

Check

by E. J. Loera

My toes curled together under the pathetic rag of a bedsheet, the frost creeping in through the two-inch deformity of the window on the left wall. I was tempted to sneak a glance at them to insure that they weren't black, but then decided that I'd rather not know. It was always so damn cold. Burns never wanted to turn on the gas to light the furnace, because he said it was too expensive. I wasn't worth it. If I wanted a fire I could go to a God damn shantytown and share one with someone's piss-covered daddy.

But damn it if it wasn't cold. This winter was supposed to be one of the worst, and already the chill could have inspired a Tolstoy novel. At least now I could imagine a Russian winter, since it wasn't like I'd ever be able to go there.

"Burns, baby, can you spare a little more of the blanket?" I whispered into the darkness.

He groaned half-consciously and rolled away from me.

I tried to close my eyes again but felt another chill shiver up my legs. My numb hand unwittingly crept up to Burns' bare shoulder, his old labor shirt having been cut off at the arm joints. "Burnsie."

He moaned, shrugging my touch off him. "Shit, Stace, I'm trying to sleep."

His words stumbled over each other stubbornly, but since he could string a sentence together at all - I knew he wasn't as ossified as he was pretending to be. The air was perfumed only with the faintest fragrance of some kind of moonshine. When again a breath of the night bolted up my ankles like a surge of electricity, I swallowed hard and touched him again.

He softly batted what he could reach of my fingers with his free arm, so that it only stung for a second. "Would you let me God damn sleep?"

"Can I have some more of the blanket?"

"Shit." Without facing me he yanked the blanket off himself and threw the wad on me.

I greedily let the cloth devour my body completely, tucking myself in on all sides like a pharaoh and his mummy wraps. It still had the remnants of warmth from Burns' company, and it hugged me tightly. It only took a couple minutes to stop my reluctant quivering. My toes thanked me with a wiggle. My eyelids, no longer fearing the sprouting of a garden of icicles beneath them, slowly sank into my cheekbones.

But just before they did, they stole a glimpse of Burns. One of his pant legs had rolled up a little, revealing a thin stripe of flesh where his socks didn't reach. His knees were bent a bit towards his chest, just as dogs do when they curl into the snow. The short hairs on his upper arm were stiff, the muscles less than relaxed.

Damn Russian winter, but without the travel to enjoy it.

I ran my tongue along the edge of my teeth like someone sharpening a blade. Raising myself somewhat, I reversed my process of mummification and pulled the sheet a few feet to the left so that it covered us each only just enough to not leave any of our bodies in threat of exposure. Falling back into my deflated pillow, I bit back the familiar cold and fought to keep my eyes shut.

After a moment, Burns spun onto his other side slowly, facing me. I yielded as he pulled me closer, wrapping his arm around my waist. His breath was hot and zozzled on my neck, but at least it was warmer. He stretched his other arm beneath my head to protect me.

"Stace," he exhaled suddenly. Just like that. No exclamation, question, or more explanation. Just a word, like it was picked right out of the middle of a sentence. Stace.

A word. Not a name. Maybe a name, but not mine. Burns was telling me soon after we had our first fight how lucky I was to have him. I knew I was, but he told me anyway. He said without him I'd be nothing but a lady on the corner painted up like a clown, willing to do anything for money - with a name like Cleopatra or Anastasia. Anastasia, he'd laughed. That was kind of funny. And since then, I was Stace.

"Yeah?" I whispered, hoping the DiMarco's next door weren't awake to listen.

It took him a minute to answer, and I thought he was asleep again. Then he continued with a slight slur, "You ain't ever gonna leave me, right?"

"No, baby," I answered mechanically, used to the question. "I'm not gonna leave you."

"And you love me, right?"

"Of course I do."

"Say it."

"I love you, Burnsie."

"On the level?"

"On the up and up."

"Yeah," he said, and his voice got softer. "Yeah."

And then a dream stuffed me in a coffin and carried me out of the room.

I was torn from my sleep a quarter of a day later, when I thought I heard my father bellowing my name. I was ready to run into the closet but no, it was only Burns, and he was screaming "Stace!"

Wiping the sleep from my eyes and feeling a temporary striped stamp on cheeks from the pillow, I sat up. The cabinet of a room was alit with the day, the rugged and stained walls embarrassingly wishing it could be night again. Burns' clothes from the day before were the only decoration in the space, littering the dirty floor with splotches of color. I hugged my elbows, glad of the wrecked window at the present moment because it permitted some sun rays to caress me directly.

Burns jumped into the doorway, still in his sleep get-up, his dark eyes narrow and his fist clenching something of a shirt that an Okie with a cornfield might wear. "What in the hell is this?" he shouted, his rugged face contrasting sharply with his boyishly wild hair that mopped itself loosely just above his eyebrows.

"It's just a shirt, Burns."

"Says you!"

My throat clenched. "What's eating you?"

He crossed the two paces to me in an instant and unhinged the back of his hand to come flying at my jaw. I'd learned from a wanna-

be Jack Johnson that if you turn into the blow it hurts less because there's less momentum. I did that now but found my neck turning with his knuckles anyway. My ears rang first and there was no feeling but a sickness in my stomach from the nauseating noise of the explosion of flesh. Half a second later I felt the heat rise, and a thousand tiny needles set to work pricking the nerves along my cheek while a hammer came pummeling at the connection of my jaw with each heartbeat.

"You feeding me a line?" he shouted, throwing the shirt at my face.

Thank God he hadn't hit my nose. That always sent the liquid scurrying to my eyes. Now though, I could contain it for the most part. The mist in my vision was gone in a swallow. "No, baby, I'm not feeding you anything."

"You're off your rocker if you thought this sap wouldn't figure out his onions. Get lost! Go on, dry up and get the hell out of here!"

He leapt a step nearer and I pulled the bed-sheet closer to me, the blood in the tips of my fingers completely gone. "Baby..."

"Well ain't you just sitting pretty? God damned whore!" His hand got loose again, and he struck me an inch lower than his first blow.

I was glad he'd chosen the same side twice. My left cheek didn't hurt at all. "This is Joey's shirt," I murmured, hoping he might keep his voice low so the DiMarco's wouldn't hear.

His eyebrows dove behind his hair. "You admit then you been double-crossing me?"

"No!" I quickly flung the shirt away from me. "Burnsie, I would never — "

"Tell it to Sweeney."

The haze in my sight got worse, and I wished my brain would stop spinning like a penny riding its edge. "You were half the seas over last night. Joey helped you come home."

He paused, a crease forming on his forehead. "If he touched you, I'll bump him off. I'll give him six even holes and a date with my knife. I can do you in too."

"I swear, baby."

“Lots of dames swear.”

“Cross my heart.”

“With an ‘x’ or a little ‘t’?”

“With a bulls-eye. You can stick a silver bullet in me if I’m lying.”

He stopped and stared at me, his expression gradually melting into its usual stolid veneer. “You ain’t worth the silver.” Turning to leave, he hesitated at the door without turning. “You swear you love me?”

“I swear, Burnsie.”

Without answering, he threw himself out the door and slammed it behind him.

My breath was still coming out in sharp gasps, slicing the air into tiny little pieces as I struggled with a dry swallow. The room was silent, allowing that unearthly ringing in my ears to intensify. My head was buzzing. I reached an almost-steady hand to my scorching right cheek, dousing some of the flames. I felt myself flinch at the touch. The scarlet hues would sink into green and then blue and then purple by the night. The blueberries on my face were a little tougher to hide.

Another alibi to write.

It hadn’t always been like this. No sheik had ever treated me better than Burns did. Than he still did — sometimes. I mean, he still took care of me. Looked after me. Protected me. He could save me from anything... except himself.

That was how we met, as a matter of fact. I had snuck into a second level gin joint off 47th, flapping my bob and kicking up the skirts in sorry attempts to look like anything other than a Jane. Naturally, three rather inebriated gun-wingers picked up on my out-of-place energy and cornered me behind the cardboard box-lined bar. One of them pulled his shiv out of his back pocket and told me to follow him into the bathroom. I don’t know what they were going to do, but I can assume.

That’s when I met Burns. He had seen the whole affair and jumped in with his own blade, pushing me behind him even though he didn’t know me. He was smaller than the other fellas, but they

must have seen that dodgy glint in his eyes — because they went away after a few more lecherous winks in my direction. Burns asked me if I was hurt, and then he bought me a drink. He stayed by me the rest of the night, even taking me home to make sure I was okay.

He was my knight in shining armor.

“Bastard,” I murmured, the haze evaporated from my eyes, as I stood and left the bedroom with dragging feet. Hoping there was still some ice left in the closet of a kitchen — which also served as a poor man's den — I shuffled over there with my right hand plastered over my face. I didn't want the walls to see my secret. But then, they had seen everything anyway — hadn't they?

“Bastard!” I hissed again, this time venturing to be a little louder than the first time. I slapped an empty glass off the near table and sent it screaming to the ground, exploding into dozens of dizzying shards. For a moment, I caught my shattered reflection in the pieces. Half my face was swelling, glaring at me from thirteen different views.

“*Bastard!*” I shrieked now, clawing once through my ragged hair. Burns was lucky to have me. Not a lot of girls would have put up with his stunts. They would have been out the door a long time ago. Yet I was still here day after day, bruise after bruise, promising not to leave him.

That's right — he was lucky. God damn lucky to have me. And if he didn't see it... well — I'd make him see it.

There was no ice. The last party we'd had was almost a week ago, so I had really just been too hopeful. My cheek was still steaming. I kicked the box hard, feeling a sharp pang in my shin where I knew I'd have another purple stain.

Then — two knocks rang against the near wall. A second later it was followed by a third.

Not now. I froze, barely even breathing, wishing the ice box were Jonah's whale.

Again, the two knocks. And the third.

I heard pacing feet, and a door in the hall opened and shut all too loudly. Half a second after that the knocks had migrated to the front

door. I ignored them, the heat in my face spreading to my ears now, praying that my pummeling heartbeat wasn't too loud to hear.

But it was.

"Come on. Open up. I know you're there. I heard you." The voice on the other side was soft, comforting even. I swam in its lilt, but said nothing. "I'll call the police."

I exhaled, angry — though probably not as much as I should have been. I took my time going to the door, knowing he could hear me, and opened it less than a hand-span. The cheap wood frame shielded the worst part of my face, only the stripe of my eye visible to Donnie.

Donnie DiMarco. Boyishly handsome, standing there in the hall with his fists stuffed into the old pants that were too big for him, his jet-black suspenders matching the ebony locks of hair he had let grow too long. His gaze was dark but supple, his smooth cheeks grimacing in worry at my sight.

"Open the door," he said.

I shook my head. "Not now."

"I heard yelling."

I paused. "Your wife left early today."

"And Bernard left late."

A stinging flame rose into the space behind my eyes. "People are late sometimes."

"Open the door."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I..." my tongue tripped over words, having difficulty making a comprehensible sentence.

"Did he hit you?"

"No." The lie came easy.

His fists came out of their concealments, seeing right through me. "I'll kill him!"

"No! Honestly, I..."

"Oh — ho! You slay me. So you're just hiding behind that door because you feel like it?"

“Because I'm cold.” I hesitated. “Come on, Donnie, I was sleeping — “ I started to close the door but his foot shot out to block it before I could say anything further.

“You really don't want to see me right now?”

I thought of my fragmented reflection on the floor behind me.

“No, I really don't.”

He mashed his lips together, nodding and casting his gaze to the ground. “He doesn't deserve you,” he whispered. His ebony pupils floated up to meet me from behind his thick eyebrows. “He's lucky to have you.”

I let out a little gasp. Yes. It was true then! Burns was lucky to have *me*. And he was going to have to be taught to see that, so help me.

Donnie peeled his foot from its door-stop position and started to turn back the way he had come.

“Donnie.”

He stopped, twisting his neck to face me. “Yeah?”

“Come for dinner?”

“My wife's gonna be home tonight.”

“I know. So's Bernard.”

His eyes narrowed, and he slowly revolved his entire body in my direction. “Someone lose their marbles this morning?”

“I'm serious.”

“What're you trying to pull?”

The corner of my lip curled into a smile. “Just a friendly dinner between neighbors. Bring your wife.”

“But...”

“Please? It was nothing to do with you or your wife.” I dropped my eyes to the floor, making sure he could see the droop in my expression. “Just, if we have company, Bernard can't... I mean, he won't...”

Hesitantly, Donnie reached a hand up to the door and gave it the slightest push. It was just enough to unmask me, my cheeks now bare before him. His gaze fixed on the inflaming half of my face, his eyes widening. “Yeah,” he nodded quickly. “Yeah — of course we'll

come over. Are you sure you don't want me to come inside right now?'

"I'm sure."

He caught his bottom lip between his front teeth. "Okay. Knock if you need me." Delicately placing two fingers under my chin, he kissed me deftly. "See you tonight."

"Tonight," I repeated, and shut the door.

I slipped back into the wall, sinking into the floor like an ebbing tide against a shore's cliffs. It hurt to grin, but I did anyway. Even as liquid streamed into my eyes and my expression faded into a wince, I wouldn't let my smile dim.

Burns was gonna see how lucky he was. Even if I had to make him jealous to see it. Donnie was right. I deserved better — didn't I?

Better — like Donnie.

And Burns was gonna see.

I tried to go back to sleep, but I was too excited.

I wanted to go out, stretch my chicken legs a little bit, maybe find some ice, though I was too embarrassed with my face to do anything except imagine the reactions of people as they stared.

They didn't know me. Who were they to judge?

I found only two different judgments in people's glares: either their eyes would scream, "Stupid idiot of a masochist" or it would be some form of pathetic pathos in that they just felt sorry for me. Always one or the other, even though it was neither.

They didn't know me. How could they possibly understand? They didn't know how Burns protected me. How he kissed me softly everyday when he got home. How he would whisper, "I love you," into my neck every night that he was sober. And they didn't know how much he needed me. No. No one but me could ever understand that.

Not even Burns.

But tonight — tonight I'd show him how much he needed me.

Longing to get the hell out of my confinement yet loath to do so with something like shame, I settled on a compromise. I strung a

woolen black scarf around my head, covering the right side of my face and looking like the Virgin Mary. It was cold enough outside that I wouldn't look ridiculous.

I then dug through some of Burns' pants that were flung this way and that like the explosion of a clothing factory, stealing all the loose change I could find in the pockets. Stuffing the coins into my coat, I started out into the hallway. My palms hugged my elbows to me tightly as I wove my way down the creaky uneven stairs and into the morning air. The bustle of the city kept things crisp, the ether scented like the death of autumn leaves. It was still early, however, and that hovering inertness of a city still sleeping cold in its bed hovered.

The Saflei Market was only half a mile from the corner of 41st, so I marched determinedly in that direction. My nose started to lose feeling and I pulled my scarf up higher. In the back of my mind I wondered if I would have worn the scarf anyway, without the given circumstances. I probably wouldn't have thought of it.

Saflei was always open early, for all the mothers with bambinos who wanted to get their bread fresh. Some sweet combination of wheat and flour warmed into my nostrils as I neared. Already there were tired, sad looking women shuffling inside. None of them looked at me, and I offered the same courtesy.

The door jangled melodiously as I entered, nodding to the absent woman who had held it open for me. The warmth of a multitude of ovens and shuffling bodies coated the space like a fog, and I took my time picking out a loaf of day-old brown bread, a small block of cheese, and the thickest slab of salted roast beef I could get with my remaining pennies. I was hoping to get more, maybe even some better java beans than we were used to, but I knew I had to make do with what I had. I refused to steal. I could earn my keep same as all the stolid mothers around me.

I loitered for a few minutes in front of the sweet breads with saliva almost spouting out of my mouth, deciding to leave only when the baker's wandering eye had begun to follow me.

The cold slammed against me like a wall. I clutched my treasures close to me and continued on 41st to the library. It wouldn't be open for another two hours, but I couldn't possibly go back to Burns' apartment. Especially not with Donnie there. And in any case, I needed something to get my mind away from obsessive thoughts about that night. Vronsky would do the trick.

Burns, if nothing else, was always timely. He would be home at six. I could set my heart by it. At a quarter past five then, I left the library, packages in tow. I scurried back after tightening my incorrigible scarf, slipping into the building and then into Burns' apartment with as little sound as possible. The first thing I did was remove my shield and drop my purchases onto the table in one swipe of my arm.

Soon after, at five fifty-nine, I heard a key turn in the doorknob.

Burns stepped in unceremoniously, inhaling sharply at the sight of the purple mess of my right cheek but pretending not to notice. "Hey."

"Hey," I repeated, a slight pain in my jaw at the movement.

He stripped his coat and tossed it over a chair. Stopping, he motioned toward the packages on the table. "What's this?"

"I went to Saflei this morning. The DiMarcos are coming for dinner."

"Who?"

"The neighbors on the left side."

He lit a fire on the stove, putting the kettle over it. "Why?"

I paused. "Just thought it might be fun. And since you don't have any plans for tonight.."

Shrugging, he rubbed his fist into his eyes like a child fighting sleep. "Whatever you want." He half-mindfully got the coffee ready in the kettle.

"Okay," I said and started to turn.

"As long as you don't care about them seeing you like that," he continued, not looking at me.

"The window was stuck," I spoke mechanically, effortlessly. "I was pulling too hard and when the damn thing got loose it jumped open and slapped me in the face."

"Okay," he said to the wall.

I took a step closer to him. "Burns?"

"What?"

"Do you love me?"

"What is it with you dames anyway? I've told you a million times already."

"I know, but, well... do you love me for *me*, or just because I'm here?"

He shrugged. "You already know, Stace."

"Remind me."

"Can't you see I'm God damned tired? I'm not up for your stupid games. Especially since you've got the damn neighbors coming over tonight."

I knew he wouldn't say anything more, so I strolled to the wall behind me and pretended to stumble over a chair, knocking it loudly against the wall.

"Damn it!" Burns yelled but didn't look at me as he continued preparing his coffee.

A minute and a half later, there were two knocks on the front door.

Burns barely looked up from his coffee, seated at the table.

"They're your guests — you get it."

I opened the door unhurriedly, Donnie with a sheepish grin and his hands in his pockets while his wife had entwined her arm feverishly around his elbow. Her eyebrow was the same color as her chocolate curls, and something like blush had spilled onto her cheeks. Otherwise, her plain dress suggested no occasion.

She gasped at the sight of me.

Before she could ask, I said, "The window. I pulled too hard. It got me."

"Oh," she nodded, her expression not changing for an instant.

"Ouch."

“Not so bad.” I stepped aside and let them pass. “Bernard, we have company.”

Donnie watched me in the corner of his eye, stepping right up to Burns and extending his arm. The latter didn't get up, but shook his hand quickly. “Bernard.”

“Donald.” He gestured towards the creature draped over his side. “My wife, Evelyn.”

Burns flicked his chin in my direction. “That's Stacey.” I swallowed, again wondering if he remembered my real name at all anymore.

“Stacey,” Donnie nodded, looking amused.

“It was so nice of you to invite us,” Evelyn started. “You both are so quiet in here — we barely ever see you except in passing.”

I choked on a wad of saliva.

“Should we eat?” Donnie asked.

Burns' forehead crinkled. “You can have some joe first. That's what I'm doing, see.”

Evelyn forced a giggle, but I noticed Donnie's muscles grow stiffer.

“There's more on the stove, Donald,” I offered.

Leaving his dark gaze on Burns, he stated, “No, thanks. I prefer drinks with a bit of a bite.”

“Donnie...” Evelyn tugged on his arm. He pulled himself out of her grasp.

Burns' eyebrows leapt up. “Fine by me.” Getting to his feet, he snatched a large bottle of panther sweat out of the cupboard to his side from behind an empty slightly larger bottle. He set two glasses on the table and filled each to the rim.

Donnie snatched his and tossed the entire thing down his throat, clanking his glass back down on the table. Burns did the same before refilling both servings.

Evelyn glanced at me uncomfortably. “So... Stacey... do you play any card games?”

I unstitched my eyes from the air between Donnie and Burns for only a moment. “Not much. I like board games better.”

"Oh. I've always found them to be dull."

"That's only because you don't understand them," Donnie suddenly interrupted. "Chess is fantastic."

A look of surprise again filled Burns' face, and he devoured his second glass. My stomach grew queasy as an invisible film began to settle over his eyes. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand before refilling his drink. "I like chess."

Donnie finished his serving and helped himself to another. "It's a tough game."

"Really? I think it's sorta easy." He ran a finger over the hints of a sideburn.

"That's talking awful pretty of yourself."

"Nothing but the truth, buddy."

"And I suppose you'd be willing to defend that truth?"

Burns rocked his head side to side, tipping his glass into his mouth but only taking half of it this time. "If it was made worth my while, maybe."

"Donnie, don't..." Evelyn reached out to him.

Donnie pulled some rattling change out of his pocket, spilling it out on the table. It amounted to almost a dollar. My eyes widened as Burns grunted, unimpressed. "Not all of us are sugar daddies. I'll write you an I.O.U."

Glancing to me for a fraction of an instant with a devious smile, Donnie took a seat. He finished his glass. "Lay it on me. Bring on the men."

Burns stared at me with strange eyes, having caught the glance. I froze, holding my breath, but he tore his pupils back to the table and muttered, "'Bring on the men', Stace."

Without a word I creaked open the cupboard above the stove, stealing out the hand-carved wooden chess set that had once belonged to my father. It was the only thing of his I still had. Very meticulously and delicately, I placed it between Burns and Donnie. Opening it and extending the board to full size, I pulled out the ragged cloth that housed all the pieces and handed it to Burns. He

took it, surprisingly carefully for all the liquor replacing blood in his system, and started to set up the pieces.

"White goes first," said Donnie, even though the stained pieces were the brown of the wood beneath the chipping white paint.

Burns chuckled. "That's you then. You could use the break."

Evelyn turned to me, trying to avert her eyes from the sight of Donnie trying to refill his glass with a shaking hand. "So what do you do all day, Stacey? I never see you."

I shrugged, not attendant to her conversation. "I don't know, this and that. I might get a job one of these days."

"Oh yeah? I guess a lot of city gals are." She paused, persisting after I offered no comment. "What do you like to do? Besides board games?"

I thought a moment, not having been asked that in so long. "Read, I guess."

"The longest most damn-boringest books you ever saw," Burns interjected with a sideways grin, and I wished he'd put down his glass. "Go ahead," he told Donnie once the last pawn was in place. "Try and beat me."

Donnie pushed one pawn forward two spaces. "I like long books. It gives you more time to get to know the characters."

"That's how I feel," I dared to voice, remembering my plan.

I was about to move closer to the table, trying to formulate how to best make Burns feel jealous but still keep myself safe, when Donnie started to ruin everything I had in mind. "Like Tolstoy," he said. "Now there are some real characters. I love his stuff."

Burns looked up at me, sipping his drink. "So does Stace." He made another move on the board, but all I could do was stare at him.

"Oh," I said. "Yeah."

"Oh," said Evelyn.

Donnie was shoving forward a rook haphazardly with one hand while sipping at the quickly vanishing liquid with another, when Evelyn again reached to him. Donnie shoved her off before she could say anything. "Quit it. I'm trying to play a game here."

Burns laughed as he took the same rook casually with his own rook. "'Trying' being the key word, I think."

Donnie spun on Evelyn as she touched his shoulder once more. "Damn it, Eve, can't you be more like Stacey?"

My heart got stuck in my throat and Burns stopped laughing. He put down his drink. "What?"

Turning back to the game, Donnie dared his bishop further as if nothing had happened. "She's not down Bernard's throat," he explained. "Why do you have to be down mine? Just leave me the hell alone."

"I think you've had too much to drink," Evelyn said calmly.

He faced her with his glass, upending the entire thing into his mouth with the slightest wince as he stared at her. "I'll have as much as I want."

Burns suddenly looked at me as he sacrificed a pawn. "Did you want some too, Stace?"

"No, thanks," I answered, surprised.

"You all drink like fishes." Evelyn rolled her eyes in my direction. "And I suppose I should be more like you."

Noting the irony in her tone, Burns spoke up for me. "Stace doesn't drink much. She's smarter than that." With a shaking hand he stole another sip, barely able to get it into his mouth. "Stronger than me, anyways."

My breath caught, a warm bubble exploding in my chest. "Thank you, Burns."

He put down his glass, spilling some onto the table. He moved his first knight into the playing field. "I'm serious." His voice was starting to slur. "Like this chess board. Look at this God damn chessboard. Her daddy made it. He was a bastard to her, but she kept the board anyway just because he was her daddy and she wanted to pay some respect to that memory. How many people could do that, really?"

My throat was getting tight and I couldn't think of what to say, but then Donnie interrupted, "Well I think she should have gotten

rid of it. Bad memories only lead to bad memories.” He moved out a knight to counter Burns' as it stalked closer.

“What the hell would you know?” Burns said, taking a pawn.

“How did you two meet?” Evelyn asked suddenly.

Burns wet his lips, nonchalantly knocking another white pawn off the board. I waited for him to set off on some tale of grandeur of how he rescued me and chased off half the city's riff raff doing it, but instead he only sighed like he was watching the first snowfall of December. “I was lucky enough to have her notice me at a party.”

And that was enough. That was all I had wanted. It was over. My Burns knew he was lucky. He knew he needed me. He knew it all along. It was over. My face lightened from its intensity. He was honest when he was sober, but this — this was a change. He could barely hold himself upright in his chair, yet he still knew he loved me.

He loved *me*.

I repressed a smile. “I'm sorry. I'm suddenly feeling awful joed. I know this dinner party was short, but — “

“No,” Donnie said firmly. “No, we're not leaving.”

Evelyn again sent her eyes in a circle like a coin spinning on its edge. “Come on, Donnie.”

“I ain't leaving, God damn it.” He cursed under his breath, losing his second rook.

Burns looked at me, his tainted eyes streaked with concern. “Hey if she says she's tired —“

“I've got lettuce on the table here.”

“More like pickles,” Evelyn stated. “Let's go.” She neared him.

All of a sudden leaping out of his chair and shoving her away with an animal-like growl, he screamed, “Leave me the hell alone!”

Evelyn was stopped by the wall behind her, holding herself upright. She glared at Donnie with misted eyes and an “o” of a mouth. She remained as she was for ten seconds before choking on a sob and flinging herself into the hallway, slamming the door behind her.

The room was silent.

Donnie clenched his teeth, his expression distorted, retaking his seat and slurping from his glass along the way.

I stared at him, the shock paralyzing my tongue. I wondered if he had ever hurt Evelyn before.

Burns was looking at me. "I'm sorry about the window, Stace."

I met his pitiful gaze. "I know."

Donnie let out a growl of frustration as Burns' knight knocked one of his off the board. "No!"

Burns sighed. "Maybe you better go. Look — you can take your dimes back, no harm done. Game's almost over anyway."

"No," Donnie snapped. "I can still win."

"Check." Burns knight had advanced all the way across the field, cornering the unmoved king.

Donnie chuckled, forcing forward his queen and taking the knight. "Gotcha."

Burns shook his head, his second knight reluctantly dashing forward and now in prime position to take the king from the other side. "Checkmate."

"No!" Donnie pulled at his hair. "No, that's too easy for you. You cheated!" Defeated and knowing it, he moved his queen into a position to take the black king.

"The game is over. You can't move after checkmate."

"You can when the other person cheats, damn it!"

Burns nonchalantly slid his rook over, stopped it right beside the queen. "Now I've got your king and your queen. What the hell more do you want?"

Donnie jumped out of his seat, his arms flying up to my shoulders and gripping me hard. "He cheated! He God damn cheated! Didn't you see it, Rachel?"

My heart stopped. Burns was on his feet in a second, grabbing Donnie by the collar and throwing him into the table before the limp body crumbled to the floor. "How did you know that?" he bellowed, then spun to me, "How in the hell did he know that?"

My eyes started to sting with a liquid and my vision blurred. My breath would only come in sharp gasps as I slowly shook my head side to side, unable to formulate words.

Burns raised his arm as if to strike me, but lowered it quickly. He stared at me, the pain melting into a salty substance in his bloodshot eyes. He just stood there, ogling, and I started to wish he would hit me.

Donnie moaned, struggling to get to his feet.

Shaking his head slowly, Burns suddenly pulled his shiv out of his boot and revolved to Donnie, blade raised.

I squealed a scream and turned my back, waiting to hear the gut-wrenching sound of torn flesh and wishing Burns had hit me.

Instead, an explosion. A short pop, like a firecracker. And the nauseating smell of smoke infiltrated the air.

I turned. And then I screamed, my mind desperately trying to piece together the images. Burns, clutching his stomach with a gape and a brow twisted in bewilderment. A cloud of grey miasma. Donnie, on his back, an arm outstretched with a pistol in his palm.

Burns extended his hand to me, his eyes full of questions he would never ask, and he buckled to the floor.

Donnie struggled to his knees, screeching a laugh. "Ah! You see, Rachel, I won!" I ogled, trying to breath, as he dragged himself uneasily to his feet. "Now it's just you and me, baby."

He moved to me, his free hand stroking my moist cheek. I stared at him.

"You and me," he repeated, twining his fingers around mine and lowing his mouth to steal a kiss.

I reached for his other hand. Thinking to also grasp it tightly, he loosened the pistol and let me take it into my own hands.

"No," I whispered, barely able to see anything. "No, Donnie. It's just me."

And I pulled the trigger.

The pop didn't startle me as I calmly turned, the cold steel drizzling out of my fingers. It clanked to the floor, and I went with it. I pulled myself to Burns. His eyes were closed gently, as if in a

deep sleep. I put my palm to his cheek and it was still warm, aflame with the liquor. But when I pulled his hand out of the red pool beneath him, it was cold. I held it tightly. Nuzzling my head into his shoulder, I let myself get comfortable.

And now, at last, it was warm enough to sleep.

