
evermore
HE'S PRINCE CHARMING.
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VICIOUS
PRINCE
ROYAL ELITE BOOK 5
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RINA KENT

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VICIOUS PRINCE

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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Also by Rina Kent

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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To the ones who wear a smile like a loaded gun.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

I usually dream of my plots and characters. However, *Vicious Prince* is a book that spoke to me instead. Ronan and Teal lived in me for a long time after I finished writing. There are scenes that were so raw and visceral, but I forged on anyway because I owe those two that much.

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.

This book deals with child molestation. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

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

Vicious Prince 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

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PLAYLIST

Worst In Me—Unlike Pluto
Nightmare—Halsey
Dying In A Hot Tub—Palaye Royale
The Last Of The Real Ones—Fall Out Boy
Alone—I Prevail
What A Man Gotta Do—Jonas Brothers
Bad Liar—Imagine Dragons
To Tell You The Truth—Written by Wolves
Doctor Doctor—YUNGBLUD
Popular Monster—Falling In Reverse
Imaginary Illness—Call Me Karizma
Old Me—5 Seconds of Summer
I'm Gonna Show You Crazy—Bebe Rexha
Play with Fire—Sam Tinnesz & Yacht Money
Everything Black—Unlike Pluto & Mike Taylor
Circles—Post Malone
Sick of Me—GARZI & Travis Barker
Leach—Bones UK

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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1
TEAL

The beginning is the end.

The beginning is when you decide how the finale will go.

For some people, the ending is a mystery and the greatest discovery of all.

Not for me.

I'd already decided the end before I'd even started. It's all in folders, tucked in neat boxes and waiting to be unleashed on the world.

Like Pandora's box.

I've come so far. I dreamt of this—or rather had nightmares about it. This scenario has existed in every night terror, in every sleep paralysis where he sat on my chest like a fucking Grim Reaper.

He stole my breath, my life, my damn existence.

And now, I'll steal his.

My name is Teal Van Doren, and I'm a thief.

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The type who's not interested in pieces of jewellery or goods, but the type who's after lives.

His life.

"Teal?"

At the sound of the soft voice from my right, I lift my head from my phone, shifting my focus from the article about Napoleon's war tactics.

My foster sister, Elsa, watches me with a slight furrow between her brows. Her golden blond hair is tucked into a long ponytail that covers her slender back. The look in her electric blue eyes is filled with concern and…something else I can't identify.

The only reason I figured out the concern is because of the twisting of her lips, the furrow of her brows, and the way she's clutching the strap of her backpack. It's some sort of a tell with her, which makes it easier to figure out her emotions.

At least this one. Usually, she maintains a resting bitch face that's hard to decipher.

Or it's probably because I'm bad at this human interaction business.

Some are born for peopling; I was born for anything that doesn't include that.

Elsa is the definition of angelic beauty with her pale skin and slim figure. However, I've never once felt non-existent beside her, even with my short black hair in a blunt lob and my generally grim makeup. When people started calling me adorable with snow-like beauty in my youth, I smothered it.

What others find beautiful escapes me, so when I first met her, I thought she was the bitch heiress to Dad's fortune. She proved me wrong by the way she acts—like right now.

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As if she took lessons from my brother, she always makes sure I'm not too lost in my head.

We're walking to the first class of the day. The grand hall of Royal Elite School, or RES, nearly swallows us. It's one of those schools the privileged have direct access to, the type of school the greatest names in the UK attend, Dad included. The feeling that I'm continuing in Dad's footsteps is one of the reasons why I tolerated the idea of leaving Birmingham to come all the way to London.

And *him*.

The one who'll soon go down.

Other than that, nothing interests me here. Not the high towers, the prestigious education, or the students with millions in their trust funds.

They look at me like I'm a freak, and I don't acknowledge them at all.

Why?

Because I was never interested in fitting in.

You can't covet something you never actually wanted or even thought about.

I have my world, and no one is welcome in.

Sometimes, like now, their faces blur until their features blend into each other, leaving stark lines behind.

Wrenching my attention from them, I focus on Elsa. "Yes?"

"I heard about your deal with Dad." She retrieves a bar of dark chocolate.

I don't hesitate when I take it from her and have a bite, savouring the rich taste. Elsa acts like an older sister even though she's only a few weeks older than me.

"You don't have to do that, Teal." Her voice softens.

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"Don't have to do what?" I steal another look at the Napoleon article.

"You know." She clutches me by the elbow of my uniform's jacket, which is my cue to pay attention.

"It's not rocket science, Elsa. Dad needs help, so I stepped up."

She traps her lower lip under her teeth, and I'm not sure if it's some sort of seduction tactic or her way of reining something in. I've seen her do that with her boyfriend, and I still can't figure it out.

I'll go with the need to suppress something because I doubt she'd want to seduce me. That would be, eh, awkward, especially since I'm almost certain she's kind of figured out who my crush is.

"Dad would never make you do something you don't want, Teal. Remember how he acted when I refused the arranged marriage?"

That's because you're his biological daughter and his pride.

Not that Dad doesn't like me and my twin brother. He's taken care of us since that day he found us curled up in balls, bleeding and starved to death.

But the fact remains: we're only his foster children. Elsa is his real daughter.

"I volunteered," I say.

Elsa stops in the middle of the hall, drawing some attention from onlookers. "What?"

I lift a shoulder. "I told Dad I'd do it."

"But the other time you asked me if this was what I wanted to do. I thought you were against arranged marriages."

"I was asking if you wanted to do it, and if you didn't, I would step up. Someone has to help Dad after you chose not to."

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"Ouch." She grimaces.

"Eh, sorry, I guess." Since I started to somehow grasp human nature, I've learnt they get offended when the truth is shoved in their faces. My twin brother Knox says I'm too direct and that I sound like a bitch.

"It's okay. I know your mind is only thinking about getting the point across."

My lips part as her mouth pulls into a smile. She… knows. All this time, only Knox and Dad understood the way my brain works. I never thought Elsa would catch on this soon.

"Thank you." My voice is barely above a murmur, and I take another bite of the chocolate to fill the silence.

"Teal." She clutches my shoulders and meets my gaze. "It's not that I didn't want to help Dad. It's that I couldn't marry someone else, since I'm in love with Aiden. That's not how it works."

In love.

Not how it works.

I allow my brain to pause on those words and their foreign meanings. Elsa keeps saying these things, and I crash into them every time as if they're a metal wall.

Sure, I know the dictionary definition of love, but that's only theoretical. The real world is the practical field, and there's no such thing as love.

There are hormones, neurotransmitters, and endorphins—chemical reactions.

I wonder when Elsa will finally figure that out. She's smart in everything except for this.

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"Sure," I say instead. There's something else I've learnt about human interactions: if you agree with them, they

drop it, which means fewer headaches and more peace of mind.

"Besides, Dad will join forces with Aiden's father, so there's no need for more allies."

"Of course there is. Dad returned from a nine-year coma, during which he was cut off from the world. He needs all the allies he can get. Aiden's father, that Jonathan King bloke, isn't trustworthy. Do you really think he'll play nice with Dad after the grudge he held for ten years? He holds Dad responsible for the death of his wife, and that doesn't just disappear."

She drops her hands from me and bites her lower lip again. This time, I'm almost sure it's because she's contemplating something.

"You're right." She sighs. "But I believe Jonathan and Dad will fix their problems over time. You don't need to sacrifice yourself."

My brows furrow. "Sacrifice?"

"Well, you already have…you know, a love interest. Marrying someone else is a sacrifice."

"A sacrifice means slaughtering an animal or a person as an offering to a deity. In other words, it means giving up something valued for other considerations. I'm doing neither." I allow a small smile to curve my lips. "If anything, I'm gaining something valuable."

She releases a breath, which means she doesn't understand my logic. It's fine, I guess. It's true Elsa understands some of my thinking, but she won't get everything so fast.

Besides, no one actually knows me—or at least not the way they think.

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They don't see the constant shadow over my shoulder or the tears trapped in the middle of nowhere.

Only I do.

"What does Knox think about this?" she asks.

"He—" I'm cut off when a strong hand wraps around my shoulder. It's so sudden, I stiffen and lift my elbow.

A dark figure is grabbing me, his fingers are on me, his smell, his damn—

"Did I hear my name?" An awfully cheerful voice cuts into the usual vicious cycle of thoughts.

My brother. Knox. It's only Knox.

Usually, I'm okay with someone touching me when I see it coming, like when Elsa clutched my shoulders earlier. I saw her before I felt her and that was fine, but a sudden attack always triggers this stony state.

"Sorry," Knox whispers, and he loosens his hold.

He of all people knows how it feels. That darkness, feeling without seeing—all of it.

I lift a shoulder, pretending I wasn't on the verge of an episode. He masks his apology with a grin as he plants himself between me and Elsa, clutching each of us by a shoulder.

Knox and I are fraternal twins, but we barely look like siblings. Where my hair is black, his is chestnut. All his features are like those of models—or gigolos; I can't actually tell the difference. It's a serious issue—don't judge. I don't think it's okay to compare your brother to a gigolo, but he is one in some ways. For one, he's charming, with a happy-go-lucky personality he only uses to get things done.

And he talks a lot, like a fucking *lot*. It gives me headaches.

"So what's with me?" He nudges us both. "Is this some conspiracy, *Game of Thrones*–style? Because I watched all the seasons—I can tell."

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Elsa laughs. "I was just asking Teal what you think about her new decision."

He retrieves a packet of crisps and throws two into his mouth then offers the rest to us. We both refuse—Elsa because it's forbidden to eat food outside the cafeteria and she follows the rules a lot, and me because I don't eat that junk food. I picked my poison, and it's dark chocolate.

"More for me." He grins, swallowing a handful.

I nudge him so he'll give me some space. He's crunching in my ear, the sound heightened by his proximity, and that's another way for the triggers to seep in.

Knox releases me, now only holding on to Elsa.

"So, what do you think?" she insists.

"Me?" He feigns innocence. "I don't care."

Liar.

"Really?" Elsa grabs him by the elbow.

"I'm T's brother, not her father. She gets to do what she wants. Do you know how freaked out I was when she said she had something to tell me? I thought she was going to say she's pregnant and was planning a party to mourn my youth." He points at me with his bag of crisps. "I'll forgive anything except making me an uncle this young."

"Anything?" I smirk.

His grin falters for a second. "You're a pain in the arse, T."

"Compliments first thing in the morning?" I feign a gasp. "What have I done to deserve you?"

"You kind of stole my egg."

"Your egg?" Elsa asks.

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"Ellie, you know how twins are formed, right? Like once upon a time, I was swimming in my whore mother's

womb, and I fought all the other fuckers who wanted to go into the egg. I won, by the way. So there I was, happy in the egg and shit, and then T here sneaks in and shares my egg."

Elsa bursts out laughing as I just give him my signature blank stare.

"What are you laughing at?" Knox squeezes Elsa's shoulder. "That's really how twins are formed."

"Identical," she says.

"Huh?"

"That's how identical twins are formed. You and Teal are fraternal. She didn't steal your egg—there were already two."

"How do you know that?" He narrows his eyes on her. "Were you there?"

"God no."

"Then we'll go with my story."

He's so daft, my brother, and I have no words to describe how much I appreciate him for it.

I wouldn't have come this far if I didn't have him.

When the darkness swallows me and I have nowhere to go, he's there, telling me without words that we have each other.

We always have, since our whore mother's womb.

We had each other even when that same whore wanted to make us like her.

When we thought we were going to die in that hollow, dark place while we almost bled out.

I retrieve my phone, ready to go back to my article about Napoleon. There's something interesting about war, not the mass destruction or the casualties, but the ways they've started.

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The ways they've been finished.

In between, there's chaos, but chaos doesn't come randomly.

I'm at the beginning phase, where the smallest action can trigger a bloody battle.

The first of many.

As I'm about to get lost in the words, in the debauchery of the human mind, another presence steals my interest.

He walks towards us with an arm around Aiden's shoulder. The latter—Elsa's boyfriend—is the tall, dark, and handsome type, and he's playing the role with that scowl that says, *Come close and I'll slaughter your family tree*. It's why the onlooking students admire him from afar, not daring to get in his way. For Aiden, only one person exists in the female population—or the entire population, actually—and it's my foster sister.

Aiden King is one of a group known as the four horsemen of this school's football team, something stupid about the damage they do to their opponents' defences. Aiden is Conquest, and true to his name, he's already conquered Elsa.

While he ignores everyone, his attention falls solely on her, as if he can cut the distance and magically appear beside her.

The one by his side is doing the opposite of ignoring his surroundings.

He winks at one girl, high-fives another, and tells a random freshman to call him with a huge grin that nearly splits his face open. They all eat it up, nearly tripping over their feet in front of him.

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Ronan Astor.

An earl's son with a Prince Charming complex.

Nicknamed Death for his position on the team.

He doesn't know that death isn't a title. Death is the beginning of every war, and I've already started mine.

I stole his will, his future, and soon enough, his life will follow.

I have a secret. I'm a thief.

Ronan Astor is my next target.

As well as my future husband.

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2
TEAL

Beauty is subjective.

I read that once, and since then, I've had this weird feeling that it spoke to me.

Beauty is a strange concept for me. Black is beautiful, and dark chocolate with nuts can also be considered beautiful.

But other than that, what's human beauty? Gigolos—sorry, I mean guys with model-like looks such as Knox's—are considered beautiful. Aiden, Elsa's boyfriend, is handsome, too.

There's a different type of beauty that's darker, a bit sinister, hiding under the surface rather than pushing to the top.

I guess that's beauty for me. It's not about the physical aspect but rather about what the exterior hides. You can feel it when someone possesses no beauty by societal standards but their charisma speaks to you in one way or another. You can't see it, but it's there.

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Ronan, however, has no beauty at all.

His is the shallow type like gigolos. If he were a woman,

he would be labelled a slut, but in his case, he's called a playboy.

From the outside, he has a well-proportioned face, and it's symmetrical, actually. It's the same on either side of his proud straight nose, from the eyes to the cheeks to the sharp jaw and even to the ears.

It's a symmetry like I've never seen in my entire life. Some people, like actors, have what resembles symmetry, but it's never actually entirely perfect.

His is.

His face is too symmetrical, as if it were sculpted by a Greek god. People's eyes usually have a slight asymmetry—not his. Even as the outside sun shines on them, they both glow in a rich identical brown colour.

I guess it's part of his filthy aristocratic blood, a heritage he claims by being the whatever generation of the world's nobility.

His beauty makes no sense at all for two reasons: (a) he's too aware of it; it's cringey, and (b) most importantly, there's no depth behind it.

At least in Knox's case, he uses the plastic, easy-going personality as a defence mechanism to get what he wants. I know all too well what he's hiding beneath all the laughs and grins.

In the few weeks I've watched Ronan, he's never shown another facet of the sickly, cheerful personality. He's always smiling, laughing, grinning, throwing parties, fucking, and fucking, and more fucking.

It's…boring.

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And yes, I have watched him. After all, he's part of my plan.

He just doesn't know it yet.

Soon, though. So very soon.

"Drop your arm, Van Doren." Aiden stops in front of us. He's smiling, but there's no warmth behind it.

That.

The depth.

The human desolation.

It's what makes him beautiful, not as a man, but as someone who stands out from the crowd of normal.

Aiden is anything but. He's all darkness with a little light that he only shows to Elsa.

"Come on, King." My brother grins. "She's my sis."

"You share no blood. Actually…" He pauses. "Even if you did, I'd tell you to drop your arm."

Elsa suppresses laughter by biting her lower lip as Aiden tugs her to his side by her other wrist. I tilt my head as she snuggles to him, wrapping her arm around his waist while he holds her with a hand at the small of her back.

It's like they can't get close enough or touch each other long enough.

Why would they do that?

Human touch is overrated. I've tried it, and it didn't really matter. At least not in the way I wanted.

Knox and Aiden get into some sort of argument that doesn't really register. It's like they're speaking in outer space—no idea if I'm the one blocking it out or if it just doesn't exist for me anymore.

As I slide my attention back to my phone, a harsh glare registers in my peripheral vision. When I lift my head and my eyes collide with that infuriatingly symmetrical gaze, a

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grin greets me, all perfect and put together and worthy of an earl's son.

I could swear someone was glaring at me just now, but he's the only one in sight. Someone with his reputation and shallowness doesn't even know how to glare. Ronan is all about laughs and having a good time to the point that negativity is considered beneath him. I've never seen him angry or displeased. Even when Elsa was taken to the emergency room, he came by filled with laughs and jokes, trying to cheer her up.

"*Bonjour, ma belle*," he tells me, his tone light, welcoming, and I think there's some flirting in there, too, but I'm not sure.

Ma belle.

My beautiful.

I don't know why he calls me that when he's never once thought I'm pretty. I heard him talking to Kimberly—Elsa's best friend—the other day, and when she told him I'm pretty, he said, "There's pretty and there's creepy, and she falls in the latter category. Mmmkay?"

It was the first time someone said those words. Creepy? Sure. I've felt it during my limited interactions with humans, but no one has said it out loud, or maybe no one has said it out loud for me to hear it. They usually think I'm crazy, abnormal…mad.

I'm curious to see how he feels now that he's forced to marry a creep, but I have neither the mind nor the patience to pursue it.

Curiosity can be beneficial, but its outcome is usually disastrous, and I have no time for that in my life.

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Focusing back on my phone, I turn around.

They're all so busy talking and throwing shade, so I doubt anyone will notice I'm gone.

Knox nudges me, a sly grin on his lips.

Okay, anyone but my brother.

I ignore him and walk down the hall. I'll have to take the longer route to get to the classroom.

I don't mind as long as it gets me away from that circle.

Lacking a talkative nature can be a disadvantage when surrounded by people who won't shut up. Sometimes, Elsa and Aiden's group of friends throw remarks my way, and I usually figure it out too late. I hate that.

It's not my fault I'm not as witty as all of them seem to be.

I pass by the faceless students and try focusing on one of them, squinting to form an image. How hard could it be? Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. It's that easy.

Only it's not.

I need a lot of focus to form faces, a familiarity of sorts, but I still don't have that with RES's students. The one I concentrate on barely has eyes; they're washed out, and the person quickly strides past me, shattering any focus I had.

I shake my head and rekindle the connection with my phone.

Maybe one day after the war finishes, I'll stand in a public place and recognise every face and every person. I'll be normal.

Though, what's normal? I never lived it, never experienced it, so how come I want it so much?

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I'm a human, after all, like my therapist says. I can deny

it all I want, but I keep snapping back to what's considered normal even without my permission.

Stupid anatomy.

"A word, *ma belle*," a low voice whispers in my ear from behind.

I startle and my hands shake, nearly dropping the phone on the ground.

Something jerks in my chest, as if invisible hands are rummaging through my organs.

It takes me a second too long to regain control over my breathing.

Refusing to show Ronan a reaction, I continue walking as if he didn't just set off my second trigger for the day. First Knox, and now him.

I'm usually more aware of my surroundings for this exact reason, but I spent all night searching for and watching videos of my opponent, making sure I know him better than he knows himself.

I guess a lack of sleep can cause a deficiency in attention.

"Did you hear me?" He speaks with that smile plastered on his face as he falls in step beside me.

"Yes, and my silence was the answer, just like how I left to stop being in your immediate vicinity."

"You're getting it all wrong, but I'm generous, so I'll fix your misconception. Silence is a sign of affirmation."

"For me, it's a sign of denial." I stride faster than I usually walk, but it's useless. He's way taller than me and his legs eat up the distance, keeping pace with me without any extra effort.

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"That's lovely." He smiles, but I don't think he believes what he said—the part where he thinks this is lovely, I mean.

No, it can't be.

He's as readable as it gets. Even with my weird relationship with feelings, I can figure him out. I watched him for weeks on end before I took this step. He can't possibly be hiding anything up his sleeve.

"Do you mind?" I stop, motioning at him to go ahead. Ronan and I often throw jabs at each other. What? I'm allergic to his over-positivity, and I can't stay quiet about it. He always retaliates and we soon drop it.

But that's only when someone else is around.

I never spend alone time with Ronan, and it's for a reason. He's always surrounded by people; it feels suffocating just watching from afar.

"I do, actually." He smiles again, adding a wink, but it's not at me—it's at a girl passing us by. "Party at my place, Nicky!"

She nods several times like an overeager kid on Christmas morning then blushes when he winks at her again.

I sidestep him and continue on my way. After all, I don't want to hinder his man-whorish ways.

I make a beeline to the library to return the book *A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic Wars*. I read the whole thing last night, so I might as well take another one.

I'm in front of a shelf when a strong hand grabs me by the arm from behind.

Third and final trigger.

My heart nearly stops beating as I shriek. The sound is so loud my ears pop.

Only no sound comes out.

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A hand wraps tightly around my mouth, killing any protest I could form.

I stare up at Ronan's symmetrical eyes. There is no laughter in there, no winks or anything familiar. It's a bit blank, a bit too…empty.

It's almost as if I'm staring at a different person.

The change disappears in a second as a grin breaks out on his face, and just like that, the shallow version returns.

Was it even there? Maybe the change was a play of my imagination because of the trigger I just experienced.

My ears still ring from the effect of it, so it can't be far off.

Still, my chest rises and falls so heavily it's like a war has already started in my heart and is now about to take me over.

Ronan lowers his hand as if he didn't just muffle my scream and trigger my damn episode.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I snap.

"Shh." He places his forefinger in front of his mouth, motioning at Mrs Abbot, the librarian. "We're at the library."

"And what are you doing here?" I whisper.

"Told you." He gives me back my personal space as if he didn't confiscate it a second ago. "I want a word with you."

"And I told you no." I turn on my heels, breathing heavily and trying to subdue the shadow on my shoulder, trying to keep it from pouncing at me.

I need to get the fuck out of here and take a pill to calm down. Otherwise, I'll be jittery all damn day.

My episodes have that effect on me.

An arm shoots out in front of my face, and I push back, jolting as it clutches a shelf, blocking my exit.

Damn him.

I can already feel the usual shortness of breath and trembling of my toes. If he keeps doing this, I'll really have no way to stop whatever's brewing in the distance.

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Might as well get this over with.

"Fine." I breathe out, meeting his gaze. "What do you want?"

"I'm happy you changed your mind." He tilts his head with a smile.

Changed my mind? More like was coerced into it.

The fucker.

I still can't pinpoint if he did it on purpose or if it was a lucky hit. Please let it be the latter, because if it's the former, I'm in trouble.

The best thing about laying plans is to follow through with them. Everything is a domino; once one falls, the others soon follow.

I'm the only one who can push that first domino. No one will do it for me.

I tap my foot on the ground and whisper due to the library's strict policies. "I'm waiting, in case you haven't noticed."

"Oh, I did notice. Doesn't mean I care. This is about me, not you, *ma belle*, remember?"

Arrogant prick.

"If there's a point, you should have reached it by now." I pretend to stare at my watch. The numbers are there, but for some reason, I can't seem to read the time. Shit. This one is worse than any of my recent episodes.

"Here's the thing, *ma belle*. My father told me I'm getting a fiancée. At first, I was fine since it was Elsa, but apparently, there's been an internal sister swap as if we're in medieval times. I know I'm part of old-school aristocracy, but this behaviour is insolent—imagine that in the queen's tone. Anyway, point is, I don't want a fiancée. I just turned

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eighteen, and I have this brilliant plan that starts with me staying single for the next fifteen years and shagging exotic girls all around the world. It's not me, it's you. Now, do me a favour and fucking disappear, mmmkay?" He grins.

"Why would I do that?" I don't even pause.

"What?"

"Why would I do you any favours? Last time I checked, I owe you nothing."

He chuckles, the sound low and discreet in the silence of the library. "Is that what you want? To owe me something?"

"That's beside the point. What I meant is that I have no obligation to do something for you. Not now, not ever."

"*Ma belle, ma belle*…" He's still smiling as he muses. "I call you *ma belle*, but you keep missing the point entirely."

His words give me pause. What is that supposed to mean? I resist the urge to ask him just that, and I have a problem with not being direct. It's as if the words will suffocate me if I don't speak them. If he meant to rattle me, he's going to be disappointed, because he won't be getting a reaction.

He reaches a hand to my lips, the touch soft, almost like a feather. Just when I'm about to push free, he presses on the tender skin and smears my purple lipstick onto my cheek, making my jaw move with the motion. "I think you missed the memo about makeup. It's supposed to make you prettier, not uglier."

I'm caught off guard by his brutal touch, and I barely register the softly spoken words. There are so many contradictions in his touch, how he started gently then ended it brutally, how he spoke softly yet lined it with a mean edge.

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I snap my head away from his immediate vicinity. His lips curve in a smirk before he quickly masks it with his usual easy-going smile.

What. The. Fuck.

"So, here's the thing. During tomorrow's dinner, I want you to sit down like a good little girl and tell everyone you don't accept this engagement, and then I'll gift you a new set of purple makeup shit. Deal? Glad to do business with you."

"If you're so against marrying me, why don't you speak up yourself?" I know why, but me getting on his nerves is only fair after the way he not only triggered my anxiety attack, but also gave me the foreboding sensation he's able to ruin my domino castle.

Ronan Astor is the sole heir of an earl, and he has no way to refuse his father's wishes. He's the perfect puppet, someone used for his symmetrical face and playful nature.

He was always meant to have an arranged marriage, and he has no way to refuse it. That would mean disgracing the great Edric Astor's name, which is something that man will never allow.

Instead of the anger, or at least annoyance, I expected, his grin widens further. "Why would I speak up when I have you to do the dirty work, *ma belle*?"

I'll be doing more than your dirty work.

Instead of saying so, I give him a smile that mimics his, but I'm bad at faking this, so I doubt it comes out as anything but a grimace. "And if I say no, Your Lordship?"

"I'll give you one piece of advice, just because you're Elsa and Knox's sister."

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I don't get a warning before he grabs me by my nape.

His hand covers the tiny space, shocking my skin as it wraps around my neck from behind.

The scent of something spicy fills my nostrils as he leans in to whisper against the lobe of my ear. "Run, *ma belle*."

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3
RONAN

Being me is easy.

There are a few recipes for success.

One, always smile.

And that's it. You don't need anything else. There's some philosopher who said that people lose their fight, their anger, and even feel humiliated when you counter their maliciousness with a smile.

Though I suspect he meant it as in, *Try to be good people, kids*. I must've missed that part somehow in my philosophical journey, which is basically listening to Cole spout nonsense about the latest book he's read.

Why waste your life reading books when you can live it? When you can breathe it into your lungs and exhale it back to the world?

While nerds like Cole drown in books, I'm giving authors inspiration and writing material. My life is the best form of storytelling to ever exist.

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Don't thank me yet.

I yawn as I stumble from the bed and to a robotic