

HIGH RISE NOVELLA THREE

*No
Ordinary
Love*



Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Published by LadyLit Ltd - Hong Kong

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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ALEX

Alex lay with her hands cuffed to the railing of Maddie's bed. The cuffs were lined with fur, but still cut into Alex's flesh every time she moved.

She had scratches on her back, her buttocks, and a whole maze of them healing on her shoulders. Maddie always had that little extra to give when it came to Alex's shoulders. Her nails dug a little deeper and her moans grew higher whenever Alex flexed her shoulder muscles.

Her shoulders, no matter how strong, were quite useless now though. So were her legs, tied around the ankle to the foot end of the bed with two of Maddie's Hermès scarves.

Alex was totally at Maddie's mercy and she wouldn't want it any other way.

Maddie's gaze hovering over her naked, helpless flesh was enough to cause a wild throbbing in Alex's clit. But Maddie wasn't just using her eyes. She'd unearthed a short leather whip from the box under the bed where she kept all her valuables—as she called them—and traced it along Alex's abs. Alex's abs could take a lot of things, gentle teasing with what looked like a riding crop was not one of them. She squirmed under the touch of the leather and the more she squirmed the more Maddie loved it.

As usual, Maddie had undressed Alex with no intention of shedding her own clothes. She still wore her work outfit, a grey Ralph Lauren pencil skirt topped with a black pin-striped blouse that looked a little too tight for comfort at the office. Maddie's blond hair was tied together at the back of her head and, no doubt for effect, she hadn't taken off her dark-rimmed reading glasses. It was working.

The room was silent except for the soft swish of the whip as it glided along Alex's flesh and the ragged sound of Alex's breath, which escaped her at quickening intervals.

Maddie kneeled between Alex's legs, her face sporting that wicked smirk she only ever displayed in the bedroom. They'd only been dating a few weeks but Alex always knew the score when she spotted the bedroom smirk.

It was hard to notice the emotion in Maddie's eyes while they were protected by glasses, but Alex could see plenty of passion displayed in the way Maddie's mouth twitched upwards as she dragged the tip of the whip over Alex's breasts. Maddie's nipples had grown so stiff they pointed through the fabric of her bra and blouse.

For the first time that night Maddie cracked the whip, right next to Alex's left nipple. Alex let out a tiny gasp, loud enough to encourage Maddie to repeat the action, but controlled enough to not let her experience too much satisfaction. From the outside Maddie may have appeared completely in charge, but they both understood this game was a two-way street.

Maddie treated Alex's right breast to the same sensation, but added more power to her action. She trailed the whip between Alex's breasts, down to her belly and over her belly button to her upper thighs. A few quick snaps on each thigh, on that delicate spot just below her entrance, and Alex was lost.

A rapid succession of whip lashes on her nipples and outer thighs reduced Alex to a puddle of desire at Maddie's mercy. Then Maddie positioned the whip between her legs again. She traced it

through the moistness gathering there, slowly but with such menace it made Alex shiver in her skin.

Maddie flicked the whip twice right on Alex's clit. Alex arched her back and the cuffs bit into the tender flesh of her wrists. The whip circled her pussy before coming down hard on her blood-shot lips. Wetness trickled between Alex's legs and suddenly the whip was gone.

Maddie removed her glasses, slowly unbuttoned her blouse, slid out of her skirt and sat in front of Alex clad only in a black lace bra and matching panties. Unlike Alex, Maddie always dressed to impress.

Her light blue eyes peered into Alex's. She didn't move a muscle for several seconds, just staring at Alex, her unflinching glare setting Alex's skin on fire.

Maddie had said it out loud enough for Alex to guess what she was thinking—that her body was a work of art. That marble statues should be carved to its likeness. That it should never be allowed to be covered by more than a tank top and boy shorts, and only if strictly necessary.

She had that ravaging expression on her face, her lips pursed together in a tight line and her eyes scanning prey.

Alex lay there panting, immobile and impatiently waiting for what was to come. She fiercely hoped Maddie would undo her bra and reveal her creamy white breasts and tiny nipples. They stood high, the pink buds of her nipples always pointing upwards, and Alex couldn't wait for one of them to coast along her lips.

Her prayers were answered as Maddie brought her hands behind her back to unclasp her bra. Alex inhaled sharply, her entire body pulsing with want. Foreplay between them wasn't always so unconventional, but either way, she was ready for the more advanced action to begin.

Maddie's breasts tumbled out of her bra. She slipped it off her shoulders and threw it behind her onto the floor. Maddie's gestures always had a flare for the dramatic, while it was Alex who was supposed to have fiery Mediterranean blood running through her veins.

Alex checked, if by any chance, the cuffs holding her wrists in place hadn't come loose so she could cup Maddie's divine breasts—they fit so snugly in her hands. She wanted to roll Maddie's nipples between her fingers and pinch hard. Maddie could take as good as she could give. The cuffs held and Alex could tell her struggle with them—and the consequent flexing of her bicep—excited Maddie. She was fast to discard her underwear and position herself on all fours, hovering over Alex, her breasts inching close to Alex's wanting mouth.

Maddie traced her lips over Alex's collarbone, not quite kissing and not quite touching, blowing air on her skin until all the hairs on it reached skyward.

Her lips trailed down, only briefly stopping at Alex's nipples to lick them into even stiffer buttons. She blew air on Alex's inner thighs and pussy lips—hot moist air driving Alex crazy.

The only body part, apart from her head, that Alex could manoeuvre was her pelvis and she thrust it in the direction of Maddie's teasing mouth.

While digging her fingers into Alex's abs, Maddie flicked her tongue where the whip had done the same earlier. Short, quick snaps of her tongue skated across Alex's lips and Alex eased into it, relaxing, knowing it was only a matter of minutes now.

When Maddie's tongue found Alex's clit and circled it, she buried her nails in the muscles of

Alex's belly, causing Alex to expel a loud moan. It wasn't the first time Maddie did it, but the effect it had on Alex still surprised her. Desire mingling with pain. Pleasure blending with lust. Alex was no stranger to it all—Rita had made sure of that—but a new lover always brings new tricks to the table, and Maddie certainly knew what she was doing.

Maddie sucked Alex's clit into her mouth and let her tongue dance over it. Exquisite sensations slammed into Alex, starting at her core and spreading through her well-kept muscles at lightning speed. Maddie kept working on the sensitive bud between Alex's legs, letting her tongue alternate between circling Alex's clit and lapping at her lips.

Shackled and bound, the sensation hit Alex twice as hard and when Maddie traced one hand from Alex's abs to between her legs and pushed the tip of her finger in, Alex couldn't stifle a scream.

Just like that, Maddie was inside of her while licking her, and the trembling started. For all the control Alex issued over her muscles in her daily life, they were useless when it came to this. Shaking and contracting of their own volition, leaving Alex spent in a matter of seconds.

Maddie added another finger and upped the pace of her tongue. Alex held on to the railing of the bed and shoved her heels into the mattress as the climax engulfed her. She felt the walls of her pussy clench around Maddie's fingers, again and again, as she rode out her orgasm and Maddie's tongue bestowed a few more strokes on her clit.

After slowly pulling her fingers out, and wiping Alex's juices off her lips, Maddie was quick to loosen Alex's restraints. She untied the scarves and unlocked the cuffs and poured her hot limbs over Alex's shivering body. Taking advantage of experiencing freedom of motion again, Alex curled her arms around Maddie's neck and drew her close.

"You can whip me any time," she whispered in Maddie's ear.

"I intend to," Maddie replied and bit into her earlobe.

MADDIE

"I don't think I've ever witnessed such smugness in your smile before." Maddie sat across from Isabella on her friend's roof terrace, nibbling on one of the croissants she had brought from The Bean.

"I don't think I've ever had reason to feel this smug." Isabella leaned back in her chair. "I almost feel as if I got myself a trophy wife."

"I heard that." Nat stepped out on the balcony, her hair still wet from the shower. "But I'll take it as a compliment." She eyed the pastries. "Does *your* trophy wife know you're eating this?" Nat fixed her clear blue eyes on Maddie and accompanied her question with a smirk.

"What she doesn't know, won't hurt her." Maddie took a big bite out of the croissant. "And my calorie burn is way up since she's in my bed every night. It compensates."

"Already keeping secrets from each other." Nat stood behind Isabella and rubbed her shoulders. "Let's see what the shrink has to say about that." She kissed Isabella on top of the head.

"A few secrets are crucial to the success of any relationship." Isabella put her hands on top of

Nat's. "I, for instance, have no idea where you were for the better part of last night. And I don't intend to ask."

"See, this is what I have to deal with every day. This emotional manipulation. I know she can't help herself, but still." Nat squeezed Isabella's shoulders and Isabella let her head fall back onto Nat's belly. "And you know full well I may not have spent the better part of the night in your bed, but I was there for the best part." Nat leaned down and planted a kiss on Isabella's nose.

"Mind and word games. This is what my life has become. Oh, how I wish I had landed a hot fitness instructor as my trophy wife. It seems so much less complicated."

Nat curled her fingers around Isabella's neck and mock-strangled her. "I know Alex seems perfect, but she's only human, just like the rest of us." While stepping away from Isabella, Nat grabbed a pastry and sat down in between her and Maddie. "You must have discovered that by now." Nat cast her glance towards Maddie again.

"Well, there is the unfortunate habit of dim sum with the family every other Sunday. As if she'd be disinherited if she dared to miss one Pozzato family meal." It was a struggle every time Alex had to make it to Tai Po before noon on a Sunday. Her parents lived in a house in the country Maddie had not yet been invited to.

"You've been here long enough to know you don't cross a Chinese mother when it comes to yum cha. It's tradition. You don't mess with that."

"For some reason it was never an issue with the company I kept before." Maddie thought about June and her growing belly. She was probably at dim sum as well, Mark's family fawning over their pregnant daughter-in-law.

"Either way, you can't blame Alex. She's being a good daughter." Nat chimed in. "They raised her well."

Maddie nodded, hesitating to broach the next subject, even though it had been bugging her. "There's also the case of the unmentionable ex." She searched Nat's face for a reaction. If anyone had information about Rita, it was her. "I know Rita cheated on her, but that's it. It's not as if I need all the details about their affair, far from it, but I do believe she would benefit from talking about it once in a while."

"Give her some time." Nat's tone was serious. "It'll sort itself out."

"Really? How?" Maddie made eye-contact with Isabella in the hope of getting some support. "If she won't even acknowledge the woman's existence."

"Alex is simply not the kind of person who needs to talk through everything extensively to process. She's not that kind of lesbian. I mean, she is half-Chinese." Nat sounded as if she really needed to convince Maddie of this.

"It's not because they don't easily talk about their feelings that they couldn't benefit from it," Isabella said. "I've been practising in Hong Kong for fifteen years and the only Chinese clients I ever get are the ones born and bred abroad."

"I do hope it doesn't come back to bite her in the ass." Maddie, who had no interest in discussing the mental state of the local population, brought the subject back to Alex. "I wish she'd share more. I can see it in her eyes sometimes, this darkness, this well of emotions not dealt with."

“There’s only one solution. Instead of talking about it with us, confront Alex.” Isabella extended her hand over the table and reached for Maddie’s. “And don’t push her.”

“She does have some wise things to say now and again.” Nat smiled at Isabella. “Then again, she attended university for about ten years so that education had better pay off.”

Maddie sagged back in her chair and let the easy banter between Nat and Isabella pass her by. As far as she knew, they didn’t have skeletons in their closet like Alex had.

* * *

“Did you tell them about me yet?” Maddie had awaited Alex’s return from Tai Po anxiously. After the impromptu chat she’d had with Nat and Isabella she was eager to get something out of her.

Alex walked over to where Maddie was sitting and pushed her down into the sofa cushions. “For now, you’re still my dirty, little, whip-cracking secret.” She smiled down at Maddie before kissing her.

Maddie wasn’t that dead-set on getting Alex’s parents’ approval, but she decided to use them as a way to instigate the conversation she wanted to have. “Are you afraid I won’t stack up against the memory of Rita?”

“What?” Alex pushed herself up, making her triceps bulge in the process. “No.”

“I know they thought the world of her.” Alex hadn’t given her that information, but Nat had mentioned it once, late at night after a dinner including too much wine. “I understand your hesitance.”

“You want to meet my parents? Is that what this is about?” Alex crawled off Maddie and sat down on the ottoman next to the sofa, far enough not to touch her accidentally.

“No. I mean, I do one day when you’re ready, but we’ve only just got together.” Maddie already felt herself pussy-footing out. She couldn’t do it. She didn’t have the words to address Alex in a way that would make her open up.

“How about when we’ve been seeing each other for three months? I’ll introduce you officially then, but you will regret it because you’ll be spending many a Sunday off the island.” Alex managed a smile again and it was all Maddie needed to let the subject go completely. Maddie wasn’t in the business of making Alex feel bad. On the contrary, her sole task was to make her feel as good as possible.

“Deal, but you’ll have to come back with me to Melbourne in the spring so my family can finally be convinced I’m not a complete romantic disaster.” It surprised Maddie she was thinking so long-term. And that she even contemplated introducing Alex to her family, who had only ever seen her with Emma.

“We’ll see.” Alex offered her hand and Maddie gladly took it. “Let’s just enjoy the delicious early stages of this relationship without worrying about family.”

A broad smile split Maddie’s face in two. “While you were being a family girl, I went online and bought this.” Maddie grabbed her iPad from the coffee table and showed Alex a picture of a dolphin-shaped sex toy. “Delivery in two days.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “You have a box full of those already. I’m beginning to worry about you.”

“This one’s waterproof, though. And turbo-charged.” Maddie pulled Alex closer and sunk her teeth softly into the flesh of her shoulder.

“I may have to confiscate your credit card before this online shopping gets out of hand.” Alex let herself slide onto Maddie. “They have support groups for that, you know. I’ll go with you if you can’t find it in yourself to go alone.”

“Shut up and kiss me already.” Maddie pulled Alex’s tank top over her head, gasped as she always did at the sight of her flawless torso, and pushed her down into the sofa.

ALEX

Alex clicked the reply button to the e-mail Rita had sent her, then closed the e-mail window altogether. She’d repeated this process five times already. She’d read Rita’s e-mail about a hundred times, even though she knew it by heart by now.

Rita confessed to having been a heartless bitch. She’d taken Alex for granted for too long. She’d acted as if nothing could touch her. She’d never forgive herself for hurting Alex the way she did.

But just because Rita was coming to terms with her mistakes, Alex shouldn’t. Still, there was that tug. It had started deep inside of her. Not immediately after receiving the e-mail. Anger had come first—a crash of blind rage rushing through Alex’s blood. Who did Rita think she was? Casting Alex aside like that and then trying to weasel her way back in with an e-mail. But this was Rita and, try as she might, Alex couldn’t ignore her. Not forever. Not when the words blinking on the screen spoke of enduring love and endless regret.

Alex had Maddie now. She could be strong. She found herself in a good position to face Rita. She could have the upper hand in this. And it might be exactly what she needed.

Alex started typing and, despite the hammering of her heart, she knew she was doing the right thing. Not for Rita. Definitely not for Maddie, who Alex had kept in the dark about Rita’s message, but for herself. She could face her fear head on. She’d meet Rita, stare her straight in the eyes and tell her to go to hell.

Thursday after my evening class. The Rambler at 9.30 p.m. It was as simple as that. Alex was confronting Rita four months after their brutal break-up. She’d have to pick up some extra classes this week, to burn off the stress.

Apart from when she’d just received the e-mail, the topic of Rita had been left untouched between her and Nat. This was Alex’s private battle—and she knew what Nat would say, anyway. Alex had contemplated telling Maddie, but she couldn’t see the point. She tried to keep conversation about Rita to a minimum in any circumstance. She didn’t want what she had with Maddie to be tainted by tales of what Rita had done to her and how incredibly inadequate it had made her feel. Rita was the past, Maddie the future.

Alex flipped her laptop shut, gathered some clean underwear in her backpack and made her way to Maddie’s floor.

“Let’s do the Dragon’s Back tomorrow.” Alex glanced at her three table companions who were all indulging in too much wine. “It’s one of the easier hikes in Hong Kong.”

“Don’t you have family dim sum?” Maddie, who’d probably drained a bottle all by herself, slipped her hand on Alex’s thigh.

“That was last week, babe.” Alex remembered how Maddie had tried to corner her. It had only resulted in a half-hearted attempt at trying to make her open up about Rita and Maddie had soon abandoned her efforts when she’d sensed Alex’s reluctance. Maybe we can talk about her after Thursday, Alex thought. Maybe I’ll be able to deal with it then.

“Easier? You are taking the more advanced age of our companions into consideration, I hope? I’ve done it a couple of times and it nearly killed me.” Nat raised her eyebrows. “Language is my thing and *easy* is not the right word to describe the path running over that mountain.”

Alex needed action. As much as her body needed the rest, she couldn’t bear the thought of a lazy Sunday afternoon. Exercising was the only activity capable of putting a stop to the endless churning of her brain. Had she made the right decision? What would Rita say? Should she tell Maddie? “Children do it. Pensioners do it. Everyone does it. You all belong to an excellent gym which keeps you in great shape. All that’s left to do is go easy on the wine.”

Nat reached for the bottle and topped up Alex’s glass. Alex let her, she wouldn’t drink it and that way it didn’t end up in Maddie’s glass.

“I’ve tackled the Dragon’s Back many times. Admittedly, it has been a while, but I’d love to do it again. It’s a wonderful Sunday afternoon activity in winter.” Isabella smiled at Alex. “Good plan.” She turned to Nat. “I’ll show the ageists how it’s done.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, darling.” Nat shot Isabella a wink. “I’m well acquainted with your high levels of endurance by now.”

“That just leaves me then.” Maddie started to slur her words. If she didn’t stop drinking soon she would never make it to the top tomorrow. “I’m a Dragon’s Back virgin, I’m afraid. In fact, in all the time I’ve been here I’ve only been on one hike and that was the one across Lamma Island.”

“That’s not a hike,” Isabella, a seasoned walker, said. “That’s a leisurely stroll.”

Maddie turned to face Alex. “I trust you only have my best interests at heart.”

Alex pondered this statement for a second. She wasn’t planning to climb this mountain to benefit Maddie’s health. This was a purely selfish activity, set up only to take her mind off Rita. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

The look in Maddie’s watery eyes brimmed with love. “I know you will.”

MADDIE

The hike was a bad idea. Maddie’s temples throbbed, her calves burned and she had a foul taste in her mouth. Yet, the view was almost worth it.

While the others seemed to float upwards along the narrow, steep trail, their feet barely touching the ground at an ungodly pace, Maddie lagged behind more and more. Alex waited for her at regular intervals, but Maddie felt increasingly alone in the staggering landscape of green

mountains and indigo sea.

“Bad legs today, Madison?” Isabella asked, a self-righteous smile on her face.

Maddie loved her friend dearly, but she felt so miserable, so out of touch with everything they were enjoying, she limited her reply to a low grunt.

“Clearly your girlfriend hasn’t been working you hard enough.” Nat put a hand on Isabella’s shoulder. “I, on the other hand, am extremely proud of mine.”

They both stood there gloating, basking in the improbable love they’d come to share. They truly were the oddest couple ever.

“Come on, babe.” Alex shuffled a little closer. “The worst is over now.”

“You said that last time we stopped, before this hike turned into actual rock climbing.” Maddie had caught her breath and was able to string sentences together again.

Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her up. “Look at this.” Alex waved her arm in front of the splendour below them. White-tipped waves crashing to shore and wet-suited surfers trying to catch them. Endless forests in all shades of green stretched away from them. “Aren’t you glad you decided to stay in Hong Kong when you see this.”

“I didn’t stay for this.” Maddie curled her arms around Alex’s waist. “I stayed for you.”

Alex inched closer until their bellies touched, Alex’s rock hard abs brushing against Maddie’s irregularly heaving abdomen while she recovered from the effort. “I love you.”

There was an intensity in the way she said it Maddie hadn’t noticed before, an urgency to her words previously hidden—or non-existent.

“I love you too, baby, but I’ll love you even more once you’ve gotten me off this mountain in one piece.”

“How much more are we talking about?” Alex nuzzled her lips against Maddie’s neck.

“Hey, lovebirds.” Nat’s voice cut through their tender moment. “If we want to see those surfers up close before dark, we’d better get going.”

Maddie’s mouth fell open in desperation. The surfers seemed impossibly far away.

“It’s mostly downhill.” Isabella could always read the distress on Maddie’s face. “Before you know it we’ll be listening to the roar of the waves with a cold beer in our hands.”

“Best not mention any alcoholic beverages.” Alex gently squeezed Maddie’s neck before letting go of her. “Come on, I’ll walk behind you. We’ll let them get away from us and enjoy a romantic walk down. Just the two of us.”

Butterflies flapped their wings in Maddie’s stomach. She searched for Alex’s hand and didn’t intend to let go of it any time soon. Her body was in ruins after too much wine last night and the unexpectedly steep climb over uneven, treacherous mountain paths, but she had Alex and as long as she had someone as strong and capable as Alex by her side, she would be all right.

Together, they made it down, Nat and Isabella mere dots in the distance whenever the path ran straight long enough. Maddie had already been convinced of her feelings for Alex before she’d climbed the Dragon’s Back, but came down the mountain with everything she felt reconfirmed and strengthened.

The disobedient curl that kept leaping free from Alex’s pony tail and jumped up and down on

her forehead. Her athletic hands on Maddie's back when they crossed a particularly difficult stretch of rocks. The way her abs stood out beneath her top when she twisted her body sideways and the immediate effect it had on Maddie. The sweet words of encouragement she had whispered in her ear on the final short climb to the beach. Despite her hangover, it was a gorgeous day and Maddie felt privileged to spend it with the most beautiful woman she knew—and she got to take her home afterwards as well.

Nat and Isabella had already started on their second bottle of San Miguel by the time Alex and Maddie arrived. Maddie crashed down in a chair, her gaze planted on the horizon, and she wondered what had caused her to experience this level of happiness so suddenly and unexpectedly. Mere weeks ago she was fumbling with a married woman in her office, deciding on whether to stay or not. Now she sat in one of the prettiest spots of Hong Kong, the sun setting behind her, after having climbed a mountain with the woman she loved more than anything.

She looked at Alex and she knew. She laughed away a tear—the sheer force of her smile enough to make it back down—and clinked the neck of her bottle against Alex's. This was love, the real kind, the lasting kind. She'd come a long way to find it, but here she was.

ALEX

Alex tried to swallow the tightness out of her throat. It didn't work. Rita's upper lip still curved deliciously upward and the blue of her eyes shone as crystal clear as ever. Adrenalin sped through her veins as Alex approached the low table where Rita sat, one long leg slung over the other.

“Hey,” Alex said and everything that came before just fell away. Tears too strong to be ignored stung her eyelids as she crashed into the chair opposite Rita. “I probably shouldn't have come.”

Rita clasped her hands in front of her mouth and pierced more of Alex's resolve with those unblinking eyes. She breathed heavily through her nose and shook her head.

“You have no idea how sorry I am,” she said through spread-out fingers barricading her lips. “I am so sorry.”

Alex tried to hold on to thoughts of Maddie, of her radiant smile and softly whispered hellos in the morning, but they seemed to evaporate at the mere sight of Rita. As if Rita was the real deal and Maddie a copy, an expertly made one, but still just a copy of the woman sitting in front of her and tearing her heart to shreds again with a few words.

Alex scrambled for her bag which had fallen to the floor when she sat down and pushed herself up. “This...” She shook her head. “No...” It was all she could muster, all her constricted throat allowed to pass through.

Rita shot up out of her chair and curled her fingers around Alex's wrist, squeezing with gentle firmness—the way she always did. “Please.” Her voice trembled. “Stay.”

The touch of Rita's skin on hers quickened Alex's pulse, making her heart thump in her temples. Alex looked down at Rita's hand, its fingers so long and perfect. The pleasure they had given her. How they had made her surrender for years on end. Six years and then this. Walking

away was not an option.

“Let’s go somewhere more private.” The emotions coursing through Alex were not meant for public display. There was some serious crying to be done. And shouting at this woman who had taken it all from her.

“I still live around the corner.” Rita’s fingers lingered around Alex’s wrist, but more limp than Alex had ever felt them.

Alex nodded and walked out of the bar. Rita left some bills on the table to pay for her over-priced glass of Sauvignon Blanc. At least she hadn’t had the audacity to order a bottle.

The sound of Rita’s heels clacking on the pavement echoed through Alex’s skull. She couldn’t think, only feel. This had to be done. Whatever it was. Whatever would happen. Rita had to repent, despite not being the repenting type by a long shot.

The doorman smiled broadly at Alex. She had lived in this building for three years. She’d made Rita’s apartment her own. It had been their home. Alex shot him an apologetic grin.

The elevator ride to the thirty-fifth floor was awkward but swift. Alex had grown up in a city full of tall buildings and had learned to hide her mental state in elevators from a young age. Instead of looking at Rita, she scanned her own reflection in the mirror.

What did that Mandarin teacher have that she didn’t? It was the one question that had plagued Alex incessantly after their break-up. Why had she suddenly not been good enough anymore?

Alex’s breath hitched in her throat when she entered Rita’s apartment. Everything looked exactly the same as on the day she’d left. An ocean of memories flooded her brain. Rita kicking off her heels after a long day at work, her body slackening but her eyes still full of fire. Rita leaning with her back against the balcony window, demanding that Alex strip just by gazing into her eyes. Rita’s hot body covering her from the back while she pushed Alex into the cold glass of the windows, naked and on display for anyone whose eyes happened to venture to their lit-up flat.

The tension seemed to drop from Rita’s muscles now she found herself on home turf. She untied her hair and let it fall to her shoulders like a soft golden curtain.

“Please, sit.” She walked to the wine fridge and pulled out a bottle of Oyster Bay. “Would you like some?”

Alex nodded eagerly. She approached the sofa and couldn’t help picturing Rita and Peggy on it. Peggy’s naked body splayed out under Rita while she did her thing. Peggy taking Alex’s place. Alex sat down on the corner edge, not wanting to associate her body with anything that happened on the grey cushions after her time on them was done.

“Here you go.” Rita handed her a glass of wine and pulled an ottoman closer. She sat down and stared Alex straight in the face. “I made a terrible mistake. Not one I can ever make right. I do realise that.”

“Why?” Alex mumbled. “Why did you do it?”

Rita took a deep breath. “If only I knew.” Her eyes grew moist and her knuckles turned white as she clenched her fingers around the stem of her glass. “Because I’m weak. And foolish. And only half the woman you are.”

“I did everything you asked me to.” Alex’s voice cracked. “Everything.”

“I know, baby. I know. I’ll never forgive myself for hurting you. Never.” Rita wiped the beginning of a tear from her eye.

“I presume you stopped taking Mandarin classes.”

“Peggy and I are no longer seeing each other.” Rita sat her glass on the coffee table and inched closer. “She had nothing on you. It was a silly infatuation. I certainly never loved her the way I loved you...still love you.”

“You loved her enough to cheat on me for weeks.” Anger swept through Alex’s bones. Months of frustration trembled in her voice. “You were the one for me, Rita. The only one. I’ve never loved anyone...” Tears took over from words. They streamed down her face and landed with fat thuds in the wine Rita had poured her.

Rita took the glass from her hand and deposited it on the floor. She grabbed Alex’s hands and buried them in hers. Warmth spread across Alex’s skin and she looked up until her eyes found Rita’s.

“I know.” Rita’s voice broke as her hands crept up Alex’s arms. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Alex couldn’t speak. After her initial anger over Rita’s infidelity had made way for deep sadness, she’d dreamed of Rita saying those words. Now she was sitting in front of her uttering them, her eyes brimming with tears and her nails digging into Alex’s biceps, they felt so meaningless and empty.

“Fuck you, Rita,” Alex whispered, but it was loud enough to startle her ex-girlfriend. “When you destroy something as pure and powerful as the love we shared, it’s gone forever. There is no going back and there is absolutely nothing you can do.” Alex shook Rita’s hands off her. “You can sit here and shed a little tear and feel all remorseful, but it doesn’t change anything. You broke my heart and my trust and I will never feel the same way about you again.”

“I don’t expect you to. I just want—”

“I don’t care about what you want.” Alex rose. “And by the way, I’m seeing someone.”

Alex cast one more glance at Rita’s flabbergasted face before heading for the door and banging it shut behind her. She had to steady herself against the wall while waiting for the elevator and, adrenalin pumping through her blood, prayed Rita wouldn’t come after her.

Once inside the safety of the steel lift cabin, she exhaled, taking in the red patches of skin on her face, and thought of Maddie. Sweet Maddie who had rescued her from the post-Rita blues. Alex looked her mirror image in the eye and wondered if Maddie could ever be enough.

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