

the meet

The champagne was warm and I was three glasses past caring, which is how I ended up with my back against a man who felt like weather.

I'd crashed the Marchetti gala the way I crashed everything: badly, and on purpose. My name wasn't on the list. My dress had been on sale twice, first for someone else, then for me. But you learn fast that if you walk into a room like you already belong there, everyone spends the night trying to remember where they know you from. I'd been doing it since I was sixteen. I was good at it.

Here's how good. At a party like that, I was never Wren. I gave the door a name I'd lifted off an invitation I'd memorized in a coat-check line six months earlier, and the name walked in and got a drink and held it like a promise I meant to keep. Wren stayed home. Wren was the thing I took off at the end of the night, along with the shoes.

It worked. Until the terrace.

I'd gone out for air, or for the performance of needing air, and the rain had turned the marble slick and black. I remember the cold coming off it. I remember the sound of the party behind me, all that money laughing at a joke it owned. I turned too fast. My heel caught the lip of the door. And then I wasn't standing anymore. I was against him.

He smelled like cold air and cedar and something underneath it, iron, the exact smell of the moment before a storm decides to break. My first thought was: *statue*. A man-shaped thing that had stood there so long the rain forgot to move around him. Dark suit, cut so plain it had to cost more than my rent. Shoulders that made the doorway look narrow. A face that had decided, a long time ago, not to explain itself to anyone.

Then my mind went loud. It always does. It's the one part of me that never learned to keep its voice down. Some people get calm when they're scared. I get narrated. Every nerve lights up and starts talking faster than I can answer.

Say sorry. No, don't apologize, you'll sound like you broke something and can't afford to replace it. Excuse me. Say excuse me. Say it lower, you're practically shouting. Say it in French. No, you know exactly one sentence of French and it's about a duck. Say nothing. Smile. Don't smile, you smile like you're being arrested. Look up. Look up first and let the rest of your face catch up.

I looked up.

He was already looking down.

And here's the thing I'd tell anyone later, if there was a later: I didn't feel caught. I felt *noticed*. Which is worse. Worse in every way that has ever mattered to me.

"You're bleeding," he said.

Not *are you all right*. Not *I'm so sorry*. Just the fact, handed over plain, the way you'd hand someone evidence.

I looked down. He was right. A thin line of red along my forearm, where the door's edge had caught me and I hadn't felt a thing. It beaded slow and bright against the cheap gold of my bracelets.

"It's nothing," I said.

"It's on my shirt."

I looked. It was. One small bloom of red on the white of his cuff, patient, spreading. My blood on his expensive sleeve. For some reason that made me want to laugh, and I swallowed it badly, and it came back out as something between a cough and a dare.

"Then you should have moved."

Don't. Don't do this. That is not what you say to a man who looks like the reason other men go quiet. Take it back. Say you're sorry. Say it before he decides something about you that you can't undo.

The corner of his mouth did something. Not a smile. The place a smile would go, if he ever let one out of the house. I noticed his hands, because I always notice hands. No rings. Nothing on the

wrists. Clean the way surgeons are clean, like the work was finished and nothing had ever touched him and stayed.

"Should I have," he said.

It wasn't a question. It was a door left ajar, and he was watching to see if I'd walk through it or run.

Through the glass behind him the party had gone strange. A woman in silver had been mid-sentence when she caught sight of him and simply stopped, her mouth still open around a word. A man touched another man's sleeve. The two of them turned, and then both were very carefully looking somewhere else. Two hundred people had just agreed to forget he was there. Nobody does that for a guest. They do it for weather. For gravity. For the reason the exits are marked.

I should have walked away. I want to be honest about that, because nobody in my life has ever believed me about anything. Any sane girl, standing on a wet terrace at a party she wasn't invited to, bleeding on a stranger who radiated money and threat in exactly equal measure, would have gone back inside and found her coat and her dignity and left. Most of them would have apologized on the way out. Twice.

I didn't move.

"Most people apologize," he said.

"I'm not most people."

"Everyone says that."

"Not most people." I heard my own voice do it, that small lean on the word. "Most people are lying."

He looked at me then. Really looked, and I felt it like a hand under my chin, tilting my face toward a light I hadn't agreed to stand under. He was older than me. Not by a lot. Enough that the calm on him had roots. Enough that nothing about him felt like it was still deciding what it wanted to be.

"What's your name," he said.

And my mind, my loud, terrible, loyal-to-nobody mind, went straight down the list. Give him the invitation name, the borrowed one, the one that goes home at the end of the night and leaves nothing behind. Give him nothing. Tell him it's none of his business and watch his face when you say it.

"Wren," I said.

I heard it land. My real name, off my tongue and into the air of a party I had no business being at, handed to the one man in the building who would know exactly what to do with it. Wren stayed home. Wren wasn't supposed to be here.

He repeated it once, silent, not out loud, and I watched him put it somewhere I'd never be able to reach.

He didn't give me his.

"That's not fair," I said.

"Almost nothing is."

"Then why'd you ask."

"Wanted to know what you'd choose," he said. "When you had to."

The rain picked up. Somewhere inside, a quartet was murdering a song that deserved better. My arm had stopped bleeding and started stinging, which felt like the honest end of the evening. I thought about the room I'd left and how half of it would have given a finger for thirty seconds of this man's attention, and how not one of them would have known what to do with it once they had it.

Leave. You know how this goes. He's a closed door with something behind it that eats people like you.

I stayed.

"Your cuff's ruined," I said.

"Yes."

"Does that happen a lot. Around you."

"So far," he said, "no."

And he reached out, slow, giving me every chance in the world to step back, and took my wrist. Turned it over. Looked at the thin red line I'd made on his night. His thumb landed on the inside of my wrist, right where the pulse lives.

My whole body went quiet the way a room goes quiet when the power cuts. No fight in it. No fear. Just the soft, awful yes of it, every alarm I owned going off somewhere far away, behind glass, where I couldn't hear them.

I hated that. I hated it more than anything he'd done, because he hadn't done anything. I'd handed it over. Same as the name.

"Get it looked at," he said.

"It's a scratch."

"It's a promise," he said. "That people who touch this" — his thumb pressed, light, precise — "don't stay in one piece."

He let go. He stepped back into the doorway, and the party swallowed him whole: black suit, black night, gone. And then it was just the wet rail and me, standing there with the shape of his warmth still around my wrist and my heart going like I'd been running from something I couldn't name.

I looked down at my arm.

He was wrong, I decided. Or he was right and I didn't care. Both felt true at once, which is how I should have known I was already in trouble.

Because I'd started writing the next sentence before he'd even cleared the door. It began with his name, which I didn't have yet, and was going to get.

He had mine. I'd known what I was handing him, and I did it anyway. That was the part I couldn't take back.

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