

*His system surged with vomit as he lifted the gun to her chest and released the safety. He'd hoped the small act of compliance would frighten her into changing her mind but her determination didn't waver.*

*"Right now."*

*The words twirled around him like a feather in the air and scattered when the bullet exploded into her.*



The small sound her finger made against the teacup synced with her heartbeat and began to serve as a metronome to her system, reminding it how to function. Tap. Pause. Tap. Pause. And what had been about to burst through her skin settled to become a gentle stream in her veins. Her head stopped burning. She could no longer hear the pulse in her ears.

She'd just restitched the seams of her composure when the sun descended into the windows of the café and exploded through the glass like a thousand threads reattaching her to the world she had nearly managed to escape, as if it had been waiting for that cue in a strange game of endurance. But she was used to this. Allowing her backup systems to carry her, she casually turned away from the perceived intruder and smiled when she realized she wasn't the only one. Several other patrons were turning as well, inadvertently performing a ripple that made its way through the eatery. The dust in the air lit up like smoke and mild panic set in as memories mingled with survivors' pragmatism. She wasn't the only one who stood up, looking for a way out, but was able to hide her discomfort by pretending to be merely finished with her tea. As the others settled with vaguely embarrassed chatter, Eva disposed of her trash and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

As usual, she'd timed her exit to collide with the outpouring of a nearby subway station, which bestowed upon her a bit more protection during an otherwise dangerous time of day, when glare and shadows met to form a perfect disguise for those intending harm. At the corner, she fell in behind at least ten other people but the line moved quickly and within a minute she was cocooned in the smell of an over-worked taxi. Her destination was only a few blocks away but to have walked any further would have dared a fate that had never failed to admit its lack of compassion for her.

It had to be the cleverest building in the city, and she could feel its oscillations before it even came into view. Tiny pricks like glitter fluttered over her skin and

she was certain its vibrations were responsible for the cab's sudden jabs as it wove through traffic. To an outsider, it may have looked like fear was responsible for the way her hands shook as she fumbled to pay the driver and then closed her skirt in the door as she distractedly shoved her wallet back into her bag. To the simple eye, the quake that trembled her had nothing to do with the looming structure gazing down at the tiny figure beneath it. It was just the quirks of a strange girl unfit for the city.

Though its humble eleven floors were more like a fashion accessory to the neighboring skyscrapers and, therefore, an easy target for vandals, the inexplicably confident structure had calmly and stoically kept its grand first-floor windows intact by allowing them to hide under massive slices of steel riveted into place, which had then welcomed elaborate layers of graffiti. The once elegant façade had shrewdly chipped to reveal the strong red brick beneath it—a warning to anyone who thought a simple match was all it would take—and while the rich purple awning might have suggested that a well-mannered hotel resided beyond it, that idea, once considered with what one could see of the rest of the building, seemed more like a childish pronouncement of a famous relative than historical fact. More than any of these things though, as evidence of its cleverness, was the sentimental truth that it was the only building on the street that anyone still entered willingly.

She opened the heavy doors under the awning and was able to steady herself with the familiar air that engulfed her. The lights were dim but she knew the space well and didn't hesitate to move through it, allowing the faint shadows of architectural details carved out a century earlier to soothe her visual palette, which had been chafed all day by the jagged lines of her deteriorating city.

She trailed her hand along the cage of the out-of-service elevator that clung to its post in the center of the room, and smiled as she imagined it stubbornly keeping a suspicious eye on the changes that had occurred within its once respectable surroundings. Modern paintings crouched between oversized, disjointed frames that had been crudely tied with dirty rope to many of the room's majestic columns, like unpredictable patients strapped to a barely adequate gurney. A well-attended bar had taken up where a guest service counter had left off. Gloved hands on little bells had become weary fingers around mismatched glasses. The dapper steward that evening was, in this manifestation, a fleshy stick with multiple piercings, who poured the drinks with ease enough to convey his own terminal boredom in a job far beneath him, despite his conflicting congenial disposition. He smiled and winked at her as she passed.

The music floating out of the speakers in the wall carried her toward a barely lit stairwell where she braced herself before climbing the necessary amount of steps to the second floor.

A hall lined with numbered doors appeared in front of her like a faded photograph of its former self. The gray walls and elaborate black molding were almost cartoonish in their rendering of the space. The only hint of color came from the dark wood floor which was required, like most who tread upon it, to function with a certain amount of decay.

Neil was at the desk when she entered the room marked 108 without knocking. His eyes flashed up at her and he sighed before resuming his paperwork. “There you are, dreamy creature.”

Still charmed by his London accent but unwilling to admit it, she lowered her head to smile and pretended to examine the smudge left on her skirt by the cab door. When she looked up, however, she realized her deceit had been frivolous, for his attention had already returned to the pages under his fingers. She made use of the respite to notice a new addition to the mostly cream and black décor: Taped to the wall behind him was a photograph that she recognized from the one magazine she’d kept in her room as a teenager: Four men with varying levels of presence chatted against a bar, their expressions unwittingly conveying the cruxes of their personalities. She smiled at the sight of Neil’s young face, but preferred the one outside the picture—the one that had devoured all traces of boyishness in the decade they’d known each other.

“Does that mean we’re friends today?” she asked, distantly teasing.

He smiled slightly but otherwise ignored the implication. The vague camaraderie was enough to tide her over. It was all she could expect these days anyway.

As she deposited her bag onto a chair nestled into the corner, she could feel his eyes upon her and realized that she finally had his attention. She wandered some more, lingered briefly by the sofa and then by the door to the balcony before settling on the edge of the bed. The crisp black quilt that cloaked the mattress only made her ugly green skirt more noticeable and she stood again, this time with less of an idea of where she could go. When she finally got the nerve to look at him, his eyes narrowed back at her.

“You’re not working tonight,” he said.

She smiled and hoped the gesture would appease him. Instead, he put down his pen—a signal of his commitment to whatever scene she intended to lead them into.

“So why are you here?” he asked.

She shrugged.

Certainly weary of forcing confessions, Neil let it drop. Then he took something out of the desk drawer and tossed it to her.

She smiled down at the thin cardboard sleeve in her hand. “Good art,” she said of the childlike drawing on the album cover. There was a snowflake, a bat, and, drawn in one corner, a tiny penis.

“Oli’s nephew did it.” He rubbed his neck. “If you’ve time, put an ear to it. Tell me what you think.”

“I didn’t know you were finished.”

“I didn’t either, actually,” he admitted, his tone soft with a sigh. “But Oli dropped it off this morning so we must be.”

“Shouldn’t you know when your album is pressing?” The accusation, though meant for Oli, splintered through Neil’s expression.

“My being a pushover has worked very well to your advantage,” he reminded her. “So I suggest not drawing attention to it.”

“Right,” she muttered, and her stomach resumed its familiar dull ache.

He stared at her, obviously expecting more, but she couldn’t summon the will to continue the argument. Eventually, Neil picked up his pen and resumed writing.

In a fit of bravery—and desperation—she came around the desk and took the pen out of his hand.

Ever-patient, or bored of her theatrics, Neil sighed and settled back in his chair. “What is it?”

She sat on the desk, her body closer to his than it had been in days. But the act had been hasty and she froze, afraid that any movement might inadvertently sponsor a touch that she wasn’t, afterall, ready to foster.

The rockstar, of course, had no sense of self-consciousness and easily leaned closer to tap the side of her knee.

“I’m expecting Oli in a minute,” he said.

Her body reflexively followed his suggestion and moved away from him.

“However,” he resumed, “I’ll most likely require an indulgence or two this evening, so I’ll pencil in your obligatory fuck for, what do you say, nine? Nine-thirty? I’ll have some cash standing by.”

Though she knew from experience to expect the sudden cruelty, her senses were never prepared and her stomach cramped as the full weight of his words were thrown into her.

“Well,” he prodded, “what do you say? I assume that’s why you’re here. Spent your allowance already?”

“No,” she whispered, then cleared her throat as if her weak voice was merely a malfunction.

“Bored then?” he continued callously, “or, oh, hm, what could it be? Feigning concern? You know, you did that once or twice last week. It’s getting a bit tedious, Eva.”

A small, injured sound came out with her breath. “I can’t stop coming here,” she said. The words had just fallen out of her mouth and she was surprised to understand, finally, just how out of her own control she was.

A moment passed, and Neil expelled a well-weighted breath. “I know.”

His simple allowance held her in place, though the door was so close, and the way out was so clear. Resigned to her impotence, or clawing at hope, she forced her gaze out the window and searched for a different sign of life. Something that would remind her how it was supposed to be. But all she could see was his suddenly kind reflection in the glass as it stared at her, years away.

“Eva...” He stood up, but was interrupted by a knock on the doorframe.

A smaller man with a similar, albeit more serious, mode as Neil, and with his white-blond hair in a tangled pompadour, came into the office.

“Neil,” Oli began, smiling his hello to Eva, “someone’s finally taken a bat to Stuart’s legs so he can’t play tomorrow. But I asked Gerard and he’s up for it.”

“Is he alright?” Neil asked.

“Christ, he’s terrible.” Oli’s eyes flared. “Can barely hold a note. But it’s better than nothing.”

“Stu-art,” Neil clarified, the conversation obviously tugging at his patience.

“Oh.” Oli shrugged. “He’s fine. On painkillers and all that. Marginally aware of himself so, in all, more of a chap than he’s ever been.”

Conscious that Neil hadn’t taken his eyes off her, Eva uncomfortably adjusted her sweater.

“You should come,” Oli said, tapping her arm to get her attention. “When I said he can’t play it was an understatement. I mean, it’ll be horrific up there. Definitely worth a look.” Oli’s lips curved in a kind smile. “You’re good at that, right? Witnessing disasters, I mean.” He tossed a look toward his bandmate.

Grateful for his absurd brand of relief, Eva allowed a reserved smile to surface. Then, faking the nerve, she walked by Neil in order to reach her bag.

“You’re leaving?” Oli asked her. “I just saw you arrive.”

“What can I say?” Eva bumped Oli’s shoulder as she passed him. “Your hair doesn’t impress me as much as it used to.”

Oli chuckled. “That’s a lie.”

When she reached the door, her body reflexively turned back to wave at Neil. His expression visibly tightened before she forced her eyes away. She was barely a step down the hall when she heard Oli swear at him.

In her apartment, she emptied her bag onto the kitchen counter and catalogued her belongings. Only one thing was missing. The loss made her double over in pain.