you don’t deserve me, but in reality, it’s *me* who doesn’t deserve *you*.”

He just watches me for a moment. Then he speaks in a dull voice. “You’ve done?”

I stare at him, blinking tears. “Y—yes?”

“Alright.” He takes a deep breath, squeezing a fisted hand in the pocket of his jacket. “I guess it’s my turn to confess, then.”

“What do you mean?”

He gives me a rueful smile. “I already knew all that, Seph. I knew what you were like, how you got with me, why you invited me to the gala.”

The ground might as well have disappeared under my feet for all I know. I feel disoriented and bewildered. “I feel right now.”

“How could you possibly know?”

“Your friend told me. Your friend with the black hair? She came to me in the greenhouse.”

“*Cammie?*” My gut squirms, nausea rising in my stomach. “Cammie told me she wanted to see you.”

“She was scared I might be a serial killer.” He shakes his head with a incredulous laugh. “She told me you were crazy rich, and that I better not harm a hair on your head, or your dad would have my balls cut off and my body thrown to the pigs.”

I stare at him, mouth wide open. He shrugs and sighs. “I told her to stop worrying and that I just fancy you. Then she... well, then she told me everything.” He meets my eyes. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think she

true to trying to be a dick. I just think she was scared one of us would get her to guess she was right.”

My father Fresh tears roll down my face, my heart melting at his kindness—deserve even in this moment, even for Cammie.

“Then *why?*” My voice is a pathetic wail. “Why didn’t you say anything. “Are you still agree to come tonight? Why did you keep seeing me?”

He tilts my face up to his with a finger and dabs my tears with his sleeve.

“I’m clueless.” “Alright, easy with the tears, princess.” He shakes his head. “Because you’re a clueless girl, people don’t get together because they *deserve* each other. People get together because they *like* each other. They stay together because they like being around each other. It’s as simple as that.”

“But *I like you!*” I protest, glaring at him. “That’s what I’m saying!” “Good,” he says, “because I like you too. I didn’t care you were ugly because I like you—a lot. If that makes me some sort of loser, I don’t care either. I’ll be your loser any day of the week.”

How can someone so big and strong be so humble? And since why am I so attracted to humbleness?

I sigh. “You must think I’m such a heartless, horrible person.”

“Nah.” He wipes my tears dry and tucks loose strands of hair behind my ears. He gives me a crooked grin. “I just think you have a vicious streak. But I like it when you’re mean to me, remember?”

I try to pull away, but he cradles my face in his hands, keeping me steady.

“There’s being mean, and then there’s being a manipulative bitch.”

He nods, still holding my face tenderly in his hands. “I know. You’ve learned something shitty, I’m not saying you haven’t. You’re learning some powerful lessons in life—you’re learning it’s not okay to use other people to get what you want.”

hurt. I want, and that you should deal with your problems *before* they beat
in your face. But guess what, princess? That's what happens when you
—still—up. You make mistakes, and you do your best to learn from them. If I
make a guess, I'd say you've probably got many fuck-ups left ahead of
anything? I stare at him. The darkness of the park and the orange glow of the
?" lights battle one another on the planes of his face. His gorgeous
his shirt structure is highlighted by the play of lights and shadows. He looks
this moment, more mature.

use, you "How can you be so calm?" I breathe. "After everything that has
other tonight?"

because "Because," he says, "if I crumpled or panicked every time I took a
I'd never get off the ground. Life isn't easy, princess. The world outside
' castle is tough. Sometimes, you're going to be punched—physically
ing me, otherwise. And the only valuable thing isn't having money or
n't care education. It's strength. The ability to take a punch and keep going.
resentment, revenge—where would they get me?"

an am I He looks at me, and his eyes soften. "Trust me, Seph. If I fell apart
time something bad happened, there'd be nothing left of me. So don't
about tonight. Don't worry about any of it. I'll be fine regardless. I
ind my have left to do is decide what *you* want."

s mean "I want you," I blurt out.

He raises his eyebrows. "But you also want to go to fashion school
e close. want to live well and have the freedom to do the things you like. You
make clothes and have your own label. Right?"

ve done "I don't care about the money." I grab his hands and squeeze them
recious father thinks he can use my trust fund to control me, but I don't care
et what that, I—"

slow up “Seraphina.” He laces his fingers through mine and squeezes me. You grow “Let’s not pretend money doesn’t matter—it does. You were born with money—I wasn’t. But that doesn’t mean I’m naïve and don’t understand the value of it. I understand it better than you, probably. It’s not easy to create a fairy—money. And it makes everything easier. It will pay for your education, a bonefashion school. It will help you fund your future business, your label, your lifestyle. I can live without money because I always have. But I would make you choose between me and living a good life. Living the life I wanted happened.”

He stands up and helps me to my feet.

“Let’s head back to the hotel. I’m going to drop you off and go back to work. And you should talk to your dad. Be smart. Be strong. Fight for what you want, alright?”

I nod and let him lead me out of the park. We flag a taxi, and even though I’m angry, we sit nestled together, we don’t speak. My mind is a jumbled mess as I process everything he’s just told me.

Back at the hotel, Noah collects his backpack and then bids me farewell. He takes my hand in the atrium. He takes my head in his hands and kisses my cheeks and forehead. He tries to let me go, but I cling to him, fingers curled around his waist.

“You’ll be alright, princess,” he murmurs against my hair. “You’re stronger than you look.”

“I don’t want you to go,” I mutter.

“You know where I am, and you have my number. If you call, I’ll be there. My address. And if your dad does anything to scare you or upset you, you can call me.”

e back. me know. I'm sorry to say this, princess—but I would love to punch y
m within the face.”

and the I choke out a laugh. “Get in line.”

ome by Finally, I have no choice but to let him go. He kisses me one last
ication, the mouth.

l—your “Good luck, princess. I love you.”

d never And then he turns and leaves.

ife you I text him as soon as I get back to my room.

Rose: I love you too x

home.

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just let

me know. I'm sorry to say this, princess—but I would love to punch your dad in the face.”

I choke out a laugh. “Get in line.”

Finally, I have no choice but to let him go. He kisses me one last time on the mouth.

“Good luck, princess. I love you.”

And then he turns and leaves.

I text him as soon as I get back to my room.

Rose: I love you too x

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 19

BUSINESS BITCH

DESPITE EVERYTHING NOAH SAID to me, I still end up choosing

I meet my father at the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Luana is still
him, and she gives me a big hug when I walk in. Things are visible
between us, but judging by the way my father makes an effort to g
politely when I sit down, Luana must have given him a stern telling-of

Once we're all sat down, he gets straight to business.

“You can't see that boy anymore,” he says. “You can have full ac
your trust fund, and you can go to fashion school—but I don't want yo
anywhere near him.”

“Then I'd rather not have my trust fund,” I answer.

Unlike last night, I'm calm today. I'm cried out, and Noah's
strength seems to have seeped into me. It allows me to face my father
fear—even if my heart is beating like crazy.

“You wouldn't last a minute without my money,” my father sneers.

“Robert,” Luana hisses in warning.

My father raises a hand. “Okay, look, honey. This boy isn't right fo
you know it. I've looked into him. Raised by a single mom who wal

when he was sixteen. No father. No education. Shitty minimum-wage
Fights some amateur boxing matches but works too much to make
He'll never amount to anything. He'll never become anyone."

"He's *already* someone," I snap. "And he *already* amounts to some-
Just because he doesn't have qualities *you* value doesn't mean he
have any qualities. And I happen to love his qualities. I love that he
hard, that he doesn't look down on others. I love that he works all the
that he's helping his mom pay for her wedding, that he's still boxing
though he barely has time to train. I like his determination, his strength
like that he actually likes me and cares for me, that he treats me
kindness, like I matter. He has something you could never buy, daddy:
heart."

"A good heart doesn't pay the bills," my father says, rolling his eyes.
good heart won't pay for your designer clothes and your expensive
champagne and your holidays and your partying."

I nod. "That's fine. I'll pay for those things myself."

"With what money?"

"With money I'll make, daddy. I don't want to end up becoming the
you are, but that doesn't mean I can't learn from you. So I'll do what you
I'll get loans. I'll work hard. I'll make something of myself. And when
successful designer, when I own a fashion house and end up on the cover
Vogue, then I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I got there all on my own.
And I'll tell everyone who'll listen that I did it all without you, that
refused to give me a cent. I'll wear that fact like a badge of honour."

We stare at each other across the table. My father's gaze is hard, and
my own stubborn pride reflected in his features. There are many things

ge jobs. father dislikes about me, but ultimately, he can't deny I'm his true dau
it pro. have his blue eyes, his qualities, his flaws.

I'll just be the better version. The elevated, polished, kinder version.
nothing. "Fine," he says suddenly, slamming his hand down. "If that's wh
doesn't want, honey, then let's handle this like a business. I'll make you a de
e workscan have your trust fund—but as an investment, in exchange for stocks
se jobs, "Stocks? So that you can become a shareholder of my company b
ig even even set it up? So you can steal my business out from under me?" I
1. And I throwing back my hair over my shoulders. "How stupid do you think I
ie with "What do you propose, then?" he snaps. "Since you're so clever now
a good "Loan me the money. A business loan."

His eyes narrow. He watches me for a second, sitting completely
yes. "Away he does whenever he's considering an important decision in a b
pensivemeeting.

"With interest," he says finally.

"At a fixed rate. And to start accruing only once I finish fashion sch

"Fine. But once you finish fashion school, you'll owe me quarterly
personand progress reports."

you did. "Fine. But I'll keep sole control over the business."

n I'm a He smiles—a cold rictus. "Unless you fail to repay the loan."

over of "Which will be long term, with a minimum term of fifteen years."

ly own. He lets out a bark of laughter but nods curtly. "Fine. I'll draw u
nat you papers."

"And I'll have a lawyer look at them before I sign."

nd I see He lifts his glass even though he's only drinking water. I raise my n
ngs my We clink glasses.

"You two are crazy," Luana sighs. But there's relief in her eyes w

ghter. Ispeaks, and she finally starts eating her breakfast.

“All that over some stupid boy,” my father says, shaking his head.

I shake my head and take a sip of my drink. “All that over my free
hat youmake my own choices.”

al. You

s.”

efore I

[laugh, TO MY GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT and sadness, I don’t get to se

am?” for the next few weeks. We only have a week off school for half-term

v?” I’m forced to spend with my father and lawyers, looking over co

Luckily, I also get to spend a lot of time with Luana—the one red

still the feature of being around him.

usiness When I return to Spearcrest, the story of what happened at the g

spread like wildfire, and I’m forced to face the consequences of my :

The girls I used to consider friends talk about me right in front of me

ool.” bothering to hide their gossip behind their hands. Everyone’s pullir

updates weight by spreading the gossip all across social media, but I keep

every day, refusing to let myself be bullied into deleting all my accou

so many disgraced socialites before me.

“What’s the opposite of a gold digger?” Giselle Frossard says lou

afternoon at the end of a class we share. “A dirt digger? A bottom feed

p some “I think it’s just called having low self-esteem,” someone replies.

tinkling of girly titters.

I close my eyes and remind myself of what Noah said. *If I crumple*

rimosa. *time I took a punch, I’d never get off the ground.* That gives me the str

need to ignore them as I pack my things away.

hen she



“Do you know what having low self-esteem is?” The classroom suddenly falls silent even as everyone is getting ready to leave. “Judging other people and making fun of them because you have nothing better going on in your own life.”

I turn my eyes to the door. Cammie, with her long black hair falling over her shoulders like a superhero's cloak, is standing with her shoulder against the doorway. Her eyes fix Giselle and her hangers-on with an icy stare. I don't say anything.

“You coming, Rose?” she asks.

Slung my bag over my shoulder, I saunter after her, my steps seeming featherlight. We walk silently down the corridor for a moment, then Cammie breaks the silence.

“Ignore those bitter hags,” she says lightly. “They're all jealous because your boyfriend's making you come and theirs aren't.”

It's not a formal apology—but it's a *Cammie* apology. I loop my arm through hers and toss my hair over my shoulder.

“You're not anybody until they're talking shit about you,” I say and they all laugh.

“Oh great, I can't wait until it's my turn,” she says with a roll of her eyes. A smile lurks on the corner of her mouth. I pretend to examine my nails with an over-the-top flourishing of my fingers.

“I can always ask Noah if he has any hot friends.”

“Ugh, don't start!” she exclaims, poking her elbow into my side.

But we're both smiling now. I know Cammie regrets our argument because she knows I was also in the wrong. Neither of us needs to say it.

My friendship with Cammie is enough to keep me going for now. The mocking and insults... Rumours in Spearcrest are like wildfir

uddenly spread fast and burn bright, but they are also over quickly. Once
peoplenothing left to consume, the fire just burns out, leaving only ash
in yours smoke.

I just need to wait for that to happen. And until then, I have things to
; on her about. Coursework, exams, university interviews. I'm expected to
inst the portfolio to present at interviews, so I have to work on that as well.

2. They It keeps me busy enough to ignore the pointing, the insults, the ;
This isn't my real life, I remind myself.

My real life has barely started.

uddenly

Lammie



because ONE DAY, I'M SITTING in the Arts section of the library, flipping t
glossy books of watercolours and looking for inspiration for some
ny arm when a dark figure glides silently past my aisle, startling me.

Sophie Sutton.

with a Even though my life feels like it's changed completely since the las
her, she hasn't changed at all. She wears her long, thick hair in the
eyes. middle parting of hers, her uniform free of any adornments or style
ny nails black brogues on her big feet. She's always been so tall and gangly, s
out wherever she goes.

I peer at her from around the corner of the aisle I'm standing—hidi
She finds a desk and sits down, setting her books and papers out in t
it—and her. I can only see a bit of her face, but she has that serious express
always has, like the weight of the world lies on her shoulders.

As for My chest feels like it's caving in as I watch her. I think about Noah
e: they the jobs he has, and how he never worries about anyone judging him b

there is in his world, he's just like everybody else. Just a nice, normal guy tries and get through life the best way he can.

But Sophie has to live the same life as Noah, except surrounded by people who worry who have everything she'll never have. People who rub their wealth and build a privilege in her face and shame her for having none of it.

Part of me wants to go up to Sophie, to ask for her forgiveness. But I probably giggles. She probably heard about the rumours. She'd just think I was covering my eyes because I'd been caught out with a poor person of my own. She might think I'm fetishizing my prejudices the same way Cammie does.

And above all, I have the feeling Sophie wouldn't appreciate an apology. She wouldn't want it. For someone who's endured so many insults, she has a lot of pride in her. Her pride is her armour.

Through Maybe that's why Evan is so obsessed with her. Because there's not a single print, his arsenal—not his popularity, not his athletic prowess, not his good looks that could put a chip in her armour.

For the first time in my life, I envy Sophie. Not because of Evan, but because she has that true strength Noah spoke about, that innate ability to take her punches and never go down. Sophie glides through Spearcross, heavy nothing can get to her. She makes it look easy, but I know now how hard it is standing

And that's the missing part of the puzzle. I never understood what Evan saw in Sophie, what kept him forever drawn to her. But it was in front of me all along. It wasn't her poverty, her circumstances or her prefect badge front of her strength.

Thinking of Sophie and Evan doesn't hurt me the way it used to. Because they make it. If they do, then maybe Noah and I can make it too. We all come from different worlds, but why should it mean we're doomed because, has never given up on Sophie, and now I understand why.

ying to I never want to give up on Noah. I pull my phone out of my bag and
my chat with Noah. Why do I keep waiting for the perfect time to text
people? There'll never be a perfect time. There'll only ever be *now*.

th and **Rose:** Are you free next Thursday?

He responds a few minutes later when I'm putting my books back on
it she's shelves.

y tracks **Noah:** I can be.

ht even **Rose:** Please.

Noah: Alright. See you then?

pology. **Rose:** See you then x

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while later, I see that he responded to my last text.

thing in **Noah:** Can't wait, princess x

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CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 20

GORGEOUS FILTHY BOXER BOYFRIEND

NOAH'S DOOR OPENS BEFORE I can even raise my hand to knock. He sweeps me up into his arms, burying his face in my neck with a groan.

"I've missed you so much," he mumbles against my skin.

He pulls me inside and puts me down. Before he closes his door, he looks outside with narrowed eyes. "Your dad's not waiting outside with a sword or anything, is he?"

I laugh and push the door shut. "What would you do if he was? Fight him barehanded?"

He rolls his eyes but grins. "I'd use your body as a shield, obviously."

"I'm too beautiful to be used as a shield," I point out.

"Your ego is so big that it would repel the bullets like a force field."

"Nothing wrong with a healthy ego," I tell him as he locks the door behind us. "You should try it."

He grins and lifts me into his arms. I wrap my legs around him. "You can inflate mine any time."

I curl my arms around his neck, pressing myself against him. "I can do so many other things I'd rather do than feed your ego."

“You mean like having me feed yours?”

“I would never dream of making you do such a thing.”

“Trust me, princess, I know exactly what you’re dreaming of.”

He carries me to his bed and sets me carefully down. He takes off my shirt and sweater, rolls down my skirt and pulls off my boots. When I’m sitting in my underwear and tights, he kneels in front of me, looking up at me and slowly starts pulling my stockings down.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says, his voice low and reverent. “I’ve missed you, love. I’ve missed looking at your gorgeous face, your shimmering skin, your perfect body.” He rolls down my stockings and I balance myself on my shoulders as he helps me step out of them. But instead of standing up, he stays on his knees and wraps his arms around my thighs, pulling me close.

“I’ve missed how you smell,” he murmurs against my stomach. “The way your skin feels.” He kisses down my stomach, to my hipbones, the top of my thighs. “The way you taste…”

He rests his mouth against my pussy, kissing me through my panties. Gentle at first, then deeper, pressing his tongue against the fabric. The moisture of his tongue meeting the wetness gathering between my legs. I push my hips against his face and he looks up with a smile.

“You like that, don’t you, love? You like it when I worship you behind your pussy.” He tugs on my panties, pulling them aside, and licks me. His gaze still raised to mine. “You love it when I’m on my knees like this, don’t you? My pretty, dirty princess.” His tongue delves deeper, tasting the wetness, and he lets out a deep moan. “I fucking love the taste of you when you’re wet you are for me.”

No longer able to stand his words, I bury my hands in his hair and close my eyes, concentrating on the sensation of his tongue gliding hotly over my pussy.

clit.

He lets out a deep, feral laugh. “Yes, good girl. Come on, princess, pull my hair, pull hard. Be mean. Take what you want. Fuck yourself on my cock. My beautiful little slut, come on.”

“Oh god,” I whimper. “Noah, fuck...”

“Yes, say my name. I love the sound of your voice, the way you sound when you need to come, when you’re so close.”

My thighs tremble, my entire body taut. I grind into him and he lets out a low groan, his hair deep and slow and rhythmic until I can no longer stand it—until my head falls back in a scream of pleasure. He thrusts against Noah’s tongue, gasping with each pulse of my cock. I grip his hair so tight my fingers ache. Then Noah stands up again, his eyes wide and startling me even as my orgasm still pulses through me in hot waves. He picks me up effortlessly and half-throws me onto his bed. His eyes are dark and hungry as he yanks his clothes off, kicking them carelessly aside. His hard cock springs free and I let out a whimper of pleasure at knowing what he’s about to do.

He flips me around so I’m on my stomach and pulls on my hips, tilting my ass up to him. I curl my fingers into his bedsheets, bracing myself as he thrusts his body, the thick length of his cock between my legs. Then I feel the blue of his cock slowly pressing against me and my breath hitches.

I turn my head to look at him through my hair. He meets my eyes with a slow smile, and then thrusts into me, slow and torturous, drawing a moan from me.

“Breathe, love,” he commands. “I know you can take me.” He thrusts closer and out, picking up speed. “Fuck, you feel so good.” His fingers dig into my hips, and his voice gets rougher the faster he goes. I arch my spine, j

back against him, desperate to make him feel as good as he makes me feel. I grip my hip, “Good girl, you’re taking me so well, my perfect little slut,” he rasps, his tongue sliding over my skin, broken voice. His eyes darken and his thrusts become harder, more brutal.

I hold on to his bed for dear life, bracing myself against each thrust as he pushes into his bed to stifle my cries, but he pulls me up by my hair.

“I sound like a slut,” he hisses. “I wanna hear your moans and whines, I wanna fuck your pretty pussy.” He slams into me harder, filling the room with the lewd sound of flesh on flesh. “I wanna hear you scream when I come inside you, my pretty, dirty little princess.”

“Oh god, yes, please,” I whimper. “Please, Noah.”

His thrusts become faster, harsh and erratic. He comes when I beg for it, just when I was just waiting for me to ask. He comes with a groan of pleasure, his body tensing against me, his cock twitching inside me, hot wetness filling me. He thrusts himself to the hilt. His cock twitches inside me, hot wetness filling me. He thrusts his hips into mine—a sensation so obscene it feels obscene. His pornographic.

Finally, he collapses on top of me, covering my body with his. His weight is hot against mine, slippery with sweat. He brushes the hair off my face with one hand and tilts my head to his with a finger to kiss my lips tenderly. He rubs his cock against my clit. “I missed you,” he whispers. His cock is still inside me, and I feel so close to him I could cry. “I missed you so much. I love you.”

“I missed you too,” I whisper back, my voice trembling, my eyes lit up with a smile. “I love you too.”

a long



rusts in
into my
pushing

LATER, WE'RE SHOWERED AND lying on his bed, me on my stomach, pushing against Noah's chest while he runs his fingers up and down my

ne feel. tickling the dip of my spine. Outside, icy rain slashes at the windows, sps in ainside of Noah's flat is cosy, softly lit, full of the smell and warmth of ital. "You're going to have to carry me to the taxi later," I tell him. "Be t. I bitedon't think I'll be able to walk."

"I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to be rough."

when I I pout at him. "You're a literal monster. I'm never coming back." with the He opens his mouth to say something, but his smile suddenly va e inside "But you *are* coming back, right? You never told me what happened your dad."

"I'm coming back." I kiss his chest and rest my cheek on it. "Maybe as if heoften, because I have coursework and exams and interviews all piling t buryingnow. But I *am* coming back."

ie up as "Do you not want to talk to me about what happened?" He frowns almostdidn't give up your money, did you? Because I know I'm not wo: much."

skin is I shake my head. "I swapped the trust fund for a business loan. A ce withare definitely worth that much, you complete idiot."

. He raises his head, his frown deepening. "A business loan?"

so close "Yeah. For Dirty Princess."

"Dirty Princess? Is that what you're calling it?"

urning "I bought the name for a kiss, remember?"

He shakes his head quickly. "No, you've not bought it yet. You'll c that kiss when you officially launch your label. You better make sure too, or I'll take you to court."

I pull myself up by his shoulders, leaning over him. His hand h stomachwaist, steadying me. The warmth of his sturdy body radiates again: y back,like sunlight.

but the “Are you trying to make sure I don’t break up with you?”
him. “Are we not broken up, then?”
because I I raise my eyebrows. “Um, absolutely *not*? You better not have
behaving as if we were.”

“I wasn’t sure. We never really spoke after the shit hit the fan
nightmare-fuel gala.”
mishes. “I was busy. We’re *not* broken up. You’ve not been out there acting
and with have you?”

“Out *where*?” he laughs, and my heart flutters at the sight of his la
e not as the way his eyes crinkle. “I’m working three jobs and training almost
up right day. When would I have time to be acting single?”

“Just checking.” I run my hands through his hair, resisting the
s. “You smother his face with possessive kisses. “When’s your mother’s wedd
rth that the way?”

“This summer.” He folds one arm behind his head to better look
and you “Wanna be my plus one, by the way? I meant to ask you.”

“At your mother’s wedding?” I ask, startled.

“Uh-huh.” He bites his lip as if trying to hold a grin. “And don’t
I’m not bringing you as my date to make my mum mad.”

My mouth drops in shock. I smack his arm, and he lets out a boyish
laughter.

owe me “We are *not* joking about that!” I squeal. “I’m serious, Noah!”
you do, He nods. “No, no, I understand. Too early?”

“*Too early*? It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done! We’re not joking
olds my—ever. I mean it!”

st mine “Fine. Alright, your highness, whatever you want.” He takes my chi
fingers, stroking it with his thumb. “Will you be my date, then?”

“Of course.” Heat rises to my cheeks. “I’ve never really met a boy’s mother before.”

“She’s nice—nothing like those people at your gala if that’s what you’re worried about. And she won’t call security on you, I promise. In fact, she probably won’t even call you out for drinking too much prosecco and telling you that you’re too good for her. Don’t listen to her if she does.” He laughs. “Oh, and you’ll meet my single, half-cousins. And you can’t wear a crazy gown, okay? My mum might fight you if you outshine her at her own wedding.”

I laugh. “Fine. I’ll send you outfit ideas and you can give me your approval.”

“Perfect.”

He kisses my mouth and I cuddle closer, tucking my head under his chin, plastering my body to his. His fingers run softly through my hair.

“Are you going back to America during the holidays?”

“I’ll have to, but I won’t miss the wedding, I promise. And I’ll be in London in September for fashion school.”

“In London?”

“Mm-hm.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You don’t want to go to fashion school since you can’t peel off?”

I shake my head, bumping my head against his jaw. “I want to go to fashion school with a hot boyfriend who can come to my apartment and help me take the stress out of me.”

“Oh, wow. Well, I can definitely do that.” He’s quiet for a second and then he adds, “Maybe I’ll have to get a job closer to London.”

I bit my lips to stop myself from appearing too excited.

“Maybe you should,” I tell him, trying to sound cool and careless.

friend's "Wouldn't want to be too far away, in case my girlfriend needs stress relief."

you're "And to be fair, you might need some stress relief too," I add he t, she'll "With all your jobs and your training."

for me. "That's true. I'm going to be fighting more after the wedding since y weird have to work as much. That'll definitely be stressful."

it try to "I don't know if I like that," I frown. "Boxers get lots of girls."

"Boxers get lots of concussions," he says, tilting an eyebrow.

seal of "You will if you try to get lots of girls."

"Why would I try to get lots of girls? I've already got the best one."

"Mm." I look up, but can't quite hide my satisfied smile. "Good ans his and He winks. "I know."

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“Wouldn’t want to be too far away, in case my girlfriend needs me for stress relief.”

“And to be fair, you might need some stress relief too,” I add helpfully. “With all your jobs and your training.”

“That’s true. I’m going to be fighting more after the wedding since I won't have to work as much. That’ll definitely be stressful.”

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“Mm.” I look up, but can’t quite hide my satisfied smile. “Good answer.”

He winks. “I know.”



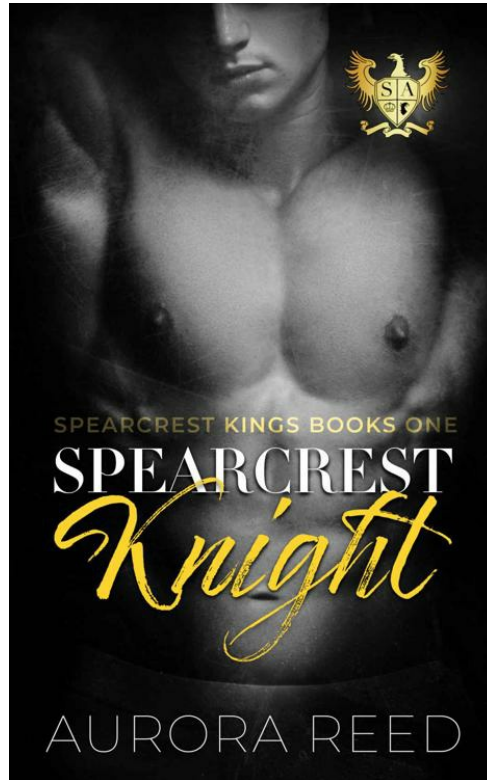
THE END



ALSO BY AURORA REED

ALSO BY AURORA REED

Want to find out about Evan Knight and his obsession Sophie Sutton?



Five years ago, Evan Knight was my favourite person at Spearcrest Academy.

When every rich kid treated me like I was the dirt under their shoes, he was the only one who accepted me for who I was. Until I found out his gentlemanly exterior is only there to hide a rotten heart.

Now, every encounter with him is a nightmare.

But in nightmares, you can kill your monsters. Evan is a monster I can't kill—no matter how much I want to. The kind of monster I'll never be free of until I escape Spearcrest.

I just have to make it through our last year.

S

I'm rich enough to have anything or anyone I want.

Anything or anyone—except for the stuck-up prefect Sophie Sutt

But I don't want Sophie. I just want to break her. Because clashing

Sophie isn't just for my amusement—it's become an addiction.

She thinks she's gotten good at avoiding me, until Spearcrest sets her

tutor me. I have a year to break her. My dearest opponent, my hate

adversary.

Let the battle begin.

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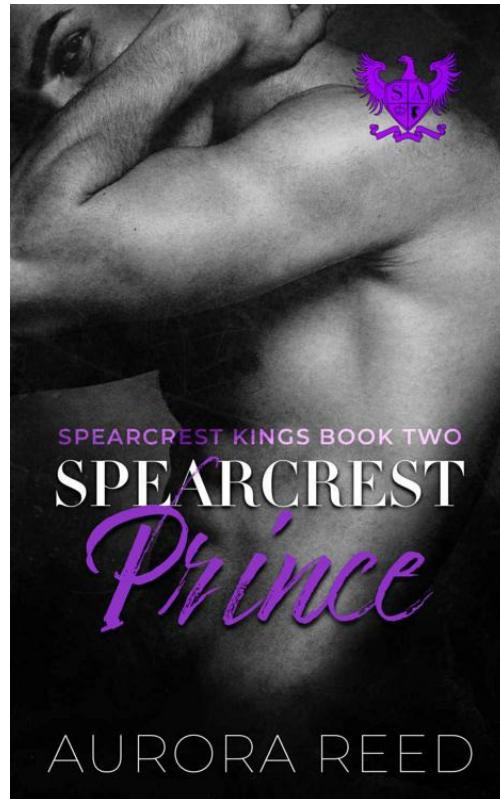
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But I don't want Sophie. I just want to break her. Because clashing with Sophie isn't just for my amusement—it's become an addiction.

She thinks she's gotten good at avoiding me, until Spearcrest sets her up to tutor me. I have a year to break her. My dearest opponent, my hateful adversary.

Let the battle begin.

Curious about the other Spearcrest Kings?



I've never met a woman impervious to my charm.

And they all accept my terms—an evening of fun, a night of pleasure then we're done. They leave my bed satisfied, and I keep my heart in

Until Anaïs Nishinara comes crashing into my life. Our parents arrange engagement, and they send Anaïs to my school so “we can get to know other”.

Except she's not interested in doing that. She's a weird loner who prefers sketchbook to the glamour of my old money lifestyle.

*I don't want Anaïs—I don't even like her. So why can't I seem to keep
from her?*

Séverin Montcroix is a rude, spoilt, arrogant aristocrat.

And now I'm engaged with him and attending the prestigious Spear Academy where he rules as one of the Young Kings. But I don't believe in kings—or princes, or fairy tales, or love.

I believe in myself, my art, and my plan to get out of this engagement. Except that for someone who claims to hate being engaged to me, Séverin just refuses to leave me alone.

Is he playing games, or does he have a plan of his own?

And why is it getting harder to resist his attempts at seduction?

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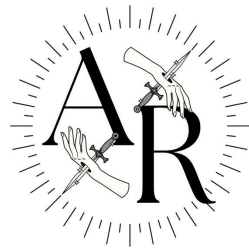
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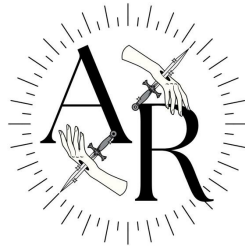
And why is it getting harder to resist his attempts at seduction?

ABOUT AURORA



Aurora Reed is a coffee-drinking academic who is fascinated by stories of darkness, death and desire. When she's not reading over a cup of black coffee, she can be found roaming the moors or scribbling stories by candlelight.

ABOUT AURORA



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