



LOVE IS IMPOSSIBLE.
HATE IS AN **OPEN GAME.**

BLACK KNIGHT

ROYAL ELITE BOOK 4

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RINA KENT

evermore

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BLACK KNIGHT

Rina Kent is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, international and No. 1 Amazon bestselling author of everything enemies-to-lovers romance.

She's known to write unapologetic anti-heroes and villains because she often fell in love with men no one roots for herself. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of darkness, a pinch of angst and an unhealthy dose of intensity.

She spends her private days in London laughing like an evil mastermind about adding mayhem to her expanding universe. When she's not writing, Rina travels, hikes and spoils cats in a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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Royal Elite series

Cruel King
Deviant King
Steel Princess
Twisted Kingdom
Black Knight
Vicious Prince
Ruthless Empire
Royal Elite Epilogue

Legacy of Gods series

God of Malice
God of Pain
God of Wrath
God of Ruin
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Villains series

Kiss the Villain
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To you.
Yes, you.
You matter.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

It's safe to say *Black Knight* is my most emotional book to date. It strikes a deep chord within me and I didn't hold back, not with the visceral details or the graphic description of the deterioration of mental health. I stayed true to Kimberly and Xander and told their story the only way possible.

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters are morally gray and don't conform to societal standards. However, this time is different. It's deeper, rougher, and can be more intense on the emotional side of things.

This book deals with depression, eating disorders, and self-harm. There's an on-page suicide attempt. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

To remain true to the characters, the vocabulary, grammar, and spelling of *Black Knight* is written in British English.

Black Knight can be read on its own, but for better understanding of the Royal Elite world, it's recommended to read the previous books in the series first.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com

PLAYLIST

I See You—MISSIO
Ghost—Badflower
Magic—Coldplay
Drink To Drown—Stand Atlantic
Hollow—Icon for Hire
Shattered—Trading Yesterday
Under Your Spell—The Birthday Massacre
Therapy—All Time Low
Those Nights—Bastille
Zero—Imagine Dragons
Birds—Imagine Dragons
Green Eyes—Coldplay
Princess of China—Coldplay
Say Something—A Great Big World & Christina Aguilera
The Reason—Hoobastank
Past Life—Trevor Daniel
Kids—OneRepublic
Rescue Me—Thirty Seconds To Mars
Breathe Me—Sia
Someone You Loved—Lewis Capaldi

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify: open.
[spotify.com/playlist/6WILx1jvNL3WQzCAZocEb-](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6WILx1jvNL3WQzCAZocEb-z?si=R0zFPwPaTbqJ0d0kdnbAFg)
[z?si=R0zFPwPaTbqJ0d0kdnbAFg](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6WILx1jvNL3WQzCAZocEb-z?si=R0zFPwPaTbqJ0d0kdnbAFg)

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PROLOGUE

KIMBERLY

AGE SIX

Sometimes, stories end the moment they start.
Nana used to tell me that when I spent summers with her in Newcastle. At least back then, I could stay away from Mummy and how she looked at me.

As if she hated me.

Now, I have no Nana. There's no one to take me away from here or tell me stories that transport me to other worlds.

Worlds with princes and knights. Worlds filled with so much magic, I dream of them.

I trot down the house's stairs until I'm outside. The sun is so bright today, casting a bright hue all over the garden and the fence.

The sound of Mum and Dad's fighting follows me until I close the door behind me. No one can hear them now, not the staff, not the neighbours.

Not even me.

I flop down on the step and lick on the pistachio gelato

stick Dad bought me earlier. Silver says all gelato tastes the same, but Silver is stupid sometimes. Pistachio gelato is the best. It's green and sweet and delicious.

If I weren't so upset, I would've gone to her house and played with her Barbie dolls, but I don't want to go anywhere.

Except for...

My gaze strays ahead to the huge mansion across from ours. It has an ancient feeling, like those castles from Nana's stories—the ones where knights and princes live. I want to go there, knock on the door, and ask him to come out.

My knight.

We agreed on that last week—that from now on, he's my knight. I even blessed him with a bamboo stick as the queen does.

Silver doesn't care when I'm upset, but he does. Because he's my knight. He always tickles me and tells me jokes until I break down in giggles.

The boy with golden hair and magical blue eyes, like the stories in Nana's books.

Still sucking on my gelato, I rise to my feet and take slow but determined steps until I'm out of our garden's gate. It's the afternoon, so maybe he's with Aiden and Cole. Maybe he doesn't want to play with me today.

I hate it when he chooses the boys over me.

Their garage door hisses open and I freeze. A red car comes out, slow at first, then it gains speed on the exit.

Aunt Samantha.

She's the one who plays the role of the queen in Nana's stories with her golden locks and big blue eyes that are so kind and caring.

Aunt Samantha, who invites me in whenever my parents are fighting and gives me snacks and food. She sits with me and does my hair because Mummy doesn't have time to. She tells me Mummy has an important job and that I shouldn't hate her for that.

She's also my knight's mother.

Her face is blank, without its usual warmth. She appears upset, but she's not crying. Or maybe she's not upset at all. She's like Mummy when she locks herself in her art studio, not wanting to see anyone.

I'm about to wave at her when I notice who's running after her car.

Xander.

The boy with golden hair and blue eyes that he stole from the ocean, the sky, and the magic in books.

Tears stream down his cheeks as he screams his mother's name. His entire body shakes, but he doesn't stop chasing her.

For a second, the whole world freezes. It's a moment, just one moment in time. It's so weird how all bad things happen in just a moment.

Nana left me in a moment, too. She was sitting with us one minute, and the next, her heart stopped. She was there, smiling at me, giving me gelato and telling me a story, and then my only grandmother was gone.

Now, it's only me, Mummy, and Daddy.

I hate it when it's only me and them. Because Daddy works a lot and I don't get to spend much time with him. And Mummy...well, I don't exist in front of her, not like when I existed with Nana.

She was my world. Now, I have nothing.

As I stand there watching Aunt Samantha's car rolling away and Xan running after her with his short legs, my chest becomes painful, the same as it did when Nana left.

My heart beats loud and hard in my ears. I'm not hearing Xan's cries and screams. I'm hearing mine when Nana dropped to the ground, closed her eyes, and never woke up.

I knew then, I just knew I'd lost something that couldn't ever be retrieved.

My life changed forever.

Just like Xan's is.

He hits the car's boot, but instead of braking, the red car makes a loud sound as it revs down the street.

"Mum, don't go!" Xan runs behind her, his flip-flops slapping against the street. "Don't leave me, please. I'll be a good boy. I p-promise."

His words bleed into each other, mixed with his tears.

My feet move of their own volition, slow at first, then I'm running as fast as Xander behind the red car.

That car resembles a monster with flaring nostrils and red horns, but neither of us stop.

He's still screaming and crying, the sound loud in the silence of the street. His shoe slips from his right foot. He kicks the other away and keeps running barefoot, uncaring about the small pebbles on the asphalt. I stop for a second to gather his flip-flops in one hand as the gelato melts in my other. It's starting to get sticky and make a mess, but I don't let go as I follow Xan.

He's in pain and I don't like it when he's in pain. I don't like it when anyone is in pain, but I hate it more when it's him.

I taste salt, and I realise my cheeks are soaked with tears, too.

“Stop, M-Mum!” Xan trips, but he catches himself and continues sprinting. The sounds he makes are winded and so guttural, it’s like an animal breathing.

The car disappears around the corner. Xan doesn’t stop. He keeps running and running, even when Aunt Samantha and her monster car vanish from sight.

Even when it’s only the two of us on the long road adjacent to our neighbourhood.

His foot catches and he tumbles forward, falling to his knees, crying so loudly, I feel every sound in my bones.

“Muuuum!”

I rush to him but stop a short distance away, hugging his flip-flops to my chest. Then slowly, too slowly, I crouch and put them on each of his feet. The skin has turned dirty and one of them has a cut from which blood coats his small toe.

“G-Green?” He stares at me through the tears that glisten as they flood his eyes.

Xan calls me Green because it’s my favourite colour. Where other girls have pink bedrooms, I have a green one.

“M-Mum is g-gone.” He sniffles.

I force a smile. “She’ll come back.”

It’s a lie. I also said Nana would come back after I slept, but when I woke up, she still wasn’t there.

Adults don’t come back when they leave.

“Sh-she won’t! She said she doesn’t want me and Dad anymore.” His lower lip trembles, even as he tries to stop crying by turning away from me.

“Xan...” I reach a hand for him and wipe his tears with my sleeve.

For a moment, he lets me as they become fatter and never-ending.

The gelato is now dripping on the ground, and I would usually devour it all, but my entire focus is on Xan and how he can't stop sobbing.

I also thought I'd never stop crying about Nana. That I'd cry like a princess in one of her books and the tears would kill me.

I eventually stopped, though.

Daddy says nothing is permanent. Everything changes.

He's wrong. Xan and I will never change. I'll always be his Green and he'll always be my knight.

We made it official after all.

Xan places a hand on my shoulder and shoves me, then stares at the ground. "Go away, Green."

"No."

He glances up at me. "No?"

"I don't want to leave you alone. You didn't leave me when Nana died."

Slowly facing me, he watches me closely, his blond brows pinching as more tears slide down his cheeks. "Why are *you* crying?"

I sniffle, wiping my face with the back of my hand, mixing his tears with mine. "Because you're crying."

"Don't cry, Green."

"*You* don't cry." I sniffle.

He hiccoughs. "I hate it when you cry."

"I hate it when you cry, too." I inch closer and put my arms around his neck, keeping the one with the melting gelato away so I don't make a mess out of him as well.

My knight is beautiful and can't have dirt on his armour.

Xan wraps his arms around my waist, hides his face in my neck, and sobs. He sobs so hard, I feel the vibration against my skin.

I cry, too, because his pain feels like mine now. His pain is so real and close, it's as if I'm the one hurting, not him.

When Nana left, Xan hugged me while I cried. He stayed with me until I fell asleep and didn't leave my side.

Now, I'll hug him until the pain goes away. Until he can smile and show me his pretty dimples.

"Green..." He snuffles in my neck. "Promise you'll never leave me."

"Never. You're my knight, remember?"

He nods.

"From today onwards, we're one."

"We're one."

1

KIMBERLY

I'm not good enough.
I'll never be good enough.

You know that feeling when words keep hammering in your head until they form a suffocating fog? Until they're all you can think about and all you can breathe?

When you wake up in the morning, they slowly condense around you like they're your lifelong companions.

They're the first thought you wake up to and the last thought you sleep on.

That's how it's felt for years now.

That's how my battle starts, and every day, I tell it *not today*.

"Kimmy!" A small hand pulls on mine as my baby brother drags me towards the entrance of the elementary school.

Kirian reaches my waist now. His pressed uniform has a wrinkle on the shoulder that I smooth with my hand.

His sun-kissed blond hair is in a short bowl cut that he takes pride in because it's 'the thing'. His bright brown eyes

are so shiny, you can almost see the world through them. A world so pure, you'd want to mass-produce it and freely distribute it.

"What is it, Kir?" I ask.

"I said, you'll do me mac and cheese later, right?"

"I can't. I have school until late."

He pouts, his hand turning lax in mine. If there's anything I hate in the world, it's killing that spark in his features.

"Marian will do it for you," I bargain.

Kir loves our housekeeper and spends time with her when I'm not around.

"I don't want Mari. I want you to do it."

"Kir..." I crouch in front of him, making him stop walking. "You know there's nothing I want more than to stay with you, right?"

He shakes his head frantically. "You disappeared the other day."

My lower lip trembles and it takes everything in me to pull it together. This is the reason I wake up every day, why I fight that fog, why I get into the shower and then put on my uniform.

People say nothing can stop those thoughts when they strike deep. You need therapy, you need meds, you need all the fucking things.

I only need this little man with his huge eyes and small pout. His face is the first thing I try to see in the morning. His voice is the one I want to hear as soon as I open my eyes.

Kirian is my own special pill. My happy pill.

But he saw something he shouldn't have last week. Or rather, he witnessed it, and when I woke up, I found him

bawling by the foot of my bed, hugging me and begging me not to leave him.

“That will never happen again, my little monkey.”

“What if it does?” His lower lip pushes forward as he widens his eyes. “What if you disappear and I have to stay with Mum?”

“Never, Kir.” I pull him to me and crush him in a hug. “I’ll never *ever* leave you alone with Mum. Do you get that?”

He pushes away from me and sticks out his small finger. “Pinkie swear?”

“Pinkie swear, you baby.” I curl mine around his.

As soon as he’s sure of the promise, he shoves away and glares up at me, pouting. “I’m not a baby.”

“You are my little baby. Deal with it.”

“Whatever.” He widens his eyes once more. “Are you going to come home early?”

Seriously, he has a puppy look that I’m ready to commit a crime for.

I stand up and ruffle his hair. “Fine. I’ll try.”

“Yay!” He hugs my legs. “I love you, Kimmy!”

Then he’s running in the direction of the school, clutching the straps of his backpack.

“Love you, too!” I shout after him. “Don’t run.”

As soon as I make sure he’s made it inside, I head back to my car. Other kids hop from their parents’ vehicles, kissing them before heading to the school.

A scene neither Kir nor I have had in our entire lives. I’m probably the only sibling driving her brother today.

At times like these, the red clouds I harbour for Mum explode with passion.

I don't care about myself, but she has no right to make Kir believe he's also unwanted, a mistake, a fucking broken condom.

At least Dad tries. All my early childhood memories consist of him putting me to bed or hugging me as I slept. He's also the one who has always nursed me when I have a cold.

Never Mum.

Dad is just a busy man and rarely at home to make much of a difference. His calls are hardly enough anymore.

I arrive at Royal Elite School—or RES—in record time since it's not far from Kir's school.

At the car park, I stare at my reflection in the mirror and take a deep breath. I can do this.

For Kir.

I flip my brown hair that's intertwined with green strands—or it's probably the other way around, more green, less brown. What? I love the colour. I'm just thankful I was born with light green eyes. Another thing to add to my green collection.

Okay, that sounded a bit off, even in my head.

I come out of my car, clutching the straps of my backpack as I stride through RES's huge entrance. Royal Elite School has ten gigantic towers and a magnificent building that goes back to medieval times.

The golden lion and shield logo is all about the majestic power of this place.

Rich, influential people send their kids to this school so they'll have an easier initiation into society. After all, most of the UK's politicians, parliament members, and diplomats have walked the halls of this school—Dad included.

He's now a renowned diplomat who works closely with the European Union in Brussels, and for that reason, we barely see him. Maybe everything will change now the country is leaving the EU.

But I'm fairly sure he'll find a way to boot himself someplace else. It's as if he doesn't want to be with us—or with Mum.

Usually, I would walk these halls with my best friend, Elsa, by my side, but since her accident and heart disease complications, she's now resting at her house. In the meantime, I'm all on my own between people who either hate me or pretend I don't exist.

The familiar jabs begin.

"She thinks she's all pretty now?"

"Once fat, always fat, Kimberly."

"Look at those thighs."

"Elsa's little bitch."

My skin prickles the more their words seep under it. I try to tune them out, but like the fog, they're impossible to ignore. They keep multiplying by the second, heightening and filling my head with those thoughts.

The grey ones that taste like bitterness and burn like acid.

No one cares about you.

You're a nobody. Absolutely nothing.

I shake my head as I cut the distance towards the classroom. They will not get to me.

Not today, Satan. Go crawl into your little hole.

This has been my school for three years, but I've never once felt as if I belong in this place.

I turned eighteen a few days ago and I celebrated my

birthday on Elsa's sickbed with Kir by my side and Dad on Skype.

No matter how old I am, it never gets easy to walk these halls, to let the knives stab me with each word out of their malicious mouths.

I wonder if they're seeing the blood following me like a trail or if I'm the only one.

My fingers snake to my wrist, then I quickly drop my hand to my side.

For Kir, I repeat the mantra in my mind. *You're doing this for Kir.*

If I get into a good college and get a scholarship, I'll be able to afford a private dorm and take Kir with me, because there's no way in fuck I'm leaving him with Mum once I'm in college.

The voices around me start blurring into themselves and I lift my head high as I put one foot in front of the other.

They're nothing.

They're just a ramification of the fog and I always beat down that damn fog.

Except once.

Okay, twice, and Kir witnessed one of them.

"Scarce, fucker."

My feet come to a halt of their own accord at that voice. That strong, low voice that's been a constant in my dreams.

And my nightmares.

Okay, my nightmares more than my dreams.

That cruel voice has ended my life over and over again when he could've saved me. Instead of letting me hold on to him, he left me for dead.

That voice isn't only a part of nightmares; he's a nightmare all on his own.

The earth tilts off balance as I lift my head. I have to keep reminding myself that gravity exists and I won't actually fall over.

That he doesn't matter. He stopped mattering that day seven years ago.

But maybe I'm only fooling myself, because even though I see him every day—or rather, avoid him—the view of him never gets more familiar or easier or fucking normal.

But there's nothing normal about Xander Knight. He was born to become part of the elite, the ones who crush others under their boots and don't look back at the damage. He's one of the kings who leave chaos and heartbreak in their wake.

He's part of RES's four horsemen, the football team's ace striker, and nicknamed War for his ability to destroy an opponent's defence.

And war he is. Xander is the type of war you never see coming, and when you do, it's already too late.

It's already sucked you into its clutches and destroyed you from the inside out.

His golden hair is styled back but is short on the sides in a fashionable way that adds to his overall cruelty. When I was younger, I used to think he stole the blue of his eyes from the ocean and the sky.

Now, I'm sure he did, because he's a sadistic thief.

The tame blue that used to lighten up upon seeing me is now darkening to a sinister colour.

To say Xander is beautiful would be the understatement of not only the century but of the entire common era.

It's not just because of his put-together blond look—his face belongs to models, gods, and immortals. It's sharp-cut with slight stubble, adding to his charm.

Like everyone at school, I used to see that beauty. I used to stop at the step of my house and pinch myself, chanting that he's indeed my friend—my knight—and he's calling me over to play together.

Now, I see someone completely different. I see vindictiveness, hate, a war god out to destroy.

He used to be my best friend. Now, he's a stranger.

A bully.

An enemy.

The boy Xander just shooed away bows his head and retreats around the corner. Being part of the horsemen, Elites' ace striker, and the son of a minister gives him the right to a crown, one that's crowded with thorns and black smoke.

Still, everyone around here bows down to his authority. If he'd asked that boy to crawl, he would've dropped to the ground without asking questions.

Xander twirls a football on his forefinger, his other hand in his trouser pocket as he stalks towards me with steady, purposeful strides. I keep my gaze on him, watching his every movement and struggling to suck air into my lungs. I don't know why I think he'll push me away, or rather, kick me down.

Not that it'd be something new. Worse has been done to me during my years of bullying—fat-shaming remarks, spilling of paint, mocking confessions, all of it.

It's stupid to think Xan would touch me. He never has. Not even once.

The uniform's blue jacket stretches over his wide shoulders

and muscular chest. Everything about him is—muscular, I mean. Including his football thighs, *especially* his football thighs.

I don't know when that happened. Okay, that's a lie. The development of his physique started exactly in the summer between Royal Elite Junior—our previous school—and Royal Elite School.

Disclaimer, I notice a lot of things around me. It's not only about him. Ever since I realised my mum wouldn't stand up for me and I'd have to do it on my own, I've learnt a lot of survival methods. The most important of all: being aware of my surroundings.

Whether I like it or not, Xander has always been a part of my immediate environment and he'll continue to be until the end of this year. Then, when I'm out of this city, everything will be over.

Breathe in. Just a few more months. *Breathe out.*

“Are you waiting for an invitation? Scarce, Berly.”

His voice is light, but there's nothing light about his undertone. I know he didn't tell the boy to disappear for my sake. Xander doesn't stand up for me, and he sure as hell doesn't tell others off on my behalf.

If it were the old me, I would've bowed my head and run away crying, and his mocking laughter would've followed me as I sniffled in dark corners, not wanting others to witness my shame.

However, something's changed.

Me.

I've changed.

Ever since I woke up and found Kir hugging me and bawling, I've come to an important conclusion. If I want to

survive in this world, if I want to stay with my baby brother and save him from our mum, then I have to take my life into my own hands.

I'm done playing a secondary role in my own tale.

Done letting the likes of Xander Knight walk all over me.

Done crying in corners like a damn coward.

I push my shoulders back the way Elsa always does and meet his gaze head-on. "There's room."

Okay, my voice could've been louder, but it's calm, so there's that. Baby steps.

"What did you just say?" He narrows one of his eyes as if not believing I spoke.

I don't talk back to Xander. *Ever*. I either run away or do as he tells me. I've always thought if I did, one day, he'd find it in him to forgive me. One day, he'd recall those times we used to be best friends.

But I've been a fool.

Those times only exist for me. He already wiped them clean, so I might as well do the same.

"You heard me." I motion at the rest of the hall. "There's room. Use it."

He chuckles, the sound dry and humourless, and my back stiffens. "Did you just order me, Berly?"

I *hate* that name. I fucking despise it.

It's a taunt, and a cruel one at that. The boy who used to call me his Green is long gone. It's not that I want him to call me that again, he lost the right when he said I disgusted him. He lost the right when he stood by as all the other students bullied me. **Copyrighted Material**

He lost the right when he was no longer my number one supporter and turned into my number one tormentor.

Still, I wish he'd just call me by my first name.

I lift a shoulder. "Call it whatever you like."

I start to move past him, but he stops twirling the ball and thrusts it in front of my face, forcing me to halt. "Not so fast."

A sigh escapes me even as a tremor shoots down my spine. Being this close to him that I almost smell the mint on his breath and his rich ocean scent rattles me in ways I don't care to admit.

Or experience.

"What do you want, Xander?"

His brows scrunch and his grip tightens on the ball. "First, lose the attitude. Second, don't say my fucking name."

"Then how about you stop getting in my fucking way?"
I snap, then bite my lower lip.

Shit.

I just snapped at him. This must be the first time in... well, ever. I don't remember ever doing it, not even when we were kids. He seems taken aback, too, when his face loses the hard edge for a fraction of a second.

Before he can think about a way to retaliate—and hurt me—I brush past him and stride to class. But I don't run. No, I keep my steps controlled.

From today onwards, Xander Knight won't see me run or cry.

This confrontation is only the beginning.

A new battle has started in our war.

And this time, I'll come out as the winner.

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2

KIMBERLY

I heave my lunch into the toilet, the gurgling sound echoing around me like a fucked up symphony.

Do you know that distorted sound some violins make?

Yeah, me neither. Dad and Mum are into classical music—they met at a concerto. Shocker. I prefer punk and alternative rock. Thank you very much.

Anyway, I fill my mind with my favourite songs instead of the sound of heaving. You never get used to it, not the sticking your finger in your throat part and not the vomiting part; it's always disgusting. Every time I do this, I feel as if spiders are crawling over my skin with their hairy legs, leaving trails of rubbish in their wake.

Once my stomach makes the hollow sound, announcing there's nothing left, I step out of the stall. No one is here, as they shouldn't be.

I only do this right before class, after I make sure everyone is in there. That's why I sometimes arrive late, then pretend it's because of a headache.

Being invisible is easy, but being completely non-existent

is a bit difficult. If I were a ghost, I wouldn't have to go through this trouble every day.

You know, the part about making sure no one is inside a public girls' toilet. If anyone is around, I just vomit in RES's back garden in the rubbish bin and only return here to brush my teeth.

As soon as I finish washing my mouth, I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

That face is also a nightmare.

In fact, it's the worst nightmare. Those cheeks that I thought would no longer be shabby, those breasts that appear too small against my blouse. My saggy arms with stretch marks galore. They're everywhere—stretch marks, I mean—at the underside of my arms, my stomach, and my thighs.

Everywhere.

I hate them and I hate this fucking body. I hate myself in it. I wish there was a way to detonate it from the inside out, aside from vomiting my lunch.

A thought assaults my subconscious.

I want to slam my fist into that mirror, break it into pieces, then take a shard of glass and—

No.

No, no!

I shake my head frantically and slap both my cheeks, resisting the urge to touch my wrist.

For Kir, you're here for Kir.

My steps are hard and determined as I exit the toilet while closing my bag.

I'm late for my next class. Or more like, I'll be late in about a minute.

That's the downside of being in the girls' room after everyone's settled in.

I'm running down the hall when an arm wraps around my shoulder. For a second, I freeze, thinking Xander has returned for revenge.

He's been ignoring me since the morning, but I know more than anyone that if Xander Knight ignores you, it's a disaster disguised as a blessing.

I release a breath after I inhale and realise it's not him. He doesn't smell this strong or feel this hard—not that I know how he feels.

And yes, I know how Xander smells. It's only because of my ability to connect to my surroundings, remember?

"You're also late, Kimmy?"

I smile up at Ronan, my first real smile since the one I gave Kir this morning.

Ronan Astor, also one of the horsemen and possibly the closest person I have to an ally in this school—aside from Elsa.

He has boyish charm, his brown hair is slightly curly, and his deep, rich brown eyes hint at a playboy in the making. Scratch that, he's already a playboy. Oh, and he happens to be a true aristocrat. His proud nose is clear proof of that.

I don't think he notices it, but his nose screams nobility from a continent away.

"Speak for yourself." I poke his side. "You didn't come in the morning."

"I had...an important meeting."

"You mean, you slept in because of yesterday's party?"

"Hey! Parties are important meetings, Kimmy. I'm

going to teach you that...amongst other things.” He grins.

“Wait and see.”

“No, thanks.”

“Yes, and don’t thank me yet.” He waggles his brows.

“I have payment suggestions for later.”

“Why do I feel like I won’t like it?”

“Believe me, you will.” He tucks me closer to his side as we walk to class.

None of the students dare to say anything to me in front of Ronan. He might not be as brooding as Aiden and Cole or a damn popularity freak like Xander, but Ronan also has his throne in RES.

His crown is just a bit more approachable, touchable even.

He’s a prince, and he’s pretty much charming, too.

I still can’t believe how he came to me first and decided we’d become friends just because he saw me at one of Elites’ games. Oh, and he announced I’m invited to all his parties. They’re legendary and with limited access, so at first, I thought maybe it was another elaborate plan from Xander to fuck with me.

However, it’s been months, and Ronan remains a rock I can lean on. If it turns out to be a sick game, I might never return from it. I actually really like Ronan. He’s outgoing and funny, and he always shoos all the unwanted attention away.

And sometimes, even the fog.

He’s going into details about the type of weed he bought yesterday as we step into class.

“I’m telling you, Kimmy.” He leans in to whisper at my ear, making me stop at the first table. “That shit was cloud nine level. Do you want to try it?”

My eyes widen. “We’re at school.”

“Get a room,” someone says from class.

That’s when I realise the position we’re in. Ronan has an arm around my shoulder and I’m completely glued to his side as his lips hover near my ear. From the outside looking in, it appears too intimate.

But since I’m used to this from Ronan, I don’t stop to think about it anymore.

“That’s a great idea.” Ronan snaps his fingers in the voice’s direction. Silver. Of course she’d say that.

I can’t believe we used to be close once. Now, she’s this exotic goddess, beautiful in a painful way with a model body and a venomous mouth, and she’s also a top-grade student. A basic bitch.

Who was once my friend. Who hugged me when Nana died and gave me one of her favourite Barbie dolls.

That time of my life used to be so full and then, in a moment, it became empty.

“Let’s go get a room, Kimmy.” Ronan smiles mischievously at me.

I hit his side jokingly.

But I can’t help wondering how my relationship with him would be if I’d known him as long as I’ve known the others.

Ronan only joined the four horsemen in our previous school. Maybe he, too, would’ve distanced himself if he’d known me since our childhood.

“Everyone take their seats.” Mrs Stone’s voice comes from behind us and I push away from Ronan to settle at the front of the class. Usually, Elsa or one of her foster siblings would be here with me, but now, it’s just me. Ronan is out since he prefers to sit at the back and sleep in peace.

As I settle in, a movement catches in my peripheral vision.

Xander.

He's by the window, in front of Cole, who's telling him something in his ear while clutching a book.

He doesn't seem to be listening since his entire concentration is on me. It's blank, though, as if he's not really looking at me.

But he is.

I can feel his gaze, not on my skin or on my face, but deep in my soul. It's invading me and touching parts he has no business touching.

I turn around and flop into my seat, fighting my heated cheeks. Just why the hell did I have to be in the same class with the four horsemen during my last year in RES?

I was almost surviving without having to see Xander's face in every damn class.

Mrs Stone is speaking about a test, but I can't for the life of me concentrate on what she's saying. My mind keeps flickering to the back tables, where I feel someone watching me.

My nape prickles with unwanted attention and I squirm in my seat as if that will make the discomfort go away.

Something hits my arm before a crumpled piece of paper falls beside me. Letting my hair cover my eyes, I peek behind me to be greeted by Ronan's grin.

He's sitting right beside Xander, where the latter is clenching his pencil in a death grip. Ronan stretches both legs in front of him, twirling a black pen between his index and middle finger. He motions at the paper with his brows.

I throw a fleeting glance at Xander, but he's focused on

Mrs Stone. His expression is neutral, but his shoulders are rigid. Why the hell is he so tense?

After retrieving the paper, I unfold it discreetly. It's a scribble in Ronan's messy handwriting with a smiley emoji at the top.

'Give the world a middle finger with a smile.'

I stare back at him and he winks. My lips instinctively curve in a smile.

Xander's harsh gaze slides from Ronan to me and then stays there.

On me.

It doesn't waver nor does he attempt to look away. He's trying to intimidate me so I'll be the one to cut off eye contact and cower like I do every time he's in my vicinity.

If looks could slice me open, Xander's would be the sharpest blade right now.

But there's something he's forgetting. His war doesn't scare me anymore. It can't be worse than the fog or Kir's disappointed gaze or the fear in his little eyes when he thought I'd leave him alone.

So I continue smiling. At Ronan, not at Xander.

I flip off those who slowly broke me, who turned me into this pathetic shell of a person.

Those who took pleasure in pushing me past my breaking point and watched me as I fell.

Those who threw me under the bus instead of pulling me to safety.

Those who fed the fog and allowed it to rule my life.

I follow Ronan's advice and give the world the middle finger.

3

XANDER

There's a certain company in loneliness.

Yes, that sounds crazy, and yes, I still stand by it. This could be due to the coffee, er...vodka coffee I just had, but who cares?

The empty house sure doesn't.

The people inside it are only paid by my father to keep their mouths shut. He makes them sign NDAs that would cost them their lives and three generations of their families sold on the black market.

People keep their mouths shut when they're stuffed with the queen's bills.

At least those my father surrounds himself with do.

Our cook didn't blink an eye when I made a coffee and poured alcohol instead of water. He just nodded and went about his business.

I stand by the huge French window, sipping my coffee and placing a hand in my pocket. You know, like a good upper-middle-class boy with decent grades, a popularity vote under his belt, and a pretty wonderful life.

Everything is laid out before me for the taking—the huge garden, the German cars in the garage, the high positions.

All of it is there.

And yet, it isn't.

Is it okay to take what you need when you don't have what you want?

The answer to that is yes, logically speaking, but I've been gradually losing that part due to my vodka.

And yes, I do answer my own hypothetical questions. Cole's philosophy shit is starting to rub off on me.

"What are you doing here? Don't you have practice?"

I slowly close my eyes, inhaling deeply, before I turn around to face the only family I have left.

The one I wish had disappeared instead of Mum twelve years ago.

My father stands in the middle of the living area, which is filled with renaissance paintings and weird fucking art that he pays hundreds of thousands for at auctions.

Lewis Knight is a man of power in this country, one of the hotshot ministers who not only regulates the economy but also controls it. He's—wait for it—Secretary of State for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy. Phew, I know, that's a long title, but it goes with his 'duties', as he calls them.

You know, like a typical politician.

He's in his mid-forties with a medium build and thick dark hair that he keeps styled as if he has daily dates with the queen herself. A three-piece suit flatters his frame and gives him a majesty that everyone praises in the media.

He's one of the popular ones, my father. Spoiler alert, that's why I get the popularity vote, too. That shit is genetic.

He's also friends with the 'IT' crowd, the first line of the conservative party, who are waging some internal war to crush the upcoming elections and rule the country once again. After more than ten years of consecutive wins, let's just say it got boring.

A permanent scowl lodges between his thick brows while he looks me up and down as if he objects to my jeans and T-shirt. I should always look presentable, even at home. You never know when those reporters will come to do a field visit.

For as long as I can remember, Dad has always had that look when his gaze falls on me; permanent disapproval of sorts. He's never approved of me or my existence.

Deep down, he wishes Mum would've taken me with her that day. Both of us do a fantastic job ignoring that reality.

If we could turn back time, he'd push me into her car or I would sneak and hide in her boot.

"So?" he insists. "Practice."

"We don't have one today."

"Why?"

"Because we need to rest before our next game."

He narrows his eyes the slightest bit, then schools his expression. He's pragmatic that way, my father, suspicious by nature, too. Perhaps that's why he's a successful politician. I have no doubt he'll call the school and make sure my words are accurate.

His fatherhood game is just that: a fucking game. He likes to be in control and to think he has me under his thumb where he can press anytime.