



Obsession on Repeat (Vinyl Hearts #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Lorelai 'Rory' Jones is used to drifting city to city, gig to gig, never staying long enough to get attached.

One electrifying encounter with Hollywood's golden boy, Sullivan Masters, changes everything.

Their connection is instant.

Before she knows it, she's moving to Los Angeles, chasing more than just a career as a DJ, she's chasing the promise of more than late-night adrenaline.

Yet fame casts a long shadow.

When Sullivan's glittering world starts to cage her, Rory finds refuge at Euphoria, an underground club where the music never quits and the nights run hot.

There she meets Asher Lark, the club's intense and magnetic co-owner who studies her as if he already knows how the story ends.

Where Sullivan is polished and untouchable, Asher is grounded, fierce, and impossible to ignore.

What begins as friction soon ignites into something hotter than either of them expects.

Rory now stands between the man who set her world ablaze and the one who might heal what remains of her heart.

Total Pages (Source): 25

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

The fire marshal had called twice, but the club remained packed, the bodies inside moving in rhythm. Multicolored lights flashed over the crowd, sparking off glow sticks. Heavy bass continued to shake the walls and glasses that littered the tables.

I bounced along with the music, headphones pressed securely between my right ear and shoulder as I spun the record.

"Rory!" Alice, a bartender, cut through the noise. "They're threatening to shut us down! Lower the volume!"

I let out a breath of disbelief.

"I'm serious!"

Chuckling, I adjusted the volume, but the crowd didn't stop. I pressed the headphones to my ear. It made me happy to hear the music, to feel it run through me and see people enjoy it. Venom was the hottest nightclub in all of Sydney, Australia.

Alice returned to the booth, this time dragging a tall man behind her.

"If he's a cop, I swear—"

"He's VIP. Boss man said to take care of him."

"Since when did being a DJ mean I entertained for one?"

"Danny's offering extra pay."

"Done."

The man hovered behind her, sharp in a tailored button-up and khakis. Dark features and oil-black hair, he easily towered over us. He was too clean-cut for this place, and with his handsome face, he wore the labels like a designer badge.

Most of the club hoppers were dressed in shorts and muscle tanks, the girls in skimpy dresses and skirts.

I kept my gear simple, wearing a white tank top with the club logo on the front and cut off shorts.

White sneakers had been on my feet, but after entering the booth, they were kicked to the side.

Dancing to the music, I watched Alice whisper in his ear before she disappeared. I waved him over. "Hey, you. Come here." I turned away when the break of the song erupted over the speakers.

He approached with a calm assurance and offered me his hand. "Lorelai Jones? "

I caught a whiff of his cologne, the smell pleasing and not overbearing. I released his hand after a second of letting my fingers linger against his. "Rory. No one's called me Lorelai in years, but it sounds fancier on fliers. I'm trying to play it cool."

"Sullivan Masters."

Of course . Celebrities visiting the club was nothing new. "You're from that Netflix show. My old roommate binged it once during one entire weekend."

"Two of Hearts, that's the one."

I adjusted the knobs, another song drifting loudly from the speakers. "First time in Sydney?"

"I've got family here. I'm with a friend doing a promotion for work." He looked out over the crowd, clearly aware of the attention his presence drew. "I lost him... somewhere out there."

Nodding, I pressed the headphones against my ear. I switched up the tempo on the disc before allowing my gaze to slide back to him. "I'm sure he's having fun!"

"Not too much, I hope. He's got a wife back home. He needs to behave."

Laughing, I looked out at the crowd and spotted Alice watching us from behind the bar. "What about you? Are you having fun?"

He caught my gaze with his. "I'm not a club person, but the music is good. You make it look effortless. "

"It's not." I flipped a switch, weaving a new beat in the mix. "But thanks."

"You're certainly leading the crowd without saying a word."

His compliment didn't feel rehearsed, it felt genuine. Surprising, for someone so used to the spotlight.

"It's all in the timing."

He watched me work, his presence possessing a quiet confidence. He appeared to be the type of guy who didn't need to try to be noticed. Golden boy, through and through.

"Maybe you'll let me buy you a drink after this?"

The question was one I had heard a million times over, but I couldn't help smiling at him.

"I'm on the clock!" I pointed to the large clock above the bar, the numbers lit up in neon lights that informed anyone capable of still reading that it was almost two in the morning.

"We close at three! You'll have to ask me again later! "

Smirking, Sullivan stepped forward to gaze down at all the buttons on the turner, eyeing them curiously. "How does this work?"

"Two switchboards." I leaned in to rest my mouth next to his ear and inched up on my toes, my chin on his shoulder.

"You follow the tempo, and you can make it faster or slower.

When the song is done, you lower the knob to flow into the next song!

" I lowered my weight flat on my feet. "Want to give it a shot? "

"Show me."

I tilted my head back against his shoulder to catch his gaze.

Grinning, I grabbed his hands and pulled his arms around my waist, shifting him forward to reach the knobs.

The song changed, the tempo now slow and alluring.

The crowd went wild. Heavy bass flowed easily through the speakers as couples started to bump and grind to the naughty lyrics.

I shifted him closer, so he could adjust the knobs, the tempo picking up.

My grin deepened when I felt him place a hand on my hip, his other hand hovering over the knobs.

"How am I doing?"

"You're a natural."

"You're a very cruel person."

I glanced up from my half-empty coffee cup to see Alice sliding onto a stool beside me. "Is that supposed to mortally wound me?"

"You'll survive. You know," she continued, "most girls wouldn't complain about a hot actor hanging around their booth. "

"He was a customer."

"He flirted. You flirted back. That's not customer service, babe. I call that chemistry."

Grunting, I downed the rest of my coffee, crumpling up the small cup, and chucked it into the trash can behind the bar. "I need more coffee, preferably something better than this shit Danny orders."

Alice jumped off the stool to scramble after me, trailing closely behind me to the front door. "You can't avoid Sullivan forever. You're not that rude. Besides, he knows where you work."

"I'm not avoiding him." I slid my sunglasses on, the weight of the messenger bag on my shoulder grounding me. "I've got my own shit to handle. He's a celebrity only in town for a minute. He'll be gone before I can blink."

"No offense, but when have you ever taken the high road when it comes to a hot guy?"

"The answer is never, but this isn't the high road." I shoved the club door open. "I'm taking the easiest one."

The owner of the coffee shop greeted me loudly before the front door shut.

I slid my sunglasses onto the top of my head, the plastic resting against the high ballerina-style bun I magically manifested my hair into that morning.

I laughed at the sight of him already preparing my drink. "How's it going, Ricky?"

"Things are great! You're looking nice as always!"

Smiling, I leaned against the counter. I glanced at my plain gray tee shirt and ripped jeans, my plain black flip flops sticking out from the frayed edges. "Thanks. Today's fashion is brought to you by thrift stores near my apartment."

He slid a cup of hazelnut-flavored coffee toward me and chuckled when I took a sip with my eyes closed, a small sigh of satisfaction escaping me. "For that reaction, it's free today."

"You're awesome, Ricky."

The doorbell to the shop chimed to signal the arrival of another customer, but I didn't pause to look, taking several more sips.

I finally turned my attention to see who had entered and almost choked on the hot liquid.

Sullivan stepped inside the doorway, sunglasses tucked into the front of his crisp button-up, his hair perfectly undone.

"Mr. Masters, good afternoon! It's good to see you again," Ricky greeted him. "I'll have your order coming right up. "

I cocked an eyebrow as Sullivan approached me. "He knows your order?"

"I'm addicted to coffee, what can I say?" He glanced at my cup. "Have you already paid? You did say you'd let me buy you a drink."

"Sorry, sweetie. I'm already taken care of."

"Shame." He moved forward to take his cup and reached for his wallet with his free hand.

Ricky waved his hand to stop him. "Don't worry about it. You two go enjoy the nice weather."

Smiling, I led the way outside; the door swinging shut softly behind us. I shifted my sunglasses to cover my eyes. "So..."

"So..." Sullivan sipped his coffee. "I'm surprised to see you this early. I didn't think Venom opened until ten."

"It doesn't. I always come in early for setup and cleaning." It was partly the truth, masking the real reason that I had nothing to look forward to all day except playing my music at night. The only day I took off was Sunday and that was because Danny

forced me to. "What brings you by so early?"

"I was looking for you." A corner of his mouth upturned. "Alice told me where to find you."

"And why would you be looking for me?"

He chuckled as he caught my sly smile. "You vanished on me last night."

"My shift was over," I teased .

"Alice said you'd be difficult."

"Alice tells people a lot of things." I shifted my weight, buying a second of silence. "Listen, no offense, but I don't have time for a relationship or... whatever it is you're looking for right now. My work is my life; it's the only thing I care about. There's no room for anything else."

"You don't have any friends?"

My grip tightened around my cup. "I don't stay in one place long enough to make friends."

"What about food? You have time to eat, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

He flashed another dazzling smile. "Great. Let's get something to eat, and you can tell me all about work."

I wondered if he knew exactly how his smile made my insides twist in knots. Did he

practice in front of the mirror? If I trusted my gut, and I usually did, it was telling me that he knew exactly how he affected women.

"I don't have time for lunch."

"You're going to need energy for work tonight. I'll take you anywhere you want to go, my treat."

"You're persistent," I muttered into my cup.

"You're interesting."

"I'm unavailable."

"That's not what last night told me."

I hated how calm he was, direct and self-assured that he was going to change my mind. "You think everyone flirts the same? "

"I think most people pretend not to want what they want. You didn't."

"I'm not most people."

Sullivan flashed me a disarming, Hollywood smile that he had no doubt used on countless people in the past. "Most people are boring."

"Are you always this charming?"

"Only when it counts." Shrugging, he sipped his coffee, glancing around as if any minute he expected paparazzi to surround us.

The mere idea of it made my skin crawl. There was no doubt in my mind that our picture had probably already been taken together.

He was a popular actor, a golden boy with a bright future ahead of him in the entertainment industry.

"I'm headed back to LA soon, but I'd regret it if I didn't ask. Can I see you again?"

I stared at him, unsure what surprised me more, that he asked or that I wanted to say yes. "I'll think about it."

"That's a good start."

Shaking my head, I finished my coffee, chucking the empty cup into a nearby trash can. "I appreciate the offer for lunch, but I need to get to work and set up for tonight. Good luck with promotion."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

My ears were ringing, and it wasn't from the music.

No, the honor was all Alice's from shrieking earlier when I told her that I had turned Sullivan down for lunch.

I did the final checks in my booth, making sure all the discs were in order, and with a final nod at Jake, the main bouncer, Venom was open for business.

Three hours later, I took another swig from my water bottle, rolling my neck as I felt the sweat dripping between my shoulder blades. My eyes scanned the crowd. I had been looking for any sign of Sullivan, and I hated it. With a grunt, I tossed my bottle onto the floor.

As the song changed, the water bottle was placed on the end of my turntable.

I glanced over my shoulder, surprised but annoyingly pleased to see him standing there in a white tee shirt and jeans.

The fast song echoed in my ears. I wasn't paying attention to the words anymore, despite how loud they were.

The bass vibrated in my chest, the words from the song whispering in my ear like a deadly siren.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as his hands gripped my hips. My mouth met his halfway, and I closed my eyes, the music twisting around us as the caress deepened. I gasped when my backside hit the turntable.

He ended the kiss. "Take a break."

"I can't!"

"Yes, you can." He cupped my face with his hands. "I think it's about time I bought you that drink."

I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. "I already said—"

"I know what you told me, but I'm not going to quit asking!" His right thumb stroked my cheek. "Don't you feel this? It's crazy, but don't you feel what's happening between us?"

It was scary, a familiar ball of nerves appearing in my stomach. He kissed me again. I couldn't help but smile when he pulled away.

"I have to work!"

"I'll wait for you."

Laughing, I wrapped my fingers around his wrists. "I know you're not a club fanatic. There's no reason for you to suffer." Releasing him, I turned to dig through my bag. I handed him a sheet of paper. "This is my cell phone! Call me when I get off. "

"You promise that you won't disappear this time?"

I licked my lips, the taste of him lingering in my mouth. "I won't disappear this time."

The twenty-four-hour pancake house wasn't busy, but I suspected it was due to it being four o'clock in the morning. I looked at Sullivan to find him staring at me.

"What is it?"

"You're drinking coffee, and you haven't been to bed yet."

"I don't know if I will be anytime soon. I'm used to being up late, so I tend to drink lots of coffee," I shrugged. "I'm not addicted to it."

"Right."

"I'm not!"

Chuckling, he raised his own glass; the water slick with condensation. "Okay, fine, you're not addicted to coffee. What are you addicted to? Well," he sipped his water, "besides music, I mean."

"You're certainly curious about me."

"I'm always curious about the women I kiss. "

I almost spit out my coffee, wiping my mouth with my napkin. "The only thing I've done lately outside of work is finish a Stephen King novel I purchased four years ago. Basically, I spend every waking hour at Venom. That's about it. I'm boring."

"You're not boring; you're selective of how you spend your time." He reclined in his chair. "What book was it?"

"Desperation."

"I've read that one, it's good."

"I think we've switched roles. You're interviewing me as if I'm the celebrity." I

glanced around the restaurant, smiling as I noticed two older women at a nearby table shyly looking at him. "Then again, maybe we haven't."

He didn't remove his gaze from me. "What made you move to Australia?"

I brought my gaze back to him. "Nothing in particular. It's a beautiful country. I move a lot."

"Define a lot."

Smothering the urge to roll my eyes, I smiled into my cup before taking another sip of the steaming hot liquid. "Every couple of years."

"Why?"

"Because I can." My answer was abrupt, but I didn't care. "What else are you curious about, Mr. Masters?"

"Well, I was curious about how you tasted, but we've already answered that. "

I fumbled my cup, but I managed to steady it at the last possible second. I stared wide-eyed at him for several seconds before clearing my throat. "Every time I think I have you figured out, you do or say something that surprises me."

"I'm sorry. I don't usually say things like that. I mean, I don't do things like that with someone I just met."

"I bet you tell that to all the girls."

"Only the ones I'm curious about, Ms. Jones."

His response made me laugh. I watched him smile, a pink blush on his cheeks appearing. "What kind of things are you addicted to, Mr. Masters?"

Sullivan toyed nonchalantly with his fork. "I consider myself rather boring," he shrugged. "I enjoy listening to Classical music. I grew up on it as a child. I prefer to be at home watching a good show than going out to a club."

"So, what were you doing at Venom tonight?"

"I think you know what I was doing there."

My mouth curved upward, but it didn't reach my eyes. "Maybe I want to hear you say it."

He leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table.

"I had a lot of fun with you the other night, more than I've had outside of work in a long time.

I'm not one to deny myself when I feel a connection.

I think there's one between us, so why not try to pursue it?

If you let things pass you by, you'll never know what they could mean to you. "

I let my eyes skim his face, lingering on his mouth for a second before I brought my gaze back to his. "How long are you going to be with us in sunny Aussie land?"

"One more week. Do you think you could fit me into your busy schedule?"

"You don't strike me as the kind of man who enjoys relationships that are doomed to

fail from the very beginning."

"You're right. Tell me you didn't think of me today."

"I didn't think of you at all today."

He surprised me by laughing. "You're not a good liar."

"It's why I don't play poker," I grumbled, "but I'm working on it." I played with the salt shaker on the table. "I like you, but my life is too complicated."

"It sounds pretty simple to me. Music is what drives you; it doesn't take much other than that to make you happy. The way I see it, we're more similar than you want to believe. Acting's a huge part of my life, it's the only thing I see myself doing forever."

"But it's not the only thing in your life. You have your friends, hobbies..."

"Are you saying you have no friends?" He pressed, a strange softness in his tone. "I imagine Alice would beg to differ."

I shrugged. "I don't stick around long enough. People leave, or I do. It's easier that way. "

"I don't know why you're fighting me so hard on this. I'm not proposing to you."

"Give it time."

The comment was laced with dry humor, but he could see the seriousness in my face. "You've been hurt pretty badly before, haven't you?" He surprised me by reaching out to take my hand in his, his thumb stroking my skin. "If you need to talk, I'll

listen."

"I know you would, and that's what scares me." I pulled away. "You seem like a great guy, Sullivan. You're certainly one hell of a kisser," I smiled when he blushed at the compliment, "but I'm not good for you. I'm not good for anyone, not even myself sometimes."

"If you give me the chance, I can change your mind about that."

"You don't know when to quit, do you, Mr. Masters?"

He flashed me a dazzling smile. "So I've been told, Ms. Jones."

Venom was packed at capacity. I smiled at the crowd, throwing my hands up to excite them before setting songs on a loop.

I turned to where Sullivan lingered in the booth.

He had returned earlier that night, insistent on watching me play.

"If you keep hanging out with me, people are going to think you're a partying, bad boy.

Surely you have better things to do with your free time? "

"I want to be here."

"Suit yourself." I glanced at the turner, momentarily distracted as I made sure everything was going smoothly. Judging by the reaction from the crowd as a remix played, everything was fantastic. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"You're just sitting there staring at me!"

"What do you want me to do?"

The temptation to see how far he was willing to go was too strong to pass up. "You could come over here, and give me a hand." My breath caught in my throat when he rose from his chair.

"It seems you have everything under control."

"I wasn't talking about the music."

He chuckled, sliding his hands up my arms. "I swear, I can't tell which way is up with you sometimes."

"I could help you out with that."

He brushed his lips against mine. "I believe you."

I returned my attention to the turntable, smiling as he wrapped his arms around my waist. I couldn't deny what he had said earlier was true.

There was something between us, and I desperately wanted to find out what it was.

I only hoped once that happened, I'd be able to walk away without my heart broken into a million pieces.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

Just inside the door of my apartment, I stumbled, but he was there to hold me steady. I met his kiss without hesitation, barely paying attention as the door shut behind us from a well-placed kick. I ignored the butterflies that threatened to choke me, settling instead with hugging his neck.

I jumped up to wrap my legs around his waist. I giggled when he caught me with a grunt, his hands gently cupping my ass. "My bedroom is the second room on the left."

"What about your kitchen?"

"If you prefer a table to a bed, that's fine with me."

Chuckling, he lowered me gently to my feet. "I'm thinking more as I'm thirsty and could use some water."

I watched him walk into the kitchen, eyeing his backside appreciatively. I leaned against the door frame, waiting as he located a cup and used the water filter on the refrigerator to fill it. At the sound of my snort, he turned mid-sip to gaze at me from over the rim.

"I thought you were kidding." I watched him finish the entire glass. "Guess not."

"I've wanted something to drink since the club. I've filmed in places that went up to 106 degrees, but I swear, Venom felt much hotter."

"It's all those bodies, sweating and moving together." I let my gaze trail his body. "It's one of the many reasons why I love working there. The music takes over, and

you lose yourself. It's one of the best highs in the world."

"I've never thought of it that way. I can relax in my house to Classical and lose myself in the same way."

I took a few steps closer to him. "Classical music is a completely different ball game than dance and techno. You can't get sweaty listening to Mozart."

Sullivan lowered his glass onto the counter. "Maybe you're not listening to it the right way."

I raised my eyebrow at him when he moved forward to match my steps. "I must admit the image of you listening to Mozart is very sexy."

"I know what you're doing, Rory."

"You do?"

He stroked the side of my face, sticking strands of my hair behind my ear. "You think that by seducing me, I'll somehow lose interest and leave you alone. "

I chuckled, a mock look of surprise on my face. "You won't?"

"Nope."

"Well, damn. What if I let you seduce me?"

He laughed, the now familiar sound making my stomach do flips. "You're too much." He brushed his lips against mine. "It's late. I should go."

"To bed? You're in luck, I've got one."

Playfully, he rolled his eyes. "I have to get up early to do some promotion tomorrow. When I'm free, I'll call you."

"I might answer."

"Might?"

I tilted my head, letting a slow grin spread across my face. "I'll think about it."

The first time he called, I didn't answer. I stared at my phone, watching as it continued to vibrate against the glass coffee table. With a sigh, I scooped it up and hit Send, clearing my throat. "Hello?"

"I thought you weren't going to answer," Sullivan chuckled.

Toying with my hair, I wrapped the long strands slowly around my fingers. "I'm not sure why, but I did."

"I'm glad."

"How was promotion?"

He sighed into the phone. "They had me in front of the opera house on this boat taking pictures all day with the other actors."

"Aw, you poor baby. What a horrible way to spend your day."

He chuckled, catching the sarcasm behind my words. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't complain."

"Nah, you can say whatever you want. I don't care." It was a lie, but I wasn't going to

admit it. "I guess you're all done for the day. Are you going out with your friend?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to visit my sister and her family that live in the city. She's having a small cookout tomorrow. I thought, maybe... you might want to join us?"

I blinked, a tight knot forming in my stomach. Meet his family? It felt too soon, too personal, and way outside the boundaries I'd set for myself. I tightened my grip around my coffee cup, focusing on the warmth, trying to ground myself. "Why?"

"I thought it would be a nice way for us to spend time together outside of work. I don't want you to feel pressured."

My pulse quickened. His casual tone wasn't fooling me. He was trying to sell me on the idea, but all I could think about was the inevitable mess this could turn into. "I'm not the family type."

"Come as you are, there's no expectations."

My chest tightened, and I felt old defense mechanisms kick in. "It's been three days since I met you." My voice came out hoarse, more defensive than I meant. "I don't get involved that quickly with anyone. People leave. They always leave."

"I'm not asking for anything more than your company and a chance to get to know you better."

The sincerity in his voice made it harder to breathe.

No one ever asked me for that. I was used to running, to disappearing when things got too real.

I swallowed. "Fine, but don't expect anything more from me.

I'm not some happy, perfect girlfriend who is going to fit into your perfect family picture. "

Sullivan chuckled into the phone. "I never thought you were, Rory. I'm only asking you to spend time with me. I'm not going to force you, but I would enjoy it if you came with me. If not, we can do something later."

I hesitated, uncertainty swirling inside me. "I'll come, as your friend, but don't push me after that."

"Of course. No pressure. Say the word, and I'll take you home."

It was a terrible idea. One, I was already regretting. "Okay."

As he pulled up to a brick, two-story home, I noticed flowers growing in the front yard and a tire swing in a tree to the side. It wasn't surprising that the family inside matched the scenery outside.

Lainie Taylor was an inch shorter than me with brown hair and hazel eyes.

Her husband, Keith, was tall and lean with shoulder length blonde hair, an obvious native to Australia.

Within minutes of watching them together, I knew they were hopelessly in love.

Their ten-year-old daughter, Jane, was a mix of the two, full of energy and imagination.

She had clung to Sullivan's legs the moment he stepped inside the door.

"Want to help me in the kitchen?"

I glanced out of the corner of my eye to see him tickling Jane. "Sure." I followed Lainie into the kitchen and stood there awkwardly until she handed me a mixing bowl.

"You can help me with the salad. Sully tells me you're a DJ at Venom?"

I didn't look up from cutting the lettuce. "That's right. "

"To be honest, I'm surprised he went. He hates public places with a passion. In fact, I tried to get him to take me when we were growing up, and he always refused."

"Are you his only sibling?"

"Yes. I met Keith when I was studying law at UCLA. We waited until Jane turned five to move back here." She watched me chop the tomatoes. "Do you like my brother?"

I almost slipped with the knife. "Excuse me?"

"Well, he rarely brings his girlfriends around to meet us. With his line work—" Lainie hesitated. "I'm sorry. I'm blabbering."

I continued chopping the tomatoes. "We're just friends." I turned my head as she made a noise in the back of her throat. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," she smiled. "Sully said you've never seen his show."

"I don't have a lot of time for television." I shrugged, dropping the tomatoes into the bowl before I shifted my attention to a bag of carrots. "It's usually a bunch of crappy

reality shows or fake news anyway."

"I can't tell you though how many times I turn on the TV and am shocked to see his face," she chuckled. "He doesn't talk about it a lot, he keeps his business and personal life separate, but he's incredibly proud of the show."

"It's not easy being an entertainer. You have to please a lot of people when you're only trying to please yourself. "

"Is that how you feel about your music?"

"Being a DJ can be hectic, but you get into a groove after a while, no pun intended." We exchanged a small smile. "Once you get acquainted with your crowd, the music tends to take care of the rest."

"Do you two ladies need any help?"

We looked to the doorway to see Sullivan, Jane in his arms. The little girl's arms were wrapped around his neck, and she giggled as he made a funny face at her.

"You're pretty," Jane smiled. "Isn't she, Uncle Sully?"

He grinned at her before shifting his gaze to me. "She's beautiful."

"Are you going to get married like Mommy and Daddy?"

I turned quickly to the counter, blushing so hard I knew I matched the tomatoes inside the bowl. "I think the salad is ready now."

Lainie laughed, shooting me an apologetic look before she poked Jane playfully in the stomach. "Silly girl, you know you shouldn't ask stuff like that. Go wash your

hands, it's time to eat."

"Okay, Mommy." Jane motioned to be put down and rushed off to the bathroom.

"I'll go find Keith." She patted Sullivan on the arm as she passed him.

He cleared his throat, pausing to scratch the back of his neck. "Sorry about that. "

"It's alright. You can't control what a child says, I know this."

"Don't let it bother you. Lainie and Keith are perfectly aware that..."

"Aware of what exactly?" I turned to face him. "Cause whatever it is, I'm out of the loop. I was never good at family stuff. I basically raised myself. This is exactly why I can't get involved with you."

"You're scared of finding something real, and I get that, but the hardest part sometimes is taking the chance no matter how scared you are."

"I don't know what you want from me!"

He reached forward to pull me close. "I can't explain this, but you make me feel... different. Everything can be absolutely crazy around me, yet when I see you, it all goes away. Haven't you ever felt that way?"

"Listen, if you want a good time, I'm your girl, but when that time is up, that's it. I'll be moving on in about three months to some place new, and you'll be wherever you're filming next. You know deep down that I'm right about this."

"Guys!" His sister's voice came floating from the dining room. "We're ready!"

I grabbed the salad off the counter. "Let's enjoy lunch, and then you can take me back home."

"I'll prove you wrong."

"You're certainly welcome to try."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

"Did you have a good time?"

I looked away from the passing scenery outside the car window. "I did, thank you. Where are we going?"

"I thought we'd go to the beach." He flipped on his blinker to change lanes. "I brought some dessert we can share."

A thousand thoughts went through my head at that moment, none of them kid friendly. "I didn't see you put any food in the car."

"I can be sneaky when my sister helps me."

"From the stories I heard at lunch, I believe you."

Chuckling, he took the exit that directed us toward the beach.

The radio was the only thing that made sound during the rest of the ride, and I breathed in relief when I spotted the crashing waves.

I slipped out of the car as he opened the trunk, pulling out a small cooler and a blanket.

I thread my fingers through his, and he pulled me toward the sand.

It wasn't crowded, the beach was scattered with people, but none of them seemed to notice us, content to play in the surf and the sand.

Sullivan spread out the blanket, and I sat, watching him pull out a small, covered bowl and two forks from the cooler. My eyes widened at the sight of the fresh fruit inside topped with nuts and whip cream. "I certainly wasn't expecting this."

"Good." Grabbing a fork, he stabbed a strawberry, dipping it into the cream before he lifted it to my mouth. "Wrap your lips around this."

Smiling, I opened my mouth, my eyes glued to his. I chewed on the fruit, moaning in satisfaction. "That is so good." I frowned as he stuck the fork in his mouth. "Hey."

"You missed some!"

I rolled my eyes, dipping my finger into the cream. I leaned toward him to spread a small amount of it on the corner of his mouth. "You did, too."

"I don't think I can reach it."

"That's too bad." I extracted a napkin from the cooler. "Here."

Accepting the napkin, he cleaned the cream off of his face. He cleared his throat, stabbing another strawberry with the fork. "Want some more? "

"Yes, please." Opening my mouth, I blinked when he completely missed my mouth and smeared the cream against my face. "Hey, not funny." I reached for the napkin.

"I'll get it."

Sullivan leaned forward, stopping at the last minute to toss the napkin on the blanket. Instead, he grabbed my chin with his fingers. His tongue licked my skin, and when he pulled away, he wore a satisfied look on his face.

A tight breath hitched in my throat. "I think you got it." I reached for the fork, sliding what was left of the fruit into my mouth. I handed him the fork. "You're a tease."

He acted shocked, going as far to place a hand on his chest. "You can't be talking to me."

"You're the only Sullivan I know." I bit my bottom lip, watching him stab a raspberry with the fork. "What's your full name?"

He concentrated on dipping fruit into the whip cream. "Sullivan Carl Masters the Second."

"Wow, that's pretty lengthy."

"Tell me about it. What about you?"

"Nothing so grand, I'm afraid. I'm Lorelai Marie Jones."

"It's a beautiful name, it suits you."

I blushed despite myself. "Are you going to serve me that raspberry, or play with it all day?"

Smiling, he lifted the fork, sliding it into his own mouth. "You mean that raspberry? "

"I can't believe you did that! How rude!"

" I reached for the fork when he stopped me, his hand wrapping around my wrist. "What are—" He pulled me forward, and with a gasp, I grabbed his shoulder to steady myself.

He pressed his lips against mine. I fell into him, knocking us onto the sand.

I was drowning in him, aroused when he let his tongue slip out to clean my lips, before diving deeper into my mouth.

Sullivan pulled away with a groan, his lips hovering near mine. "Rory, we're in public."

"Uh huh." I traced his jaw, every inch of him so close.

"We should stop."

"Why? Who's watching?"

He released me, and I sat back up. "There's always someone watching." He watched me brush the sand from my clothes. "You look perfect."

"Stop that."

"Why? I enjoy complimenting you."

"That's dangerous talk."

He propped himself on his elbow. "Am I not supposed to enjoy myself with you?"

"Enjoying something makes it harder to walk away from it."

His smile faltered enough for me to catch it. "Are you already planning your exit? "

"I always plan my exit. It's the only way I know how to breathe." I could feel the shift in him, the way his easy charm sharpened into something more serious.

"You ever think that maybe running away isn't strength? Maybe it's fear dressed up as freedom?"

"Spare me the inspirational soundbites," I rolled my eyes. "I've heard them before."

"And yet here you are, eating strawberries and letting me look at you like you hung the damn stars."

I scoffed, but the sound wobbled. "You're good at making it sound as if this matters."

"It does matter, Rory."

"Why? Because we kissed in a club? Because I'm the first girl to challenge you?"

"Because when I'm with you, I don't have to pretend. I don't have to be the version of me they put in magazines." His hand brushed my wrist, deliberate but gentle. "Tell me you don't feel it too," he murmured, "and I'll stop."

I looked away, toward the waves, the sky, anything but him. A little boy was burying his father's hand in the sand a few feet away, their laughter soft under the breeze. "I didn't realize it was getting so late."

His touch shifted, but he didn't press the subject. "Well, look on the bright side. Tomorrow's your day off."

I nodded, fingers tracing slow patterns in the sand. "Yeah, I plan on sleeping until the sun gives up. "

"Good for you. You deserve a break." He watched me climb to my feet. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all." I flashed him a small smile. "I really need to head to work to start setting up."

"Sure, whatever you want." Sullivan stood and leaned in to kiss me.

I kissed him back. My hands slid into his hair, his grip tightening around my waist.

Click.

We both froze.

A second click followed. I turned, pulse stuttering in my throat. He stiffened beside me, his hands slipping away as his eyes scanned the beach. Half-hidden behind a dune, a man stood with a camera, lens raised, posture unmistakable. Another shutter snapped.

He swore under his breath. "They must have followed us."

It was the kind of reaction that alerted me this wasn't new to him. But it was new to me. All I could do was stare. Throat tight, I tried to distract myself by brushing sand from my jeans. "It's fine."

"It's not fine, Rory. We'll handle it."

"We?" I exhaled hard through my nose. "You'll be back in LA in two weeks with your PR team spinning the whole thing into a late-night talk show anecdote, and I'll just be the girl who got played by a famous actor."

"That's not fair—"

"Isn't it? You'll disappear behind a gate in the Hills. I'll be here, fielding phone calls

from people who suddenly remember my name."

He took a step toward me. "I didn't ask for that camera to show up."

"No, but you brought me into your world without thinking about the consequences."

"I brought you into my life, Rory. There's a difference."

I crossed my arms, the wind catching strands of my hair. "You say all the right things. You show up, you make me feel like I matter, and maybe you mean it. But you'll leave. That's what people like you do."

He looked at me for a long moment, it seemed he was trying to figure out how much of me had already been damaged before he ever arrived. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

"Then stop acting like you won't."

We stood in silence, the ocean roaring behind us, the world feeling a little too big and a little too exposed.

He didn't try to touch me again. "Okay."

I walked away, the taste of his kiss burning on my lips, and the sound of the camera shutter ringing in my ears.

My alarm shrieked at 9:30. I smacked it and rolled over with a groan. I stretched, letting the sheets tangle around me before I finally opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling.

First thought: Sullivan.

Second: coffee.

I frowned. He hadn't shown up at the club last night. He dropped me off at my apartment... and vanished. No text. No call. No message through Alice. It shouldn't have bothered me, but it did. He was too close, and then suddenly, too far.

Yawning, I shuffled into the kitchen in black shorts and a tank, letting the hum of the coffee maker fill the silence.

A few minutes later, I settled on the couch, mug in hand, scrolling through the usual half-dead morning channels.

I should've been asleep. Venom didn't close until three, but I'd stayed later than I needed to, long after my set, long after Alice told me to go home, because some pathetic part of me thought he might show up.

He didn't .

Sighing, I clicked off the TV and tossed the remote onto the coffee table. "I'm an idiot," I muttered. The apartment didn't argue.

I sat there for a minute longer, then pushed up from the couch. In the bedroom, I changed into exercise pants and pulled a jacket over my sports bra. Running always helped. It didn't solve anything, but at least the pavement didn't ask questions.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

I was dripping with sweat when I returned. I approached my apartment with my head down, focused on retrieving my key from the inside of my bra. Someone coughed. I looked up to see Sullivan leaning against my door frame, amused at having caught me with my hand down my shirt.

"It's not what it looks like." I pulled my hand free. "I'm looking for my key."

"Do you always hide your keys in your underwear?"

"Only when I'm feeling kinky. Give me a minute." I eyed him as he moved away from the door frame. I angled my body, grumbling under my breath. "And no peeking."

"Are you sure you don't want any help?"

Smiling victoriously, I pulled out the key. "I can search my breasts fine on my own, thank you." I reached the door, doing my best to ignore him standing so close to me. "You weren't at Venom last night."

"I had a busy day with my management team, so I decided to get some rest."

I concentrated on sliding the key into the lock. "Alice told me she hadn't seen you."

"Really? That's interesting. I could have sworn Alice told me she had Saturdays off."

I flung open my door at the same time I brought my gaze to his. "Since when do you know about Alice's off days?"

His eyebrows rose at the suspicious tone in my voice. "I started asking about yours, and she voluntarily told me."

"If you have a question about me, you can ask me, not someone else. You don't see me going online when I'm curious about you, do you?"

"You probably don't own a computer," he chuckled.

"I do too!" I objected, turning to face him in the doorway. He started laughing, and it took me by surprise. "Why are you laughing? This isn't funny."

"I'm sorry, Rory."

"Then stop laughing."

He coughed as if a move to stop the next laugh from coming out and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry; you're too adorable, staring up at me all..." He sighed, reaching out to stroke the side of my face. "You're angry with me."

"I'm not angry," I grumbled .

"Yes, you are, but it's okay. I only wanted to see you. I'm sorry if I bothered you."

"You're leaving?"

"You don't want me to go?" His grin let me know he was already aware of the answer, and I fought the childish urge to stomp my foot. "Can I come in?"

"If you don't, honey, I'm going to invite him into my place."

"Mrs. Richards!" I rolled my eyes at the elderly lady entering her apartment from

across the hall. "Alright, come inside."

Sullivan smiled at the woman before he walked past me. She winked at me before entering her apartment and shutting the door.

"Ignore her." I shut the door. "She's old, and senile, and..." I stopped short mid-turn as he stretched his arms out to pin me against the door, his hands comfortably resting inches above my head. "Um, what are you doing?"

"Can I ask you something?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Do I have much of a choice?"

"You always have a choice, Rory." He studied me, eyes scanning the features of my face. "Did you miss me last night?"

I shifted against the door; certain I wasn't going anywhere unless he let me. "I think you know I missed you last night. It's pretty cruel to tease me about it. "

"I'm not teasing. I'm merely curious to see if you missed me as much as I missed you."

I tugged playfully at his shirt. "You should have come to see me. I was hoping to spin this new track for you."

"After our conversation at the beach and what happened, I wasn't sure you would want me to. You should have texted me. I would have showed up."

"Never mind, it doesn't matter what I thought."

He captured my chin with his right hand, tipping my face up to meet his gaze. "It

matters to me. Spin it Monday. I'll be there."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

I was slightly distracted by the feeling of his thumb brushing against my lower jaw.

"If you keep coming by to see me, I'm going to start expecting it, and when you finally don't show up, it's going to bother me."

"By bother, do you mean you were upset I didn't?"

"Do you need a thesaurus?"

"I'm trying to make sure I understand what you're saying." He stopped stroking my chin, but his grip didn't relax. "Did it bother you that I wasn't there?"

"Why are you asking me that?" I wrapped my fingers around his wrist. "Please stop doing this."

"I don't understand what I'm doing. "

I snorted. "Sometimes you act as if you have no idea what you're doing to me. You're making this hard for me; making it harder to say no each time I want to."

Pushing away from the door, he ran his hand through his hair. "I'm trying to handle this the best way I can, but you have to realize things aren't that easy for me either."

"And how is this hard for you exactly?"

His gaze turned hard, and I barely had time to process what was happening when he

was suddenly touching me again, pressing me flat against the door with one hand, his other cupping the back of my neck. I grabbed his shirt, sighing at his weight pressing against mine.

"I'm only a man." He bent his head to brush his lips against mine. "Trust me, you're making it very hard for me."

"I could help you with that." I smirked when he inhaled sharply when my hands slipped under his shirt. "I'm all sweaty from running; I should probably take a shower."

"Rory..."

Wide-eyed, I gazed up at him. "I should!"

Releasing me, he pulled himself away from the door. "Hurry up; I want to take you out to lunch."

"No offer to wash my back?"

"Tempting, but lunch first."

At a small, downtown restaurant, I waited at a table by the window as he talked to the cashier, handing her money to pay for our order. The young blonde blushed at the attention, quietly thanking him and handing back his change. Several of the staff had greeted him the second we entered.

"We're popular everywhere, aren't we?"

He chuckled as he sat down across from me, shrugging nonchalantly. "I've eaten here a lot the last week. It reminds me of home."

"Where is home? Los Angeles?"

"Yeah, I've lived there for five years now. Lainie and I moved around a lot as kids. My father was in the military. My mother is originally from Perth, and when he retired, we lived there a while."

"Well, don't worry; you'll be home in no time."

"You don't sound too upset by that."

I played with my napkin. "You have to go back at some point, right?"

"What about you? Is there a place you've ever called home? "

"No."

He studied me before glancing over his shoulder as our number was called. "Be right back."

I continued picking at the napkin until it was in tiny pieces. When he returned, he slid our food between us, and I retrieved my sandwich from the plastic tray.

"So, where were you born?"

I paused with my sandwich halfway to my mouth. "New Jersey."

"Do your parents still live there?"

"My mother died when I was twelve. My stepfather didn't care what I did after that.

"The words tasted strange coming out, I hadn't said them in years—or ever out loud

to another person.

"I left home when I was sixteen, and I found ways to feed myself until I was able to get my first turntable.

I've moved from place to place making money. "

"You don't stay in one place for too long."

I shook my head. "I love seeing the world. A home is nothing more than a place you sleep."

"How long have you been in Australia?"

"A year and seven months," I answered.

"Where are you going next?"

I reached for my drink, my fingers tightening around the plastic. I didn't look at him.

"I don't know."

Sullivan reached for his sandwich; his head bent as he unwrapped the foil from around it. "You could always come back with me to Los Angeles. "

I froze with the cup half-way to my mouth. "Why would I want to do that?"

"I'm sure I could help get you some work." He looked up with a smile. "I know a few people who'd love to have you at their parties."

"I appreciate the gesture, but LA isn't my thing." I concentrated on my sandwich again. "I don't know if I'm going back to the United States anyway."

"When was the last time you were there?"

I looked up again. "What does it matter? What's with all the sudden questions?"

"Hey, I'm curious about you, that's all." He frowned. "What's wrong?"

I jerked my hand away, trying to ignore the hurt look that flashed across his face. I forced a smile, hoping it looked more convincing than it felt. "Let's eat, okay?"

"I think I'd rather talk."

I left my food untouched. "There's no reason to do a background check or try to learn all you can about me. It's pointless."

"It's not pointless to me." He reached out to grab my hand. "Why do you keep pushing me away?"

"Because when I don't, people get hurt, and I can't have that on my conscience anymore." I pulled away, but he didn't release me. "Let go."

His dark eyes studied my face, his grip tightening. "You think you're the only person that gets scared of new things? Of making a mistake? You're not, but sometimes you have to trust that things will work out."

"I'm only going to ask you one more time. Let go." When he released me, I sat back in my seat, pushing my half-eaten sandwich aside. "This isn't going to work."

"What isn't?"

"You. Me. Whatever this is." I motioned vaguely between us.

"You vanished, and all I could think about was that day on the beach and how it felt to—" I stopped myself, jaw clenched. His eyes were locked on me, unreadable. "I don't let people in. Not because I'm cold or dramatic or some cliché damaged girl, but because when I do, they want more than I can give. "

"Did someone hurt you in the past?"

I let out a breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "Everyone's been hurt. That's not the point."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For vanishing. For pushing you to meet my family." He didn't look away. "I'm not used to this. The way you don't pretend to be anyone else around me. It's... different."

Something in my chest twisted. Not enough to let my guard down, but enough to where the sudden tension wasn't so palpable. I picked up my sandwich, took a small bite, and chewed. "I'm still annoyed."

He grinned, picking up his sandwich as well. "Trust me, I'll make it up to you."

Sullivan insisted on walking me to my door. Right as I entered, my cell phone rang, and I barely heard him shut the door behind us as I answered. "Hey, Alice."

"Have you seen today's paper?"

"I don't exactly have a subscription," I frowned. "What about it?"

"You and your new boyfriend are on the cover at the beach together. Do you need a reminder of what you're doing in the photo?"

"Oh, my God."

She laughed. "Was that what you were saying at the time?"

"Shut up, this isn't funny."

"Unfortunately, it's quite serious. Paparazzi came to the club a few minutes ago asking for information about you; two of them with cameras, press passes, the whole thing. They asked for 'the mystery girl in the booth.' Danny told them you didn't exist."

I slumped onto the couch, panic already knotting in my chest. "This can't be happening. "

"I'm not sure how, Rory, but they knew your name."

"I have to go." I ended the call before Alice could say another word. "This is exactly what I was afraid of," I muttered. "One photo, and suddenly I'm a headline, a story they get to make up."

Sullivan stood slowly from the stool near the kitchen counter. "We'll handle it—"

"No," I snapped, turning on him. "You'll handle it. You've got a team for this. You'll smile on late-night TV and joke about your 'mysterious beach fling' while I'm left to burn."

His jaw tightened. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it? Because that's how this works, right? You get to move on while I get to be dissected, called desperate or a mistake."

"You think I'd let that happen?"

"I think you don't get it! I've spent my whole life staying under the radar. I'm not built for cameras in my face or strangers digging through my past."

"I didn't ask for this either," he fired back. "I didn't plan for some photographer to catch us on the beach, but I'm here. I'm trying, and all you do is push."

"I push because people leave!"

He stared at me, something in his expression breaking. "Maybe you push so they have to."

I looked away, jaw tight, chest heaving.

With a sigh, he grabbed his keys off the counter .

"Sullivan—" I started, but he didn't look back.

"Call me when you figure out if you actually want someone to stay."

The door slammed behind him. The silence left in his place was deafening.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

TWO DAYS LATER

My phone was vibrating before I opened my eyes. I groaned, dragging it out from under the pillow, half-blind as the screen lit up with a flood of notifications—texts, missed calls, social mentions. My heart dropped at the text message from Alice.

You need to check the news. Now.

I opened the browser with shaky fingers, already knowing it wouldn't be good.

There was a photo of me leaving Venom the night before, face partially obscured by my hoodie, eyes down. Below it was a worse photo from the beach. His hand on my shoulder. My face tilted toward his .

Once something private. Intimate. Now, public property.

Sullivan Masters' Secret Fling: Mystery DJ Exposed.

A quote followed, pulled from 'an anonymous source close to the situation': "She's a girl he met in Sydney. It wasn't serious. He's headed back to LA."

I hadn't spoken to anyone. He hadn't called.

I barely finished reading the article before I was throwing on yesterday's jeans and pulling my hoodie over my head. I grabbed my keys, calling Alice, as I exited my apartment.

"Rory?"

"Do you know who leaked it? Was it someone at the club?"

Silence.

"Alice?"

"One of the bouncers told me the paps got an anonymous tip. Said they were 'invited' to scope out Venom." She hesitated. "Do you think it was Sullivan? That he did it for publicity?"

I swallowed hard at the thought of such betrayal. My throat burned .

"I don't want to think that about him," she continued. "But it lines up. He disappears on you, things blow up, and suddenly your photo is everywhere."

"I need to hear him say it wasn't him."

"Rory—"

I hung up. A text and a phone call to his number went unanswered.

It didn't take long for me to locate where he was staying during his promotional tour. I was halfway down the block from the hotel, heart pounding and half-ready to scream, when a black SUV pulled up beside the curb. The passenger window rolled down.

"Rory Jones?"

I stopped walking.

The man behind the wheel wore expensive sunglasses and a perfect suit. He looked like someone who closed a lot of doors behind him before people realized they were trapped.

"I'm Eric." Like I should know who he was. "Sullivan's manager."

"Good for you."

"We need to talk."

"I don't think we do."

Sighing, he stepped out of the car, calm and practiced. He'd probably done this before with countless other women, other headlines, other messes. "He didn't leak anything, but you and I both know that doesn't matter. The story's already out. The question now is what you want to do with it."

I narrowed my eyes. "What I want?"

"You're not stupid. You've seen how fast this spreads. We can either control the narrative, or let it eat you alive. I can help you. Interviews, a quote here or there, some soft press to paint you as the cool, edgy underground artist who caught his attention."

"You think I care about the narrative?"

He didn't blink. "You should. Because once they've decided what you are, it's hard to rewrite it."

I shook my head. "You want me to brand my life so it's easier for you to sell him."

"I want to protect him, and, by extension, you."

"No, you want to protect the version of him the public wants to see, one that makes you the most money. That doesn't include me."

I walked away.

I don't know how long I sat in Venom's back office, legs pulled to my chest, arms wrapped around them praying I could fold myself small enough to disappear.

There had been a storm of paparazzi, so many surrounding the entrance that it had taken two bouncers and a barrage of Danny's threats to get through the door.

After an explosion of texts and social media alerts, I turned off my phone. Even now, it was lost in the depths of my bag, completely ignored.

The door creaked open behind me. I froze, back straightening. "If you're here to offer me a publicity package, I swear—"

"It's me." Sullivan stood in the doorway, hat pulled low, hoodie half-zipped. He looked nothing like the guy on the beach or the man on the magazine cover. "Eric told me what he said to you."

"How? Did he text you? 'Hey, I offered to turn your emotional disaster into free PR. Any thoughts?'"

He flinched, but didn't look away. "He shouldn't have come to you. That wasn't okay."

"Yeah, well," I muttered, "neither was disappearing."

"I didn't disappear. I stepped back. You were panicking. I didn't want to make it worse."

"You made it worse anyway."

"I know." Sullivan stopped a few feet from me. "I didn't leak anything. I didn't sell you out, and I sure as hell didn't send my manager to turn you into clickbait. I told him to protect you, not package you. "

I stared at him, pulse hammering. "You could've told me that you were trying to fix it."

"You wouldn't have listened." He stepped closer. "I didn't plan for any of this to happen. I didn't expect to meet someone like you, but here we are. I'm not going to let some headline rewrite what this could turn out to be for us."

I watched him, unsure if I wanted to yell at him or lean into him. Maybe a little of both. "I don't trust easily. You already know that. I'm not great at... this."

"You don't have to be great at it. You just have to let it be real."

I exhaled, the fight draining out of me. "I didn't want to care about you."

He smiled, the expression soft and a little sad. "I know." He reached for me, slow and deliberate, giving me the chance to stop him.

I didn't.

"You're driving me crazy, pushing me away, and I'm not letting you anymore."

His arms wrapped around me, and I folded into him.

He kissed me like he was afraid I'd disappear.

My hands collided with his, and somehow through our daze, we managed to discard our shirts onto the floor.

I smiled into the next kiss, squealing as he gathered me into his arms and strode into my bedroom.

He tossed me on the bed, and I scrambled back all elbows and feet, watching him struggle with the belt of his jeans.

"Here. Let me." I slid forward to grab the buckle, forcefully unzipping his jeans, and yanking the fabric past his hips.

He knocked my hands away, shoving me lightly, so he could cover my body with his on the bed. We kissed again, and I shivered at the feeling of his hands sliding up my bare stomach to cup my breasts. I wrapped my legs around his waist and rolled my hips.

"Be patient." He dipped his head to kiss my collarbone, trailing wetness down my chest. "Damn, be patient, Rory."

"Screw patience." I slipped my hand under the hemline of his boxers to cup him, and he jerked his hips in response, swearing into the silence of the room.

"Minx." He broke away to smile down at me and pressed his hips against mine. He chuckled as I groaned at the feeling of his length against my thigh. "You enjoy being a tease?"

"Like you don't." I wrapped my fingers around him, moving my hand slowly up and down his length. "You act so innocent, but you don't fool me." I raised my head to

hover my lips beside his ear. "Fuck me."

He rolled off slightly, and I followed, moving to unsnap my bra and toss it to the floor. My next move to assist him with his boxers was halted by his hands, his hot gaze lingering on the sight of my naked breasts.

"What is it?"

"You're so beautiful."

I blushed. "Sullivan..."

"No." He wrapped his fingers around my wrists and pressed them to the bed beside my head. "Let me ... Fuck, let me look."

I wiggled under his gaze, a look of awe crossing his features. "Come on, you're too old to be seeing this for the first time."

He snorted, smile deepening. "No, I've seen breasts before, but..." He swallowed, and I froze as he bent his head, his lips brushing against my already rock-hard nipples.

"Sullivan!"

His answer was nonverbal, his tongue slipping out to slide across one nipple, and I cried out, my legs tightening around his waist. He ignored me, taking the nipple into his mouth and lavishing it with careful attention.

I squeezed my eyes shut at the shot of heat that roared through me, words pouring from my mouth that made absolutely no sense .

"Please." As if answering my prayer, he lifted his hips. My hands quickly yanked down his boxers, tossing them to the side before finding my own panties and jerking them down my legs.

Skin to skin, we rolled back onto the bed. My move to grab him again was stopped, my wide gaze meeting his. He kept our eyes locked as he crawled slowly down my body, kissing every inch of skin.

"What are..."

He placed his hands underneath the back of my thighs, pressing my legs upwards, so I had no choice but to lay my feet flat on the bed, my knees bent. My words were lost when I felt his warmth breath span my wet lips, my need already soaking me to the point I felt it drip down my thighs.

The cry that came pouring from my mouth could have woken the dead. He kept me trapped against the bed, his lips and teeth teasing me to the point I lost all concept of time. I pressed my hand against my mouth, biting down on the skin between my thumb and index as he dipped his tongue into my heat.

My hips jerked as he sped up the pace of his tongue, nibbling as he sucked, and I sobbed at the speed of which my orgasm exploded.

He crawled back up my body, kissing my collarbone before placing his lips over mine.

I kissed him deeply, tasting myself on his lips and tongue, and it only aroused me more, combined with the feeling of his length bumping against me ready and hard.

"Please, Sullivan."

His gaze echoed my eagerness. "Wait." He slid from me to grab his jeans.

I fell back against the sheets, my breath finally returning. I turned my head to watch as he extracted a condom from his wallet. "Do you keep those in bulk?"

"Shush," he blushed. "You're ruining the moment."

Laughing, I reached forward to grab the foil packet, tearing into it easily. "Let me make it up to you."

The muscle in his jaw jumped as I rolled the condom over him then slid back, motioning him forward with the flick of my index finger. His body moved over mine again, and for a split second, we paused, our gazes connecting.

"Are you okay?"

I felt my breath catch at the words. "I'm more than okay."

He grinned, the action lighting up his face.

He swooped down to capture my lips. The kiss mixed with his words melted me, and I threw my arms around his neck.

Fumbling around, he wrapped a firm hand around the base of his dick and slid the head against my wet slit.

I licked my lips, throwing my head back with a sigh as he pushed slowly inside of me

.

He shifted his hands on either side of my head, his eyes watching me carefully for any sign of discomfort as he began to push inch by inch.

I scraped my nails down his back, urging him into motion with my hips and teasing bites from my teeth against his neck. "Please."

At my plea, he finally moved, pulling all the way back out before thrusting again, the pace slow and torturous. I squealed in surprise when he suddenly rolled us into a sitting position.

He kissed my mouth softly. "Still good?"

I nodded, moving up and down his length and smiled as he groaned in response. "Please..." I threw my head back when he lifted his hips to meet mine.

He bit down on my collarbone, the pace increased, and I sighed at the feeling of his sweaty body meeting my own.

I couldn't help but run my nails down his back again, this time harder, and as he thrust into me again, his right hand found my hair, jerking my head back.

His name spilled from my lips at the same time as my orgasm erupted, and I had to cling to him as my body shook from the force.

His grip remained firm on my hair, Sullivan pressing his face into the crook of my neck.

Two thrusts later, he followed me into the abyss.

I collapsed against him, and the motion sent us tumbling back onto the bed, my body falling onto his. I rested on top of him, my chest heaving .

"Was that okay?" His voice was deep and laced with the beginnings of sleep.

I kissed the side of his face before nuzzling his neck with my nose. "It was perfect."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Sullivan chuckled. Sitting on the bed, he placed a hand on my shoulder, nudging me. "I cooked us breakfast."

"It's too early. Five more minutes." I squealed as he tickled me and twisted myself onto my back, trying to knock his hands away from my sides. "Okay! Okay! I give!"

"That's what I thought." He brushed his lips against mine then rose from the bed. "Come on, I made bacon and eggs. Do you want orange juice or milk?"

"Um, orange juice."

He turned to head back into the kitchen, pausing in the doorway. "Stop staring at my ass."

Blushing, I shrugged. "Sorry, not sorry." I let my eyes linger on him. "I'm going to brush my teeth. I'll be right there. "

Yawning, I stumbled into the bathroom. I blushed at spotting the bite marks on my collarbone. I turned on the water as cold as I could get it, hurriedly brushing my teeth.

"Rory?"

"Coming!" I flicked off the light, quick to change into comfortable shorts and his discarded tee shirt before I entered the kitchen. I noticed his quick survey as I walked past him. "What? You didn't think I was going to come in here naked, did you?"

"Is there any way to answer that so I won't get slapped?"

Smiling, I accepted the glass he held in his hand. I sipped the juice and eyed the table he had set up with plates of bacon, eggs, and toast. "I thought you only cooked bacon and eggs."

"I fibbed a little."

"I'd say a lot." I inched upward on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek and then slid into a seat at the table. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He sat down across from me, and for a few minutes, we filled our plates, eating in silence.

I shoved a piece of bacon into my mouth, chewing thoughtfully. I glanced up to find him watching me and paused mid-chew. "What?"

"Nothing." He lowered his glass. "I love watching you eat."

I picked up another piece of bacon and threw it at him. He easily caught it. "You should eat." I snatched up my fork and stabbed the eggs on my plate. "Growing boys need fuel."

"You sound like my mother."

"Trust me; I'm nothing like your mother," I snickered.

"I fully realize that."

The obvious meaning behind his words flustered me. "About last night..."

"I'll find a way to make this work. We'll make it work."

"You're leaving."

He laid down his fork, wiping his mouth with his napkin before he made his way around the table to squat next to me, resting his hands on my knees. "Rory, look at me."

Slowly, I turned my head to meet his eyes.

"I want to date you, distance or no distance." He reached out to grab my chin, so I couldn't look away. "Don't you want to be with me?"

"What if we try and it's not enough?"

"It's enough; you have to trust me on that."

"This isn't easy for me. I've never let people into my life."

Releasing me, he rested his weight onto his knees. "Why is that?"

"My childhood wasn't perfect. It was hard. Growing up alone was hard. I've spent so much time moving and not looking back that I've forgotten what it feels to have anything meaningful. Do we have to talk about this right now? "

"No, of course not. Do you need more orange juice? How about some coffee?" He stood slowly, passing a hand over my hair. "Coffee sounds good right about now."

I grabbed his hand and pressed my face into the palm of his hand. "I want this to work, too."

"I know." He pressed a kiss into the top of my head and stepped back when I let him go. "Coffee, coffee..." He glanced around. "You don't have a coffee pot."

I winced shamefully. "It broke the other day."

"No problem. I'll run down to Starbucks."

"I might be on a tabloid most wanted list now, but I'm pretty sure I can make it there without being noticed," I smirked. I rose from the table and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I'll be right back."

"Excuse me."

I glanced over my shoulder to stare at a woman standing behind me in line.

"Is this you? "

My gaze drifted to the magazine in her hand. "I don't think so." I turned my attention back to the line, moving forward as another person was served.

"This is you! You're dating Sullivan Masters! What's he like? Is he as sweet as everyone says? I bet you're having sex. I can't say I blame you."

I turned quickly to glare at her. "Is that the kind of thing you usually ask a random stranger?"

"You're not a random stranger." She shook the magazine at me. "You're dating Sullivan Masters."

"That's a trash magazine."

"Honey, if the story is false, these pictures say all we need to know. I know I certainly don't kiss my good friends that way."

"I'm surprised you have any friends." I stepped up to the counter. "Can I get a tall vanilla latte and a venti caramel macchiato, please?"

"Aw, you're getting his favorite drink; that's so cute."

"Lady, if you don't leave me alone, you're going to be wearing it."

"Well, don't you have a nasty attitude?"

Turning to the counter, I handed the cashier my debit card.

"Yeah, it matches your face," I muttered. I nodded my thanks as the cashier gave me back my card. Ignoring anything else the woman had to say, I shifted to the side to wait, and as if sensing my frustration, I didn't have to wait long until my order was ready .

Holding the drinks, I went backwards out of the door. A flash of lights went off.

"Rory! Over here!"

I turned too fast, flinching instinctively. There were two of them; paparazzi, clearly not local. One had a camera already raised, the other holding a phone filming me.

"Are you and Sullivan living together now?"

"Is this the real thing or a summer fling?"

I stepped past them, jaw clenched, walking fast. One of them tried to keep up, calling after me.

"Rory, come on! We want your side of the story!"

I stopped short and turned around to face them. "You don't have my side of the story, and you won't get it standing outside a Starbucks with a lens shoved in my face. He's not here, so why don't you guys find someone else to pester?"

"Is the tall coffee his?"

"They're both mine. I'm thirsty."

The photographer laughed, another series of flashes went off.

"Seriously, stop it. I doubt magazines want my picture; they won't sell without him in them."

"Thanks for looking out for us, but we know how to do our jobs." The same man spoke up again, his shutter clicking. "Obviously you don't own a mirror, gorgeous. These will sell, trust me. "

"Whatever." I headed down the sidewalk, mindful they were following me at a short distance.

It was by some miracle I was able to get into my car without spilling the coffees or tossing them. I let out a sigh of relief when I finally pulled into traffic. Weaving in and out in case others were following, I managed to make it back to my apartment in record time.

Sullivan greeted me at the door with a smile, but it quickly turned into a frown at the look on my face. "What's wrong?" He shut the door and took his drink that I extended to him. "Did something happen?"

"If you call being asked personal questions and having my picture taken as something happening, then yeah.

" I turned around on my heel. "This woman, this random stranger, asked me all these questions about you and made a comment about our sex life...

" I threw my hands up. "You are so lucky I'm not a jealous person because she would be wearing my latte right now! "

He smirked from over the rim of his cup.

My eyes narrowed. "So, help me, if you're laughing at me..."

"How'd you know this was my favorite?"

Blushing, I paused to take another sip of my coffee. "I have the internet, and I own a phone. Quit trying to distract me from being angry."

"I'm sorry." He sat his cup onto the table and opened up his arms. "Come here. "

"No."

"Rory? Come here, baby."

"I said no, Eggs." I laughed when he blinked in surprise. "You would not believe some of the shit they put on the internet. Eggs, what a nickname." I smiled coyly before sipping my latte. "Let me guess, you ate too many eggs as a kid?"

"Actually, I..."

"No, wait. You got caught sleeping with eggs in your bed thinking they'd hatch chickens?" I shrieked as he came forward, turning toward the kitchen, but he was faster, wrapping his arms around my waist to pull me against him. "I'm going to spill my coffee!"

"Then I suggest putting it down," he growled in my ear, "or else you're going to get it all over your nice bed sheets."

"Think rather highly of yourself, do you?"

"I didn't hear any complaints last night. Pretty sure those words coming out of your mouth were praise enough without me saying anything." Promptly, he plucked my cup out of my hand and sat it next to his cup on the table. He picked me up, slinging me over his shoulder, and soundly slapped my ass.

"Sullivan Carl Masters the Second, put me down!"

"Lorelai Marie Jones, you did not say my full name!"

"I did! Now put me down!"

"What's the magic word?"

"Penis. "

He almost dropped me, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "It does start with a P."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I clutched the bottom of his shirt tightly with my fists. "I couldn't hear you from all the blood rushing to my head!"

My response only made him laugh harder, his reaction making me laugh as well, and I gasped as his knees buckled, sending us crashing to the floor. I grinned, breathing hard as I pressed his arms flat above his head. "What's the magic word?"

"I believe you said it was penis."

"Your penis?" I chuckled, matching his grin with one of my own, and straddled his hips. "What a dirty boy you are, Sully. What would your fans think if they heard you talk that way?"

"To be honest, my mind isn't exactly on my fans right now." He lifted his hips as if to demonstrate his meaning, and it made my breath catch.

"Shame. Though I'm pretty sure my mind is in the exact same place as yours."

"Good to know."

I released his hands, and my eyes closed as his hands drifted up my jean-covered legs. My tee shirt gave him easy access, and a moan poured out of my throat at feeling his warm hands discover my bare breasts.

"You went out without a bra on? "

"Mm-hmm." I gasped when he pinched my right nipple and opened my eyes to glare down at him. "Those are attached, sir."

"Trust me, I know." His smirk was dangerous. "Besides, you like that."

"There's a lot of stuff I like." I placed a soft kiss on his chin, trailing my lips up his jaw line and lingering inches above his ear. "Stuff that would make a good boy blush."

Before I could react, he rolled us, this time trapping my arms to the carpet. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

I wiggled under him as he dipped his head to nip at my throat. "Sullivan..."

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm going to miss you." My eyes opened as I felt him roll away, his body leaving mine completely. I pushed myself up on my elbows. He sat beside me, his arms folded over his bent knees. "What is it?"

"I wish you wouldn't say that."

"Why not? It's true."

"We agreed to try to make this work. Why are you fighting it?"

"Fighting? I—"

"I want you to come with me, back to LA." He shifted his gaze to me. "I want you to live with me. I'll help you find work. I thought earlier that's what you were agreeing with me to do, so how can you miss me when you're going to be with me? "

"I have never said I was coming with you. We've never talked about me living with you. You're the one that said distance or no distance."

"I know but, I assumed you'd agree, especially after last night."

"Last night was wonderful." I nervously shifted my hand through my hair. "That doesn't mean things are signed, sealed, and delivered. It was sex."

He stood with a grunt, suddenly towering over me. "That's all that was to you?"

"What else should I call it?"

"Sex between two people who care for each other isn't just sex. It's more than that!"

"I'm sorry, but I guess we're not on the same page." Standing, I propped my hands on my hips, mindful that his height gave him several inches over me. "You seem to have this fairy tale version of our relationship revolving in your head. I have a life here. You can't expect me to-"

"You said you were moving soon, that you do every two years."

"Do you think that if I agree to go back to the US with you that I'll stop moving? That I'll settle down and be the perfect girlfriend for you? I'm sorry, but that's not me. That's not who I am."

"Who are you then?" Sullivan spat back. "I suddenly don't have a damn clue. Every face you show me turns out to be a fake. "

"Fake? You're one to talk."

"What the hell does that mean?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Let's calm down. I don't want to fight."

"I asked you a question, Rory; what the hell does that mean?" Out of frustration, he kicked the table, the cups shaking. "Answer me!"

The action, one so unlike any side of him I had ever seen, startled me. I stared at him, taking a step back with my hands raised. "Calm down or leave."

"If I walk out that door, I'm not coming back. Do you want that?"

"No, I meant it when I said I care about you. I'm open to working on something more, but I can't simply up and move. I thought we were going to take things slow, maybe try long distance first, and -"

"I didn't think you'd actually want to do that."

"We've known each for two weeks! And now you're asking me to move in with you halfway across the world!"

He ran his hand over his hair, letting out a long sigh. "I don't know if I can do this. It hurts to think I can be this close and not touch you."

"What are you talking about? You can touch me whenever you want."

"There's a difference, I see it in your face. Last night, I felt it, but now... "

"I'm sorry." I watched him turn away. "I wish things were different, but they're not." Inside, I panicked, but I forced myself to remain standing where I was. "Where are you going?" The whispered words came out the exact moment he swung the front door open.

"I need some time to think."

The door shut behind him with a soft click.

I stood there staring at it as if any second it would open again. The silence that filled the room felt familiar. He'd left me. Again.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

I couldn't sleep. It had been several hours since he had left.

I cursed myself for thinking about him. Switching sides, I glanced at the alarm clock, the bright red numbers taunting me.

My apartment was dark. I had called out of work, telling Danny I was sick, but we both knew better.

I had left the front door unlocked in case he returned without my knowing.

Deep inside, I realized he might never come back.

I sat up at the sound of the door opening and shutting. Slipping free from my sheets, I tiptoed into my living room and froze at the sight of the figure standing in the darkness. I knew right away it wasn't Sullivan, the large frame alarmingly different .

"Get out of my apartment." My voice shook as I took several steps back in case I needed to take a break for the bathroom or the kitchen. "Whoever you are, I'm armed."

"Somehow I doubt that."

The living room light flipped on, and I blinked quickly to focus on the man standing there. He was bald with a goatee, tall, and broad-shouldered. By the mere sight of his muscular frame, I knew I wasn't going to be able to make it far before he was upon me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Colin. You must be Rory."

"Colin what?"

"Wilson."

"Well, no offense, Colin Wilson, but maybe you should get the fuck out of my apartment before I call the cops." Gaining a bit of confidence, I crossed my arms and tried my best to look intimidating. "Do you always enter apartments uninvited?"

He chuckled, glancing around before he focused back on me. "Do you always leave your door unlocked? Besides, Sully invited me. Well, before your major throw-down earlier this morning. I came to get his jacket."

I hesitated. "He told me he was coming back."

"Why? So, you can fight again and tear him up more than you already have?" He shook his head. "Besides, he wouldn't make it back in one piece to your place anyway."

Fear suddenly took the place of my shock. "Is he hurt? What happened? "

"If you call stone drunk being hurt, then yeah."

I frowned. "What can I do to help?"

"You can get his jacket for me. I need to get back. He's at Venom by himself."

"What's he doing there?"

"Your friend, Alice, found my number. She called me after he became too drunk to

stand up on his own. I have to tell you, you've worked my friend over good, lady. You're a piece of work."

I twisted my hands nervously. "I never meant to hurt him. Things are complicated. We're from two different worlds, and..." I stopped when he interrupted me by laughing. "What?"

"What gives you the right to decide that for him?"

"You're angry because he's your friend, I get that. I'm okay with that, hate me if it makes you feel better, but it won't change my decision."

He stared at me with pure disbelief written all over his face. "That's great for you, but Sully adores you, and he wants to be with you. That's not going to change either."

"What would you have me do?"

"I'd say follow your heart, but we both know you're not listening to anything it has to say. Are you sure it's beating?"

"That's uncalled for, Mr. Wilson."

"No, what's uncalled for stringing my best friend along and trampling his heart. Was that the plan all along? Get a celebrity to fall for you then sell him out after your fun was over?"

"Fuck you, you don't know shit about me. We're done talking." I walked into the kitchen and returned with Sullivan's jacket. "I believe this is what you were looking for."

Colin took it from me but paused when I didn't let go. "Is there something else you

want to deny while I'm here?"

"I want to come with you."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

I tugged the jacket toward me. "I work there; I can get you in and out faster without making much of a scene. You're going to need me." I released the jacket. "Please."

Frowning, he studied me for a few seconds. "Fine, let's go."

Venom was packed to the rafters, but I barely noticed as Colin steered me toward the bar. Sullivan was slumped over on a stool, Alice behind the bar attempting to talk to him.

She looked up in relief when she spotted us. "About time you showed back up!" She gestured at Sullivan resting his head on the bar. "I cut him off twenty minutes ago."

"I'm fine!" He swayed back, almost tipping off the stool, but Colin reached out to hold him steady. He glanced over his shoulder. "Hey, buddy!"

"Hey, man. It's time to get you out of here."

"But I'm not ready!"

Colin clamped his hand down on Sullivan's shoulder. "Let's go and get you into bed."

"Hey, my jacket! You found it."

"Of course I did. You told me where to find it."

"Right, I did! I..." He finally spotted me. "Why are you here?"

"I work here. Please, let's go."

"I love you!" He shouted the words, shoving away from the bar, and Colin steadied him as people around us took notice of the commotion. "I love you so much, Lorelai."

Cursing, I ignored the whispers that managed to float towards us from over the loud music. "I'm going to have to speak to whoever is DJing about this music. It's-" I jumped when Sullivan grabbed my arms.

"Tell me you love me."

"You two can be all lovey-dovey in the car. We need to go before we cause a scene." Colin glanced around, nodding at a couple of people looking our way. "More than we already have. "

I looked around, shifting nervously. "Yes, please."

"Not until she tells me how she feels!" He tightened his grip on my arms. "I want to hear it, Rory!" He chuckled, swaying slightly. "Damn, I have had way too much to drink!"

"Yes, we can tell," I sighed. "I love you. Let's go."

"Aw, you don't mean it!" He let me go and grabbed a random club attendee passing by. "She doesn't love me, dude."

I managed to wedge myself between them and pushed the man away who scrambled back into the crowd unnoticed. I grabbed his face and pressed my lips against his. "It's time to go." I couldn't help but laugh as he tried to kiss me again. "Stop that!"

Colin grunted, glaring at me before he focused on his friend. "Sully, if I have to carry you out over my shoulder, I will."

"No need." I grabbed Sullivan's hand and puckered my lips, laughing as he smiled and followed me. "Let's go."

"Don't forget my jacket!"

"I've got your damn jacket!" Shaking his head, Colin followed us.

"Here we go. One more step." I helped Colin shift Sullivan onto the bed. I watched him flop onto it, his arms and legs sprawled out. "Can you get some water from the kitchen, please?" I directed the request to Colin. "There's also a bottle of Tylenol in the cabinet above the sink."

He disappeared, leaving me to strip Sullivan down to his boxers and pull back the covers on the bed.

"You're... so trying to get me naked." His eyes were closed, the words coming out slurred. "I knew you couldn't resist me."

"You're going to have one hell of a headache in the morning."

"Good. It'll take attention away from how bad my heart hurts."

Frowning, I watched him snuggle into my pillow. Colin reappeared beside me, and I took the glass along with the Tylenol. I sat the glass on the end table, lowering myself beside him. I retrieved two pills then placed the bottle beside the glass. "Sullivan..."

"Go away. "

"I will as soon as you take some medicine and drink some water." He grunted again, his face pressed into my pillow. "Come on, you'll feel better once you do. How about a hot shower?"

"No shower." He rolled over onto his back, reaching out to caress my face. "You're so beautiful."

"You're so drunk. Take these." I passed him the water. "That's it; there you go." I watched him chase down the pills with the whole glass. "Good." I took it from him. "Do you want some more water?"

"Stop babying me." His words were stern but came out in a whisper. "Stay with me?"

I glanced over my shoulder and was surprised to see Colin staring down at me.

He retrieved the glass from me. "I left his jacket on the couch. I'm going to take off now. I'll call his cell phone in the morning and check on him."

"Are you sure? The couch pulls out into a bed. I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you were here, or..." I started to rise from the bed but paused when he grabbed my wrist to stop me.

"I think you have it all under control. I'll get out of your hair. I'll call you tomorrow, Eggs." Colin patted Sullivan on the leg.

"I'm sorry finally meeting you wasn't under better circumstances, but for what it's worth, I do care about him."

"I know. You'll work it out." He patted his leg again, chuckling as the other man grunted again from the pillow.

I followed Colin to the front door, locking it behind him. I walked back to the bedroom, lingering in the doorway, unsure of what to say or do next.

Sullivan didn't lift his head. "I can feel you watching me."

"Is there anything else I can do for you? Are you sure you don't want a shower or maybe some coffee?"

"Could you turn off the lights?"

I flipped them off, standing there in the dark. I could hear him moving around on the bed. "Anything else?"

"Yes, you can lay down with me."

Ignoring how bad I was suddenly shaking, I slipped into the covers beside him. He threw his arm over my waist, pulling me close, and laid his head onto my chest. I slid my arms around his shoulders, and we were content to remain silent in the darkness.

"Rory..."

I pressed my lips softly against the top of his head. "What do you need?"

His arms tightened around me. "I need you."

I froze as his hand slipped under my shirt and flattened against my stomach. It sent shivers up my spine at the same time a delicious heat sparked in the pit of my stomach.

"Let me touch you." He lifted his head to bury it between my neck and shoulder, his breath hitting my skin tantalizingly. He skimmed his fingers against the curve of my

right breast. "I need you so much."

"This isn't right, you're drunk."

"No, let's not take advantage of me again; we can't have that."

"I never took advantage of you."

"You didn't?" He lifted his head, and his gaze caught mine. He smirked, his eyes watchful as his hand covered my breast completely. "You're not wearing a bra again."

"I was in bed, and I was in a hurry to get to you."

"Don't you want me?"

I stroked the side of his face tenderly. "That's not the problem. You should get some rest. I have a feeling tomorrow isn't going to be too pleasant for you."

"I don't care about that."

"It's the alcohol talking."

"No, it's me. The alcohol's giving me the courage to keep going." He moved his hand down my chest to linger on my hip. He pressed his pelvis against mine, smiling at the strangled sigh that came pouring out of my throat. "Let me make love to you."

I gathered up enough strength to push him away. I freed myself of the sheets, my feet hitting the cold floor. "I need to... I need some water."

"Rory..."

I rushed from the bedroom. Breathing hard, I flattered myself against the refrigerator. It took me several minutes to compose myself, my hands shaking while I filled a glass with water. I forced myself to sip it slowly, and once I finished, I walked back into the bedroom.

I paused in the doorway. He was sound asleep, my pillow clutched tightly against his chest.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

A loud curse woke me. I peered over the back of the couch to see Sullivan holding a hand against his forehead, his other hand gripping the bedroom door frame. Wincing, he looked up to find me watching him.

"Damn door frame walked into me."

I stood from the couch. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit by a truck, and then a plane..." He moved slowly into the living room, his hand rubbing his forehead. "And maybe a nuclear bomb, I'm not sure."

"Can I get you something?"

"An explanation would be nice." He lowered his hand. "Why did you sleep on the couch? The bed is big enough for two people."

"You needed to sleep. I thought you would appreciate the room. "

"After several shots of whiskey, last night's events are a little fuzzy, but I'm pretty sure I asked you to stay with me."

I stiffened at the hard tone of his voice. "I'm pretty sure you remember trying to feel me up, too. The last thing we needed to do was make this more complicated than it already is."

"We've had sex. I don't see how one more romp in the sack would have messed you up more."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm not going to fight with you, especially not with the state you're in right now."

"I'm fine." He growled but lifted his hand back to his forehead again. "I have a headache the size of Earth, but I'm fine."

"There's Tylenol by the bed. Enough time has passed that taking more won't hurt you."

"I'm touched that you care."

I flinched at the coolness in his voice, struggling not to attack back. "I do care."

"You've got a funny way of showing it."

"Why'd you get drunk? Colin came here—"

"Shit." He glanced around quickly, frowning as stared down at his boxers. "I forgot all about him. Where's my phone?"

"I put it on the end table."

He disappeared into the bedroom, staying there for several minutes, until he returned dressed in his jeans and his tee shirt.

"Is everything okay?"

"He's with his family right now. I'll call him in an hour to come get me."

I studied him. "Do you want me to drive you somewhere?"

"If I say yes and get you to drive me to the hotel, that'll only give the press more fuel for the fire, and we both know how much you hate that."

"I'm only trying to be nice."

Sullivan let out a short bark of laughter. "Thanks, I appreciate it. Better late than never I suppose."

"Why are you saying these things to me?" I whispered, flinching again at the fact I felt tears gather on my lashes.

He let out a long sigh. "Because I want you to know exactly how I feel, Rory. I'm hurt, and it's not my head that's killing me."

I didn't ask to come here and fall in love with you.

I never imagined that would ever happen, not even after that first night, but it did. Sometimes you don't get a choice."

"You always have a choice; people feel things all the time. It's whether you act on them or not that separates humans from the animals."

"Are you listening to yourself? I mean, the words come out, but do you hear them? "

"I understand perfectly what I..."

Frowning, he took a step toward me. "I don't think you do. You're placing love on the same shelf as what to make for dinner or what movie to watch. Those are choices. Love, that's on a shelf all on its own."

"I wouldn't know." I trembled as he made his way around the couch, reaching out to

stroke the top of my head. "Please don't..."

"Whoever he was, he was an idiot for hurting you."

I felt a wave of embarrassment when I started to cry. He said nothing, watching me for a few seconds before he pulled me close and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. He rocked me while I cried, my fingers clutching the fabric of his tee shirt.

"It's okay, Rory. I've got you." He pressed several kisses to the crown of my head, continuing to stroke my hair. "Let it out. I'm here."

I pressed my face into his chest. "Why?"

"To be honest, I don't know. I could tell you it's because I love you, but I don't think that would mean anything to you right now."

I shoved away from him, a hard glare on my face. "This isn't some movie, this isn't... This isn't where you come in all gallant and noble to save me!"

He immediately matched my loud tone with one of his own. "I don't know what to save you from, Rory!" He threw his hands up. "Someone else? Yourself? You keep pushing me away!"

"I'm angry! That's why I'm pushing you away!"

"You're not angry, you're scared. You're scared because this is real, and you don't know what the hell to do with that."

I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out. My fists clenched at my sides.

"You feel it, Rory. Don't lie to me, not now."

I pointed to the door, heart thudding. "Leave."

Before I could move, he reached out and pulled me into him. "Tell me you don't care," he whispered. "Look me in the eyes and say it meant nothing. Say I'm merely some guy you slept with, and this is over."

I struggled for breath, for words. My gaze dropped to his shirt, then to his hand curled around mine. "I..." My voice cracked. "I wish I could."

"Say it, and I'll go."

I looked up at him, eyes brimming. "I'm trying to protect myself. That's all I've ever known how to do."

"I know, but I'm not here to break you."

I hated how warm his arms felt around me, how in that moment I didn't want to deny anything he requested of me. "I don't want to need anyone."

"You don't need me, but I'm here anyway."

"I don't know how to do this. "

"You don't have to know. Stop pretending you don't feel anything." His hand tightened on my back. "Say it."

"I don't know if I'm ready to say all of it."

"You don't have to say everything," he murmured. "Say what's real."

"I think I'm falling in love with you."

SIX MONTHS LATER

I snuggled deeper into the sheets, content to be enveloped by the down comforter. I released a loud sigh, burying my head into my pillow, and smiled at the feeling of Sullivan's arm circling my waist.

His soft lips skimmed the slope of my neck before pressing warmly on the spot below my ear. "Baby," he whispered, "it's time to get up."

"No, get back in bed with me."

"As tempting as that is..." He shifted to twist me flat on my back and slid easily between my legs. "I have a meeting in an hour with my agent, and you have another interview to show up to on time. "

"Where's the fun in that?"

My pout made him laugh, and he pressed a kiss against my lips before he slipped from the bed. "Get in the shower. I'll put on some coffee."

"How about..." Sitting up, I didn't attempt to catch the sheet as it fell to my bare waist. "You forget the coffee and join me in the shower instead?"

He groaned, rubbing a quick hand over his face. "Rory, you know as well as I do that if I join you, we'll probably never leave the house today."

"You act like that's a bad thing."

"Definitely not." He leaned over to place a kiss on the top of my head. "I'm going to go make coffee. I could use a cup."

I flopped back on the bed. "I might cancel my interview today."

He paused from picking up a discarded shirt from the floor. "Why? You've been back in the States for a month now, and you've only been to two interviews. Are they going that badly?"

"I wouldn't say bad..." I toyed with the sheet. "Nothing's clicked, that's all." I slipped out of the bed, bending down to grab a shirt by my feet and slipped it over my head. I grinned as I caught him watching me. "Having second thoughts about that shower?"

"You're going to be the death of me. "

"Certainly not. If you died, who would be around for me to tie to the bed and have my wicked way with?"

Ignoring the news reporter on the television, I concentrated on the article documenting another random celebrity's wild weekend.

I turned the page, pausing at the picture of Sullivan and Colin, the article describing an upcoming Two of Hearts episode.

It was typical, talking mostly about the characters and intricate plot, but it was a smaller picture of him with a skinny blonde that caught my attention.

"Sullivan Masters and co-star, Scarlet Nix, of the upcoming flick 'Beautiful Lies' do promotion in New York. Sources claim the two share more than acting together, and it looks to be the start of a hot romance."

I snorted out loud. "Trust me, World News, he prefers brunettes."

" I tossed the magazine into the trash can and dumped what was left of my coffee in the sink.

I was out the door in less than thirty minutes, dressed in comfortable black slacks and a white tank top, my hair slicked back into a high ponytail .

Traffic was typically busy, and I tapped the steering wheel to the beat of the pop song playing on the radio. Sitting at the jammed red light gave me time to think.

In the end, I had decided to finish up my contract at Venom.

We had spent every waking hour communicating by phone and email, both of us testing the waters of our new relationship.

The long break between Australia and moving in with him had cooled the interest in the media about me, most reporters chalking me up to a fling that he had left behind. We had done well laying low.

Now I was in Los Angeles, and the world was my oyster, so he teased me.

Living with him was an easy adjustment after a few weeks, but it was driving me crazy.

I wasn't the kind of person to lie around and depend on someone else.

I missed being a DJ. So far, the clubs I had seen did nothing to capture my attention, and the people were less than friendly until they realized who exactly they were talking to.

Word of my arrival in LA had hit the underground running.

When I arrived at a club named Euphoria, it was a struggle to get out of the car instead of doing an illegal U-Turn and returning home.

Euphoria was one of the largest clubs I had ever seen from the outside, nothing meeting my gaze but looming dark brick and glass windows.

The stone steps lead up to two large wood doors.

I nodded at the doorman as he opened one. He eyed me but said nothing.

I put on my best smile at the woman standing behind the hostess podium. "I'm here for an eleven o'clock DJ interview? I'm—"

"DJ Fetish!" She grinned widely, her earrings dangling against her long streaked red and black hair. "I have been waiting forever to meet you. I mean, I totally dig your work. When I heard you were coming, I was—"

"Gina, that's enough." A tall redhead made her way up to us, and I relaxed at hearing her familiar voice. She smiled, displaying perfect, white teeth. "I'm Vanessa Wexler. We spoke on the phone. Forgive Gina. She can be a bit overwhelming when she's had too much caffeine."

"It's nice to meet you, Gina."

"Nice to meet you, too."

Vanessa motioned me to follow her. "I looked over the resume the second you faxed it to me. I'm a bit surprised you don't already have work lined up."

"I'm picky when it comes to where I work." My eyes flickered over the space, looking around at the multiple floors. The main level was ready for the upcoming

crowd, several staff members stocking the bar.

"The doors never open before ten. We close at three." Vanessa walked at a steady pace. "We don't approve of drugs, solicitation, or sexual activity near the bar area or on the main floor. "

"What about the other areas?"

She shot me an amused look from over her shoulder. "Solicitation is never appropriate and carries a heavy penalty that Bruno at the door graciously takes care of."

"You run short hours; how do you keep this place afloat?"

"We're the hottest nightclub in all of Los Angeles.

We have been for the past five years. The line at the door always starts building at eight on the dot.

" Vanessa laughed at my raised eyebrows.

"People want the best, and they'll do anything to get it.

We cater to celebrities and regulars, although we do go the extra mile for celebrities, hence the three floors. "

"Considering the area, that's understandable."

"Main floor is open to anyone. The second floor is for staff, and level three is for VIP only."

I shifted uncomfortably. "To be honest, I didn't bring my equipment if you're looking for me to audition. I'm sorry if I'm wasting your time."

"I never waste my time, Ms. Jones. If I had thought that about you, I would have declined our interview by phone instead of canceling a business meeting and making you drive all the way down here."

"You canceled a meeting in order to meet with me?"

Vanessa shrugged nonchalantly. "We do what we have to in this business to stay ahead. I can't have someone else scooping up the best DJ in the world right now, can I? "

"Do you have an interview with this DJ after me?" I chuckled. "I sure would like to meet them."

"I asked you to come down to talk to you; that's how I hire people in my line of work.

I look for motivation, confidence, how relaxed they are, and how they deal with topics such as the mention of sex and drugs.

You can tell a lot about a person's business persona simply by looking at their personal one. "

"And now that you've seen mine?"

"I want to offer you the job. Euphoria is open every night except Sundays. The backup DJ will cover your other night off. I require all employees to be here by eight for setup and to attend any meetings. The dress code is strict. You'll be expected to wear black shorts and a black tank displaying our logo, unless we're hosting a party

or important function. "

"How do you pay your employees?"

"You're paid every Friday through a bank of your choosing. Cash tips are handed out after closing. Upper level employees such as the DJ and the bouncers are given a bonus of a thousand dollars with perfect attendance after six months. Tax taken out, of course."

I almost swallowed my tongue but managed to regain my composure. "Of course."

"If you need some time to think about this... "

"No!" I objected loudly with a shake of my head. I blushed at seeing Vanessa's amused look and cleared my throat. "I'll take the job. I'd be honored."

"I believe the pleasure is all ours. Come with me, and we'll fill out the necessary paperwork."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

Every single thing I researched about Euphoria told me the same thing. For five years in a row, anyone who was someone in LA wanted to be seen there. It was the number one spot for nightlife, and it didn't get much bigger when it came to parties and after-award show shindigs.

When he returned home, he found me in the kitchen humming at the stove. "Hey, baby." He tugged at his tie, shrugging off his jacket to hang it on a chair at the table. "Something smells fantastic."

"I made your favorite, chicken stir-fry." I lowered the heat on the skillet. "I have great news. I took the job at Euphoria."

He slipped his tie free and tossed it on top of the jacket. "That is great, but isn't it a little more exposed than what you were aiming for? "

"Maybe." I stirred the chicken. "But when I went for my interview, it felt right. It's amazing, the number one place to be in LA. If I make it spinning at Euphoria, there won't be a single club on this planet that won't hire me."

"Any club would be crazy not to hire you, Rory, but that's not the point. I remember a conversation we had not too long ago about how you wanted to stay below the radar."

"Well, I seem to remember our conversation was aimed more at the fact I wanted us to be below the radar, not my job."

He actually scoffed out loud. "So we're never going out together? You're never

coming to my premieres? In case you've forgotten, the media already knows about you. I think my sister has a few newspapers to prove my point."

"As far as they're concerned, I was some random girl you met on vacation, and I'm still in Australia."

"Well, you're not, and as soon as your job starts printing fliers and heating up promotion, the media will track you down again."

I shoved the skillet off the eye and turned to face him.

"Okay, first off, I never show my face on fliers." I counted on my fingers. "Secondly, I go by a stage name. You've got some nerve to tell me what to do when it comes to the media. You certainly can't keep them out of your business, so don't tell me how to handle mine! "

"That was a bit uncalled for; I'm not trying to pick a fight with you."

"I told you that I won't give up my job to be with you, and you said you would never ask me to do that. I've finally found a place, and you don't have anything positive to say?"

"I told you I thought it was great! Forgive me for being concerned."

"If I want to hear concern, I'll call my mother, and we know that'll never happen!"

Sighing, Sullivan leaned against the fridge.

"I'm aware that she passed away when you were a child, but other than that, you never talk about her.

You never tell me anything about your childhood.

I think I've been very understanding about everything.

I'm sorry my concern came out wrong, but I'm not doing this. "

My eyes narrowed. "Doing what? You and me? Are you dumping me?"

"I never said that! Why are we fighting?"

"I'm not sure."

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, kissing the top of my head as I pressed my cheek to his chest. "Let's eat dinner, have some wine, and talk about this later."

I squeezed his waist. "How was work?"

"Boring. If I have to do one more interview where they ask me what my favorite color is, I'm going to scream."

"You poor thing. That sounds horrible. "

"Yeah, yeah," he smiled, rolling his eyes. "You finish the food, and I'll get the dishes."

"Left are the bathrooms." Gina Moretti, who had re-introduced herself to me as a savant of all things sexy and sometimes procurement manager, was giving me the tour, pointing left to right. "As you saw the other day, this office where Vanessa lurks is on the third floor."

"I do not lurk."

"Yes, you do." She wiggled her fingers at Vanessa as she walked by with a folder in her hand, waiting until the woman disappeared before smiling at me. "She's a vampire."

"I'm sorry?"

"Pale skin, doesn't show up to work until after dark, and sometimes, she sleeps in her office. Oh, and she hisses a lot, that's a personal favorite of mine. Plus, she has the sexual appetite of a-"

"Whoa, that's enough!" I held my hands up.

"Eh, you can't help but discover this or that about your coworkers, it's the perks of working in such a popular place. You should hear the stories about some of the celebs that come here. I could-"

"Keep those to yourself, and get back to work?" Vanessa walked by again, disappearing into the stockroom behind the bar.

"See how stealthy she was? We didn't hear her come back. Vampire."

I couldn't help but laugh at the woman's silly expression. "Okay, moving on. Where do I set up my stuff?"

"Oh, your booth!" She scurried away, and I followed immediately.

We approached a room on the second floor, and when she swung open the door, my eyes widened. It was large, set up with four turntables, a long leather couch, and matching recliners. Glass windows exposed the dance floor below.

"I've never seen a booth not set up on the main floor before, this is incredible." I

knocked on the glass. "Are these..."

"Trick mirrors. You can see out, but they can't see in unless you hit this nifty little button here." She pointed to a panel on the wall. "The other button opens the panels, so you can interact with the club below."

I whistled between my teeth as I approached the turntables, running an appreciative glance over them. "These had to have cost a small fortune. "

"A little over two thousand dollars each to be exact. They were purchased three weeks ago when we fired the last DJ. Vanessa ordered them top of the line."

"I have my own."

"You're free to use whatever you'd prefer, but she'd thought you'd enjoy them."

"Why was the last DJ fired?"

Gina plopped down on the leather couch, throwing her legs over the side of one arm.

"He couldn't keep his business and personal life separate.

We can get away with a lot, but it doesn't mean you can parade it in people's faces whenever you want.

There's a price to pay for being overconfident and cocky, and well, he found that out the hard way. "

I spotted her looking at me expectantly, and my eyebrows rose. "What?"

"Aren't you curious to know why exactly he got fired?"

"You already told me it was a bad mix of business and personal. What more is there to know?"

"Oh, I like you," she giggled. "I can see why Vanessa hired you."

"Thanks, I think?"

"It's definitely a compliment, but I love gossip too much to pass up the opportunity to talk about it."

"She chuckled. "DJ Dream was a solid DJ, but I swear that man slept with anyone that looked in his direction. You couldn't begin to imagine how many people he had in this room every night, sometimes more than one at a time. "

I glanced hesitantly at the couches.

"No worries, the room was completely cleaned and remodeled. Vanessa took no chances when it came to DJ Skanky Ass." She wiggled her nose then motioned at the floor. "New carpet, new furniture, new everything. She has the cleaning crew here every morning at five. She's religious about it."

"There won't be any worry about me and my personal life. I love being a DJ, it's the only thing I've ever had real passion about in my life besides..."

"Besides what?"

"Besides my boyfriend."

Her eyes lit up. She slid her legs off the leather arm of the chair and sat up, suddenly invested. "I pegged you for a digit girl. You know, someone with several boyfriends, maybe a girlfriend or two. Wild nights, no names remembered in the morning."

I raised a brow, unimpressed.

"But then I did a little research." She wiggled her fingers like she'd conjured a spell. "And stumbled on some juicy tabloids. You and a certain actor...?"

"Of course you did."

"So, is it true?"

"Some of it, the rest is clickbait."

She tilted her head, curiosity bubbling beneath her smirk. "You're very contained for someone who is dating Hollywood's favorite jawline."

"It's not a performance. I don't owe the world an explanation because someone snapped a photo."

For a second, she went quiet, then surprisingly, she smiled. "You're way more interesting than your headlines." She stood up from the couch and glanced at her watch. "It's seven o'clock, we have a meeting in thirty minutes on the main floor. Do you want me to come back to get you?"

"I'm pretty sure I can find the main floor by myself," I teased. "I'll see you down there."

After she left, I looked around for a few more minutes, content to study the turntables.

Upon hearing a soft knock on the door, I turned to find an unfamiliar man standing in the open doorway. He was tall, easily over six feet, and had long brown hair to his shoulders framing strong facial features, a trimmed goatee and light green eyes.

He flashed me a bright smile, the action lighting up his handsome features. "Sorry, I was looking for Vanessa."

"Last time I saw her, she was in the stockroom."

"Ah, taking inventory no doubt. Not sure why she pays Gina to do it when she's always going behind her to double check it." He stepped inside, the door shutting, and extended his hand. "Asher Lark. "

"Lorelai Jones, but please call me Rory." I pumped his hand with a quick smile. I surveyed his black cargo pants and black shirt with the white Euphoria logo. "Do you work here, too?"

"Uh, in a way, I guess I do. I own Euphoria."

"I thought Vanessa owned Euphoria."

"It was a joint venture when we opened five years ago. I'm more of a silent partner." He flashed me another smile. "It's nice to finally put a face to the name of such a world-wide famous DJ."

"I don't know if I would say world-wide, but I appreciate the opportunity to work here."

"DJ Fetish is an interesting stage name."

I couldn't stop the blush that spread across my cheeks. "I thought of it when I was seventeen, so it might lack a little creativity."

"I wouldn't say it lacks anything."

"I should probably head downstairs for the meeting."

He swung open the door. "After you, Rory."

A crowd of employees had already gathered together, Vanessa standing in the middle with a clipboard. I spotted Gina waving at me and maneuvered my way over to stand beside her.

"I see you met Daddy."

"Who?"

She nudged her head in the direction of where Asher was now talking to Vanessa.
"Our other boss. "

"Yeah, he came into the booth looking for Vanessa."

"Yeah, right. He came in there to see how much drool he could get out of you."

I frowned, looking back at the man in question. "I mean, he's attractive, but he's just a guy." I looked over to find her staring at me, her mouth hanging open. "What?"

"You think Asher Lark is just a guy?" She laughed. "Oh, that's priceless. Vanessa is going to fucking love that."

"I'm missing something, aren't I?"

"Double Edge?"

"Double what?"

"Piston?"

"Isn't that in an engine?"

"Girl, you better be yanking my chain. Do you not watch movies at all?"

"Obviously not," I remarked dryly. I crossed my arms and tried to squish the sick feeling that had started to eat at my insides. "Let me guess, he's an actor."

"Bingo."

"How did he end up co-owning a nightclub?"

"Vanessa and Asher met years ago at a Hollywood party her uber rich parents were hosting.

They cooked up the idea to open a nightclub as a way for her to become independently wealthy.

He agreed to help finance in exchange for co-ownership, and ta-da, Euphoria was born.

" She studied the topics of discussion and chuckled.

" Pretty sure they were fucking, a lot, but realized they were better off as friends and business partners. "

With a groan, I rubbed my forehead. "Remind me later why I needed to know that."

"I figured you would want to know all the dirty details. Besides, you said he was hot."

"He's our boss!"

She shrugged, unbothered. "Sure. Technically. But this whole thing? It's Vanessa's baby.

If it crashes, she's got nothing but old family money and pride to fall back on—and she'd swallow glass before admitting failure.

" She flicked a glance at me. "He's got a dozen other projects lined up. Movies. Endorsements. He'll land fine. "

I crossed my arms. "Then why was he still here?"

"He loves to meet new hires, especially the interesting ones."

"Lucky me," I muttered.

Before she could say something snarky in return, Vanessa's voice cut through the space, sharp and magnetic. "Alright, team!" She clapped once, and the room stilled. "First off, I want to officially introduce our new DJ, Rory, also known as DJ Fetish."

The team clapped on cue. I nodded stiffly.

"Secondly," she continued, "if you have any supply requests, make sure they get to Gina by tomorrow morning. We open in a few hours, so finish your checks. Any issues, come to me or Asher. Let's have a great night."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

I spun the heavy tempo track, watching as the crowd happily danced along.

It had been two hours since the club opened, and the entire building was packed wall to wall.

The song transitioned into another one, the bass almost rattling the glass around me.

Hearing the door open and shut loudly, I turned, surprised to see Asher holding a bottle of water.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. I figured shutting the door would get your attention." He lifted the bottle.

"I thought you might be thirsty."

"Oh, thank you." I accepted the bottle, opening it to take a quick sip. "I thought you'd be gone by now."

Chuckling, he approached the glass and looked down at the crowd. "I've got nowhere better to be at the moment. "

"Surely you have some glamorous party or premiere to attend?"

His eyebrows rose. "So, you do know who I am."

"Gina had to tell me. I'm sorry. I hardly have time for entertainment these days."

"That's a shame, but it's definitely no reason to apologize."

Aware he was looking at me closely, I shifted my attention to the turntable and turned the knobs to force the beat to flow into another song. "Thank you for the water. You don't have to bring it all the way up here."

"It's no problem."

We stood in silence as the music continued to play, the crowd moving as one.

"Have you taken a break?"

"No, I don't usually—"

"You should take your breaks. Put some tracks on a loop and take a fifteen."

I did as he asked, putting several tracks on a loop before I followed him out the door. We took the back way, walking past the bar, and I shivered at the cool night air that washed over me as we stepped out into the alley.

"Do you need a jacket?"

"I'm okay. It was the change in temperature. It's hot in there." I smoothed my hands down my tank top and shorts, rubbing the toe of my tennis shoe into the cracked cement .

He paused to rummage through his cargo pants, and I watched him dig out a pack of cigarettes. He stuck one into his mouth, tilting the box toward me. "Do you want one?"

"No, thanks. I haven't smoked in several years."

"I don't usually smoke, but the urge to buy a pack hit me a couple days ago." He took a drag of his cigarette, quiet as he exhaled and watched the streams of smoke spiral into the air. He leaned against the opposite brick wall. "So, tell me about yourself."

"There's not much to tell."

"Nonsense, there has to be at least one thing. Your resume said you worked in Australia last. That's a long way to come for a job. Were you there for a reason?"

I scratched the back of my neck. "I move a lot."

"I don't blame you. I've always been a big fan of change." He inhaled on his cigarette again, exhaling through his nose. "I was born in New Zealand, so I definitely know about taking big risks."

"Was acting what brought you to America?"

"Yes, and work is what brought you here. Appears we have something else in common besides knowing what a loop is."

I chuckled, a little bitter. "I moved to Los Angeles because I met a guy. Lane, right?"

I studied his face carefully. Actors all swam in the same glittery, shallow pool. Odds were, he'd crossed paths with Sullivan at a party, a premiere, or some glossy magazine spread where everyone pretended not to care.

"Actually, I'd call that brave." He flicked his cigarette onto the concrete, the ember flaring out as he faced me fully. "Takes a hell of a lot of guts to change your life for someone."

Something about the way he said it made me pause.

"I need to head back but take your full fifteen. You deserve to take breaks just like the rest of us." He headed inside.

I stayed out a beat longer, letting the cooler air settle the weird tightness in my chest.

By the time I reached the booth, the lights were up, the bar was buzzing, and the low hum of bass was already bleeding through the floor. I slipped on my headphones, hands moving by habit—knobs, sliders, track cues—letting the music drown out everything around me.

Tonight, I was DJ Fetish again. No feelings or questions. There was only the music.

With a sigh, I shut the front door, shrugging off my jacket and dropping it on the couch along with my purse and keys.

I kicked off my shoes, not bothering to see where they ended up.

I made my way through the living room without the assistance of the lights, trying to be quiet, but my attempt failed when I ran into the leg of the sofa, stubbing my toe.

"Shit!" I hopped on one leg, grabbing at my toes. "Damn it."

The hallway light turned on, and I blinked at the sight of Sullivan as he stumbled into the doorway dressed in his boxers. He rubbed his forehead, squinting at me. "Baby? What time is it?"

I lowered my foot back to the floor. "It's 5:30."

He moved forward to hug me. "I didn't realize you'd be coming in that late."

"I stayed behind to clean up." I pulled away. "I'm going to take a shower before I

come to bed."

"I wish I could join you."

"In the shower?"

He grinned but shook his head. "I meant the bed. Eric called last night. I got the lead role in the new Christopher Nolan film that I auditioned for last week. I know it's bad timing, but I fly out tomorrow for wardrobe and to meet the other cast members. "

"I'm happy for you, believe me, but that makes me a little sad," I admitted. "We haven't had any time to spend together lately."

He cradled my hands against his chest. "Come with me. Every moment I don't have to work, we'll spend it together."

I pulled my hands free. "You know I can't do that. I literally started my job tonight."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I was making a suggestion."

"How long will you be gone?"

"For a couple days." He cleared his throat. "Filming starts next month..."

My mouth dropped open as I stared at him.

"I'll be gone for about five months."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was. I'm sorry to drop all of this on you, but I've been working hard to get

where I am, this role could change my entire career for me. Tell me you understand."

I did, but in so many ways, I felt betrayed. I had left a good job behind in Australia simply based on my emotions and a promise of something special. Suddenly, I wasn't sure I hadn't been sold a lie.

"Go take a shower. I'm going to get dressed, and we'll talk some more until my ride arrives."

He had been gone a total of sixteen hours, thirty minutes, and some odd seconds. Not that I was counting. I could smell him on the shirt I had borrowed, that faint mix of cologne, skin, and the expensive detergent he used. I lifted it to my nose and inhaled before shoving it into my locker.

I turned toward the mirror to fix my shirt and jumped. Gina was standing behind me, arms crossed, a wicked grin on her face.

"What's up, buttercup?" She popped her gum with a snap. "Checking if you're Snuggle fresh? Let me guess." She tilted her head. "Boyfriend's shirt?"

I hesitated a beat too long.

"Called it."

I rolled my eyes again, but the blush hadn't gone anywhere. "You're insufferable."

"I'm observant," she corrected, smirking as she leaned against the locker next to mine. "So, how serious are we talking here? Matching tattoos? Secret wedding in the Maldives?"

I snorted. I grabbed my headphones and started toward the stairs .

She side-stepped to block me. "Oh no, you don't. You're in deep, I can smell it, literally."

"It's new and weird. And a little terrifying."

Gina popped her gum again. "Asher is going to be disappointed he doesn't have a chance."

I blinked quickly. "What?"

"You heard me, Ms. Fetish."

I scoffed, more reflex than belief. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" She leaned in conspiratorially. "You didn't see the way he was watching you the other night, and let's not forget the back alley cigarette talk I heard about. That was not 'boss-employee' energy."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. "I'm with someone."

"And yet, you're blushing. Don't worry. I'm not suggesting anything scandalous. I'm saying keep your eyes open. You never know when things shift." She glanced over her shoulder. "Speak of the devil."

Asher approached us, wearing that effortless kind of confidence, black-on-black, hair slightly tousled like he hadn't tried but looked unfairly good. His eyes landed on me immediately. "I wanted to check in before the doors opened. Are you good with the set list tonight?"

"Yeah, locked and loaded."

His gaze lingered, not inappropriately, not long enough to call out, but enough. "You've got nothing to worry about, last night was amazing. Tonight shouldn't be any different."

"Yeah," I said, shifting my stance. "I'm trying not to overthink it."

"You shouldn't. You're already the best thing about this place." He said it as a fact, the truth as he saw it. Somehow that was worse than flirting.

Gina cleared her throat behind me. "Smooth."

His mouth tugged into a crooked smile. "Honest." He turned to nod at me. "Knock them dead tonight."

With that, he was gone.

"Still think I'm imagining it?"

I didn't answer her. I headed up to the booth as fast as my feet could carry me.

By the end of my set, the pulse in my veins was louder than the music.

I peeled off my headphones, hands trembling slightly.

The crowd below was a satisfied blur, but my own head felt crowded.

I escaped the booth intent on using the restroom and stopped abruptly.

Asher stood leaning against the wall, arms crossed in wait .

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm leaving for the night. I wanted to say good job."

"Thanks." I forced myself to sound casual. "The energy felt good tonight."

"It wasn't just the energy." His gaze was steady, direct. "You connect with people. It's rare."

Warmth rose into my cheeks again. I glanced away, desperate to regain control.

He didn't say anything at first, simply watched me for a second, clearly amused. "Relax. I'm not here to steal anyone's girlfriend."

I looked back at him sharply. "I wasn't worried. Who's worried?"

He raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "Good, because I know your situation."

"My situation?"

"You're taken. I'm not here to start anything." His tone was light, but his gaze lingered for a second longer than it should've. He stepped away from the wall, casually adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. "Doesn't mean I don't appreciate good taste when I see it."

I blinked. "Are you complimenting my outfit or my life choices?"

"Maybe both. I'll let you decide." Before I could think of something clever to say back, he was already walking off with a simple, "See you around, DJ Fetish. "

I was staring down the empty hallway when my phone buzzed. Sullivan's name flashed on the screen, jolting me back into reality. I took a breath, steadying my voice

before answering. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," he said warmly. The background noise suggested he was somewhere crowded. "Miss me yet?"

I smiled faintly, despite myself. "Maybe a little."

"Only a little? I must be losing my touch."

My eyes flicked involuntarily toward the hallway again. "It's been a busy night."

"How'd it go?" He sounded genuinely interested, his tone gentle. It twisted the guilt in my chest tighter.

"Everything was great."

He hesitated a beat, voice dipping into something softer. "I wish I was there."

I squeezed my eyes shut at the sincerity of his words, leaning against the wall. "Me too."

"Are you okay? You sound off."

"I'm fine. I'm processing some stuff."

"Stuff." He repeated the word carefully. "Anything I should know about?"

Asher's words echoed in my mind. "No," I said firmly, pushing that memory down deep. "Nothing important."

Sullivan didn't respond immediately. For a second, the silence stretched, thick and

uneasy. "Okay." His voice was calm but guarded now. "Promise me you'll talk to me if it becomes something. "

"I will."

"Good. Get some rest. I love you, Rory."

My heart clenched, guilt and longing warring inside me. "Talk to you soon."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

Gina was wiping down the bar, humming to herself as she polished glassware. She glanced up as I approached, eyes immediately narrowing with curiosity. "Okay, you've got the face." She lowered the rag. "Spill."

I slumped onto a bar stool, crossing my arms against the counter. "Things are complicated, and I have no one to talk to about it."

"Talk to Dr. Gina." She leaned on the bar, fully attentive.

"Sullivan and I have been fighting a lot lately."

"About what?"

"Everything. Nothing." I rubbed a hand over my face. "We keep arguing about how fast things are moving. Six months ago, I didn't know who he was, and now I'm living with him, trying to rebuild myself all over again. He wants more, and I'm barely keeping my head above water."

Her eyes softened with understanding. "It's a huge, life-changing decision to make so suddenly."

"It's massive, and now, every conversation we have feels like walking through a minefield. I haven't been able to say 'I love you' back. He keeps saying it, and it... hangs there."

"You don't feel the same?"

"I think I do." My voice cracked slightly. "But what if saying it makes it hurt more if it doesn't work out?"

She was quiet for a moment, studying me. "Maybe it's supposed to feel that way. Loving someone isn't safe." She tapped her finger gently on my arm. "You're terrified of losing control."

I let out a shaky laugh. "I know, and I hate that."

"Look, Rory," her voice lost all traces of teasing, "I don't know him, but I've seen the way he looks at you."

"Then why am I doubting everything?"

"Because you're human. Because letting someone in is agreeing to opening yourself to all kinds of pain." She squeezed my hand briefly. "But maybe it's time to figure out if he's worth the risk."

I took a deep breath, nodding slowly. "Maybe it is."

"For the record, if you do go, I'm stealing all your good playlists."

I didn't wait until morning to call him back. The conversation with Gina echoed through my thoughts, replaying like lyrics stuck on repeat. The second I entered the house, I opened my phone.

"Rory?" He picked up on the second ring, voice heavy with sleep. "Everything okay?"

"Can we talk?"

He was instantly alert. "Of course. What's going on?"

I sank onto the couch, pulling a pillow tight against my chest. I inhaled deeply, steadying myself. "I'm scared, terrified, actually, of how quickly things have changed."

"It's been an entire month since you moved in with me, and you haven't spoken a word about this, about how you feel." He sighed softly. "Is that why you can't say I love you back?"

My heart twisted painfully. "Yes. Because saying it gives up control entirely. And what if I'm not enough? What if this blows up, and I'm left alone in a city I don't know, after giving up everything here?"

"Rory, it kills me that you've been carrying this alone. I love you, but that doesn't mean I want you to lose yourself. I don't need you to sacrifice everything to prove anything to me."

"I don't want to lose you."

"You won't, not unless you push me away, and then, I'd probably be around, annoyingly persistent."

I laughed, the tension finally loosening in my chest. "That does sound like you."

"Look, I know it's scary. I'm scared, too, but I told you we'd figure it out together. We can slow down. If you need to find a place of your own, it'd hurt, but I'd understand."

"I don't want to find another place to live." I hesitated. "I do love you. I'm sorry I'm telling you for the first time over the phone."

"I know, but hearing you finally say it back? Totally worth the wait. Do you feel better now?"

I smiled softly into the phone. "Much better."

I had barely finished my first cup of coffee when my phone began to buzz from where I had discarded it onto the coffee table.

Sitting down my mug, I glanced at the screen, expecting a text from Sullivan or maybe a notification from the club group chat about tonight's shift, but instead I saw a flood of notifications.

My stomach sank. There was a flood of tagged photos followed by comments on social media. My phone buzzed again in my hand as articles began to pop up in bubbles across the screen.

I tapped the first notification, pulse quickening as the image loaded.

Sullivan Masters' Mystery Girlfriend Has Moved to LA? Are we looking at the newest power couple taking Hollywood by storm?

I sank down onto my couch, feeling sick. My phone rang again. His name flashed urgently, and I answered.

He didn't greet me, his voice already tense. "Eric told me about the articles. It somehow leaked that you're with me now in LA."

"It was only a matter of time. You're famous, Sully. Have you talked to anyone about me?"

"No one I wouldn't trust completely. I swear I didn't leak anything." He sighed. "My

life isn't normal, but it's part of being with me. It might never go away completely."

"I knew that when I agreed to move back here." I chewed my bottom lip, mind spinning in circles. "This is going to be Australia all over again, with them hounding me and finding me at my job. Shit. I need to talk to Vanessa."

"I can get Eric to try to do some damage control, maybe we should look into hiring you some bodyguards."

I frowned at the suggestion. "Absolutely not. That's not who I am. I won't live that way."

"Rory, I want you to be safe, especially when I'm not around to make sure of it."

"I'll talk to Vanessa. I'll see what my options are. For now... I think not answering is the best answer. We can talk about it when you get back."

"Rory..."

"I'll be fine, I promise. Focus on work. You said it yourself, we'll figure it out."

I knew he didn't want to drop the subject, but he merely agreed, the call ending. I sat on the couch and stared at the phone, the notifications continuing to pour in, the sound of the phone echoing through the house.

By the time I got to the club that evening, the tabloids had done their damage .

My phone was flooded with questions, unsolicited opinions about my life and my relationship with him. I ignored the numerous paparazzi that crowded my car as I pulled into the parking lot, ducking against the glare of lights, and was thankful that the bouncers had been outside to run interference.

I couldn't breathe. I ran up the stairs without greeting anyone, not stopping until I reached the door to the booth.

Leaning against the wall, eyes closed, I fought desperately to regain my equilibrium, my heart racing.

I was close to having a panic attack, my head spinning despite the solid wall against my fingertips.

"Are you okay?"

My eyes snapped open. Asher stood at the end of the hall, studying me carefully.

"I'm fine."

"You're a terrible liar."

I sighed, giving up the pretense. "Have you seen the headlines? They're not true."

There had been several more articles over the past few hours, all with salacious lies, rumors, full of stories about our relationship, about who I was, and how he was a playboy having the time of his life with a woman begging for fame.

He approached me slowly. "It doesn't matter. The truth isn't what sells."

"I didn't ask for this. I'm—"

"Dating someone whose life comes with a spotlight." He hesitated. "Look, Rory, fame isn't kind. It takes everything you love and tries to twist it into something ugly."

I met his eyes, startled by the sincerity I found there. "What do I do?"

"You hold onto the real things." His voice was soft, reassuring. "If you and Sullivan have something real, protect it fiercely. If it isn't strong enough, be honest with yourself. There's nothing worse than pretending."

I stared at him, my throat suddenly tight. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because someone should," he smiled faintly. "And because I wish someone had done it for me."

There was silence between us, not awkward but charged.

"Thank you."

He nodded. "Anytime."

I let him get halfway down the hall before my voice slipped out, hesitant and vulnerable. "Asher?"

He paused, turning back slightly.

"Do you think I'm strong enough to survive this?"

"I think you're strong enough to survive anything." He studied me, his expression unreadable. "The real question you should be asking is how badly do you want to?"

Asher left me alone with those words echoing quietly in the silence.

The next morning, my phone lit up before I'd even had coffee. Seeing Sullivan's name on the screen, I answered, a sudden flare of concern overwhelming me. "What's wrong?"

"I wanted to check on you after last night. Eric's been updating me on all of the articles. We're tracking down the journalists and their publishing houses. It's possible we may have grounds for a lawsuit, or at least threaten them with legal action. Maybe it'll slow things down for a bit."

I ventured into the kitchen. I needed coffee, something for my nerves, or at least something comforting and familiar. "It was a rough night, but I made it." I moved around the kitchen. "I almost had a panic attack, but I had help working through it."

He hesitated, a brief pause filling the line. "What kind of help?"

"Asher Lark, he's a silent partner with Vanessa; he caught me in the hallway mid-spiral. I think I would have passed out if he hadn't been there. "

"Why is this the first time I'm hearing about him? I didn't know he co-owned the club."

"It never came up in our conversations. To be honest, I didn't think anything of it." Pulling a mug down from the cabinet, I frowned. "It wasn't a big deal. He's nice."

He grunted into the phone. "You were falling apart, and you didn't call me. He's practically a stranger."

"He's my boss, and he was there. I was freaking out. He understood."

"Of course he was. Did you talk to him about us?"

I sat the mug down on the counter with a dull thud. "He saw the headlines."

"I bet he did." His voice hardened, and beneath the anger, I could sense something. It was fear. "You don't think it's convenient how he was suddenly there when you were

vulnerable?"

My frown deepened. "He knows I'm with you. He respects it."

"You honestly think he cares about boundaries? I know guys like him. I've worked with guys like him. He's known for being a playboy."

"I trust him." Immediately, I knew I'd chosen the wrong words.

The silence stretched, sharp and painful.

"Do you trust him more than you trust me?"

"Of course not, but things feel fragile right now, and he was there. "

He sighed, suddenly sounding exhausted. "Maybe this was always going to happen. Maybe I was naive thinking I could have this, have you, and keep my life the way it was."

"You do have me," I insisted, voice cracking.

"I don't want Asher Lark of all people comforting you. That's my job."

The possessiveness was raw, an unfamiliar feeling invading my thoughts. "Then I need you here, not on another continent."

"I already told Eric that I'm taking the next flight out. Rory?" His voice lowered. "If he crosses the line again, there's going to be a problem."

The call ended, and I sat frozen, heart pounding.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

The moment Sullivan stepped into the club, the air changed.

He was jet-lagged, unshaven, and clearly running on a mixture of coffee and sheer determination.

His gaze immediately found Asher across the room, and I knew there was nothing I could do to stop what was coming.

He crossed the room, tension radiating off him in waves.

Asher turned around, catching sight of Sullivan approaching, and his expression tightened.

"I think we need to talk."

"Alright. Let's talk."

"You need to stay away from Rory. Whatever game you're playing, I'm telling you, it stops now."

Asher raised an eyebrow. "There's no game. Rory's a grown woman. She can choose who she talks to. "

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I know all about your track record. You see an opening, and you're taking advantage of it. I see this for what it is."

"You don't. If you did, you'd realize your issues with Rory have nothing to do with me."

"My issues with Rory," Sullivan stepped forward, voice dangerous, "are none of your business."

"They became my business when I found her alone and hurt by the mess your world caused. If you think confronting me solves anything, you're mistaken."

"You need to back off. You're making it worse."

"And you leaving her alone for weeks at a time makes it better?" Asher shook his head. "Look, I get why you're angry, but your real problem isn't with me, it's with yourself. You know you're failing her, and you don't know how to fix it."

Sullivan's fists clenched at his sides, jaw tight, eyes blazing. For a moment, I thought he might actually swing. He exhaled sharply instead, visibly pulling back. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough. Like you said, I know your track record," Asher threw the words back in his face. "I know she deserves more than you giving ultimatums because you're insecure."

"I won't tell you again. Stay away from Rory." He turned sharply, storming past me without another word.

I tried to meet his eyes, to reach for him, but he was already gone. I spun around, my heart hammering. "What was that?" My voice shook slightly, a mix of anger and fear. "Why did you provoke him?"

"I didn't provoke him. He came looking for a fight, and I refused to lie."

"You told him he was failing me! That wasn't your place!"

"Maybe it wasn't, but it wasn't wrong either."

I stepped toward him, voice lowered but fierce. "My relationship isn't something for you to dissect or analyze. I trusted you. I needed someone to talk to, not because I wanted this mess."

"And you think I want it?" He stared down at me, the cool confidence finally cracking slightly.

"You should've stayed out of it," I whispered, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. "We were finally figuring things out. You've made it worse."

Asher leaned against the bar with a sigh, dropping his head back, eyes closed briefly before looking at me again. "I wasn't trying to hurt you. I meant every word I said. He's insecure, and it's damaging you both. He's going to keep hurting you, Rory."

"That's not your choice to make!"

"You're right, I didn't. But if it was me, Rory—"

"Don't." My voice cracked. "Don't finish that sentence. "

He pushed away from the bar, brushing gently past me toward the exit. "I'm sorry I made things harder for you. That wasn't what I wanted."

"Then what did you want?"

He paused at the doorway, shoulders tight. Without turning around, he answered quietly. "For you to know that you deserve more." He disappeared through the door,

leaving me standing alone—confused, aching, and more torn than ever.

I found Sullivan outside, leaning against the railing at the club's back entrance. His back was tense, his head bowed as if trying to calm himself.

"Sully?"

"Did he send you out here?"

"No," I said sharply, anger flickering again. "I came because we need to talk."

He exhaled heavily, gripping the railing. "So, let's talk."

"Why did you come here? You flew halfway around the world to confront him. Why?"

"Because I was afraid of losing you. Because every time we talk, I can feel you slipping further away. When I found out you confided in him, it made me realize how close I was to losing everything."

"You don't get it. I didn't choose him over you. I needed someone who understood, and he was there."

"Why didn't you pick up the phone and talk to me? "

"Because I'm afraid!" My voice rose, cracking painfully. "Because every time we talk, we fight. I'm drowning, and you keep asking me for more! You show up here and start some macho confrontation, claiming Asher's the problem, when the real problem is us."

He stared at me, breathing heavily, his expression breaking slowly. "So that's it?" He

studied me, his expression unreadable. "It's us?"

"I don't know, but it's not him. Whatever issues we have aren't because of him."

"Tell me how to fix it, because I don't know how."

"Stop making everything a test. Stop treating me like something you might lose instead of someone you have."

Sullivan froze, something shifting in his eyes. He reached out slowly, carefully touching my cheek, thumb brushing the tears that spilled over. "I'm terrified of losing you."

"I'm terrified too," I admitted, leaning into his hand. "But if we keep acting this way, we'll lose each other anyway."

He stepped closer, his forehead touching mine gently. "I came here to fight for us, not against you."

"Trust me enough to let me breathe. I need you, not your jealousy, not your fear. You."

He closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep, shaky breath. "Okay. No more ultimatums, no more confrontations. Whatever happens, we face it together. "

I nodded, finally relaxing into him, feeling him breathe deeply, his body softening as the tension slowly faded between us.

Later that night, after he had fallen asleep, I lay awake, staring at the ceiling. My thoughts refused to settle, replaying the conversations from earlier. Sullivan's hurt, Asher's honesty. Everything was blurred, knotted, impossible to untangle.

I rolled quietly out of bed, slipping into the living room. The city lights outside our window glowed softly, distant and indifferent. I sank onto the couch, pulling a blanket tightly around myself as though it might keep my conflicted feelings at bay.

His words kept echoing in my head, unsettling and too honest. You deserve more.

The problem was, I didn't know what 'more' meant.

Was it attention? Stability? The absence of pressure, the freedom from his complicated, spotlight-driven life?

Or was it the possibility that someone else could understand parts of me Sullivan couldn't?

The thought felt wrong, dangerous, unfair.

But I couldn't stop seeing Asher's eyes; calm, sincere, filled with something deeper than flirtation.

He hadn't been stirring trouble. He'd been genuine.

The worst part was, some tiny, traitorous part of me wondered what if. What if things had been different? What if he had never walked into Venom?

My phone buzzed quietly, pulling me from my thoughts. I picked it up, heart skipping painfully when I saw Asher's name.

I'm sorry for today. I meant every word I said, but I never wanted to hurt you.

I stared at the message, thumb hovering over the screen, unsure how to reply—or if I should reply at all.

I know, but we can't do this.

I understand.

I put my phone down, sinking deeper into the couch. I knew understanding something and accepting it were two different things. Right now, my heart had no idea how to tell them apart.

I spent the next few days at Euphoria deliberately avoiding Asher. I arrived early, stayed behind the booth, and made sure I never ended up alone with him. Each time our eyes met across the crowded club, I quickly looked away, pretending the steady burn of guilt wasn't eating at me.

Gina noticed immediately. "You're avoiding Mr. Hollywood," she teased gently after my set one night, nudging my shoulder. "Something happen?"

"It's complicated," I mumbled, eyes glued to my equipment as I packed up.

She sighed. "It always is."

The club was closed, almost deserted except for employees, and I finished cleaning my area, sweeping the turntables free of any dust that had managed to cling to it. Satisfied, I made my way from the booth, nodding at the few people I passed that said good night.

Vanessa wasn't in my office. I bit my lip as I debated on what to do. As I came rushing out of her office, I ran smack-dab into Asher, and he had to reach out to steady me else I would have landed flat on my ass.

"Whoa, where's the fire?"

"It usually starts in the kitchen."

Chuckling, he released me once he was sure I was steady again on my feet. "Where are you off to in such a rush?"

"I was looking for Vanessa."

"She already left. She told me to close up." Before I could respond, he stepped forward and casually stretched his arms out, hands pressed flat against the hallway walls blocking my path. "You've been avoiding me."

I squared my shoulders. I resisted the urge to step back. I hadn't registered how close he was. I chose to step sideways, more for clarity than nerves. "I've been busy."

He raised an eyebrow. "Busy rehearsing your vanishing act?"

I ignored the dig. "I was going to tell Vanessa I want to help set up for the VIP party on Wednesday."

"That's a week from now. Absolutely not."

"What?" I blinked. "Why? Everybody else is."

"Well, not everyone's birthday is on Wednesday," he shrugged. "That entitles you to a free pass on all boring setup duties." The humor faded from his expression, and he slowly lowered his arms. "What's wrong?"

I took a step back, gaze dropping. "Don't mention my birthday. How did— Let me guess, my paperwork?" My voice was quiet. "Please don't bring it up to anyone."

"Deal, but only if you tell me why."

I looked up, meeting his gaze in the dim hallway. "Because bad things tend to happen on my birthday. "

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

He gave a half-smile. "You mean like a curse? Pretty sure that's a movie plot."

"This isn't a joke."

His expression shifted instantly, the teasing gone. Before I could register the movement, he reached for my hand. "I'm sorry. I won't ask or mention it again."

I didn't pull away. For some reason, I didn't want to. "Thank you." I gave his hand the smallest squeeze.

"Does this mean you forgive me?"

"Does this mean I can work Wednesday?"

He exhaled a soft laugh. "Absolutely not."

"What?" I leaned in slightly, half-indignant, half-smiling. "You're seriously going to pull rank and ban me from helping?"

"You call it pulling rank." He took a slow step toward me. "I call it protecting you from a night you clearly don't want to remember."

The air between us shifted, lighter one second, heavier the next. I felt his gaze drop briefly to my mouth before he looked away, as if catching himself. I should've said something, should've looked away, too. But I didn't.

His voice dropped slightly. "Are you always this stubborn?"

"Only when someone's trying to read me like a book they haven't earned the right to open."

He grinned, clearly surprised. "I like that."

"You do? "

"Yeah." His tone lowered. "A lot."

The tension stretched, sudden and breathless. I didn't move. Neither did he.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Gina's voice echoed sharply through the hallway.

I jumped back as if something had burned me.

She cocked an eyebrow, popping a large bubble of her gum. "We're ready to close now, Boss."

Asher stepped away, clearing his throat. "I'll make sure the back doors are locked." He disappeared past us.

I glared at Gina, who winked, obviously waiting all night to make that entrance. "You good?" she asked, not trying to hide the grin in her voice.

"Totally fine." I smoothed my shirt, and ignored the heat lingering in my face. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." Her smirk widened. "Just wondering if I should start planning the seating chart for the wedding."

I shot her a look. "You're not funny."

"I'm hilarious."

We rounded the corner, and of course, he was already at the bar, leaning casually against the edge, as if the whole hallway incident hadn't touched him. He glanced up at me. Only a glance, no smirk, no nod, but something about how his eyes lingered made my pulse stutter all over again.

I forced myself to walk past him, calm, collected, totally unfazed. Except nothing about the way my skin buzzed where he'd looked at me felt normal at all.

I did my best to ignore him the rest of the week. Our brief moment in the hallway and combined with the fact I had not heard from him since he had left again, I was at my wit's end trying to remain sane.

A knock on the door had me grinding my teeth.

Hoping it was a waitress with a tray of drinks, I approached with my empty soda glass and quickly opened it.

I took a step back, surprised to find Vanessa in the doorway with a serious look on her face and a bottle of Jack Daniels and two shot glasses in her hands.

"Are you lost?" I leaned against the door frame. "Your office is upstairs."

"I know where my office is, smart ass." She flew past me, a blur of flaming red hair, and quickly perched on the edge of the couch, placing the bottle and shot glasses onto the coffee table. "It's almost one, and you haven't taken a break." She patted the couch. "Now is a perfect time."

"Vanessa..."

"If you want to keep your job, sit your ass down. "

Though the words were teasing, I lowered myself beside her. I watched in amusement as she filled a shot glass, and she threw the liquid back before slamming it down. "I never pegged you for a whiskey lover."

"Even vampires have a taste for something else every once and a while.

" Vanessa filled my shot glass and reclined into the cushions.

She stretched her arm across the back of the couch, watching me as she held the full shot in her hand.

"Gina told me about what happened between your boyfriend and Asher. "

"Yeah, it was a blast." I swallowed the contents of the shot glass, shuddering as the burning liquid coated the insides of my throat. "Does this go on your tab?"

"I'll put it on Asher's." She finished her second shot, remaining in a relaxed position as she dangled her empty glass between her index finger and thumb. "I'm sure he won't mind when it comes to you."

"Vanessa, I—"

"You don't need to apologize." She lifted a hand. "I didn't come in here to threaten your job."

I lowered my shot glass to the table and sank deeper into the couch cushions, wary.

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I've been known to give good advice when it counts—and I'm hoping this

is one of those moments."

I blinked. "About what, exactly? "

"Asher's smart. Sometimes too damn clever for his own good, and when he wants something, he doesn't give up easily."

I shifted uncomfortably.

"I think we both know he's not only interested in your playlists.

" Vanessa gave me a knowing look. "I'm not saying you owe him anything. I'm saying be honest with yourself.

Whatever you're feeling, don't shove it down so deep it turns into regret.

" She gave me a small smile. "I realize that dating an actor isn't easy. "

"How long have you known?"

"The day you came for the interview I knew all there was to know about you, Rory."
She patted my knee gently. "How long have you been dating Sullivan?"

"Almost seven months."

"Do you love him?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Yes, but we've been fighting a lot lately. He's gone again preparing to film another movie." I paused to fill my shot glass again and drowned the contents before pouring another one, chasing it as well. "I'm in way over my head."

"Rory, slow down." She covered my hand with hers where it rested on the bottle, preventing me from pouring another shot. "You're not in over your head. If I thought you were incapable, I wouldn't have hired you."

"No, you hired me after you found out personal details about my life. "

"Am I wrong for wanting to make sure my interests were protected?"

Shaking my head, I slipped my hand free. "I don't have anything to hide."

"We all have something to hide. Do me a favor, and don't put on a fake face around me, too many people do it too much already for my tastes.

" Vanessa rose from the couch, leaving the bottle.

"Consider the bottle a gift, but a word of advice? Straighten things out before you lose peace of mind. You're too good a person to let this fast-paced life eat at you. "

She turned at the door, hand lingering on the knob. "As cheesy as it sounds, sometimes what you want isn't what you need, but don't forget that every decision you make has a consequence."

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

Shutting myself in the bathroom, I dialed Sullivan's number. It rang several times before a clicking sound informed me it had been picked up. I opened my mouth to speak when I was interrupted, an unfamiliar feminine voice greeting me.

"Sully's phone!"

I frowned. "Who is this?"

"This is his secretary. Who is this?"

"Sullivan doesn't have a secretary, and he definitely wouldn't pay her to giggle if he did," I snapped. "Who the hell is this?"

"Um, hold on."

There was a brief silence.

"Rory?"

"Who was that?" I paced around in the bathroom .

"That, my love and sometimes frustration of my life, was Tate Evers, my co-star. I told her that you wouldn't find it funny to answer, but she's got a mind of her own, like someone else I know."

I ignored the obvious jab. "Where are you?"

He sighed, the background a garbled mess. "We're at dinner right now. Your call is a welcome diversion, though I'm surprised to hear from you."

I paused. "Why wouldn't you hear from me? I haven't heard from you since you left. You haven't texted me."

"Rory..." It sounded as if he covered the phone. His voice came out lower than usual through the line. "I love you, but I can't fight with you every time I turn around. If things are bothering you, we can fix them, but..."

"I'm not fighting with you, what are you talking about?"

He sighed again. "Look, I have to go, but I'll be home in a couple days."

"Sullivan..."

"Lorelai, I cannot do this right now."

I forced myself from pushing the subject more. "Okay."

"I'll be home soon. I love you."

I cut the connection as quickly as possible. Crying, I slid against the wall to sit on the floor. Shoulders shaking, I tried my best to cover up my sobs. A knock on the door startled me. I frantically wiped my wet cheeks.

"Rory, are you in there?"

"No! "

Asher laughed from the other side of the door, and despite it being unlocked, he

didn't enter. "There's another person who sounds like Rory that works here, too? That's amazing."

"Please go away."

"I can't."

"Why not?" I sighed in frustration. "There are other bathrooms!"

"I have a strict policy about not deserting crying women."

Rolling my eyes, I forced myself to my feet and made my way to the door. I jerked the door open. He didn't back away, his eyebrow cocked as he leaned forward with his arms propped against the door frame. "I wasn't crying."

Asher stepped forward, not stopping as I took a step back. He shut the door and locked it with a flick of his wrist before he concentrated on my features. "Alright, you weren't crying. You're leaking water from your eyes. What were you doing in here?" He glanced around. "Mopping the floor?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I stuttered. "And unlock the door! The last thing I want is someone-"

"I think you're worrying too much about everyone else and not one inch about yourself."

"Wow, an actor and a shrink, that's quite the combination." I ran my hands through my hair and lowered the toilet seat in order to sit down. I buried my face in my hands, my elbows on my knees. "Every so often, I'm reminded why I don't date."

He leaned against the bathroom wall. "Did something happen?"

"You could say that."

"Considering I don't have a clue as to why you're crying..." He chuckled at the look I shot at him. He squatted down on his haunches, his gaze sincere. "Tell me what happened. If not to me, then to Gina or Vanessa, but you need to talk about it."

I stared down at my feet. "I'm afraid of becoming too comfortable and losing track of what matters."

"And what's that?"

"Not being discovered."

"That's going to be difficult considering how talented you are. It can't stay hidden no matter what you do."

"I can become a hermit or a nun."

He laughed at my look of seriousness. "Neither of those are the first thing that comes to mind, but you're correct. The life of a hermit would become monotonous, and we both know you're not cut out to be a nun."

"There's an insult hidden there somewhere," I sighed. "You don't know the first thing about me."

"I know you love your job. I know the look you get on your face when you're dancing and think no one's looking." He ran his hands through his hair before clasping his hands together. "I know how I feel when I'm near you. "

"Please, don't—"

"I need you to hear it from my own mouth." He held up a hand to stop me from speaking and stood up. "You have a boyfriend, I respect that, and I realize you're having problems that don't involve me, so I'm staying out of it the best I can.

I'm here to be your friend, not force myself on you, and that's how it's going to be until you figure things out.

If that time comes and I have no chance...

Well, I'd rather have you as a friend than not at all. "

Dumbfounded, I stared at him. I was startled when someone suddenly pounded on the door.

"Asher, are you in there?"

He chuckled. "Yes, go away."

"Are you alone?"

"Gina, go away!"

"Fine. Whenever you're done with... whatever you're doing in there and you see Rory, tell her that Vanessa is looking for her." The sounds of Gina's departing footsteps echoed down the hall.

I shot to my feet. "Shit, I lost track of the time."

"You'll be fine, trust me." He reached out to cup my shoulder with his hand. "Rory—"

"Please don't say anything else. I need time to think and figure things out before..." I stepped away from him. "I like you, too, and that's part of my problem. You throw me off balance. I can't think when I'm around you. "

He unlocked the door, swinging it open. "Get back to the booth. I'll find Vanessa and let her know everything's okay."

I hesitated. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"Are you finally headed home?"

I looked up from where I was sitting on the couch, my legs crossed and stared at Gina leaning against the open booth door. I shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"I'm guessing Vanessa left that for you earlier."

"Yeah, she stopped by to talk... about stuff."

She approached the couch and plopped down next to me, spotting the Jack Daniels on the table.

"Are you okay? You seemed a bit distracted tonight, not that I could tell by the music.

You had this place rocking off the hinges.

Vanessa was pleased at the number of compliments and requests she received. "

"Requests?"

"You know, for private parties and events." She stretched out, propping her feet up on the coffee table. "What do you say we get drunk and talk about whatever comes to mind? It'd be a shame for that liquor to go to waste."

I smiled softly. "You want me to get drunk and say something embarrassing."

"If it's about Asher, that's fine by me."

"There's nothing to say about him."

"Then what was going on in the hallway the other day and then later in the bathroom?"

My mouth dropped open at the smug look on the other woman's face. "Get your mind out of the gutter."

She giggled, reaching for the liquor bottle and the shot glass beside it. "That's how it always starts. A kiss or two then boom, you're doing the mambo in the club bathrooms."

"I didn't kiss him!"

She poured us both a shot and drank it, filling it again before shoving my shot glass toward me. I accepted it, holding it between my hands. "It's okay to be tempted. This club is definitely the place for it. Euphoria is named for exactly that reason."

"I'm not going to cross that line." I swallowed the liquor and shuddered. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that taste."

She grabbed my shot glass to fill it again. "That means you haven't had enough. Trust me, you'll stop noticing after a couple rounds. Tell me more about Sullivan. "

"Can we not talk about him? Everyone keeps asking about him, and I don't want to talk about him."

"Okay, fine. Let's talk about your birthday. Do you have any big plans?" She paused at the look that crossed my face. "Bad topic?"

"I hate birthdays. It's a long story about an ex I don't want to ever share, ever."

Gina grabbed the entire liquor bottle, taking a long swig from it. "Kick ass. That means I don't have to get you a gift."

I burst out laughing at the coyness on her face, the alcohol beginning to take effect and make me feel a hundred percent better.

"Good, I'll repay you in kind the next time your birthday rolls around.

"I took the bottle from her and sipped, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"I swear, does everyone know about my birthday in this place or what? "

"Not everyone. There's me, Asher, Vanessa, a few other bartenders..." She laughed when I groaned. "Hey, if you don't want news to spread, it won't spread."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Yeah, I'm totally lying."

I found myself laughing, the two of us passing the bottle back and forth until neither of us made any sense.

An hour later, Asher and Vanessa found us hysterically laughing. The empty bottle

sat haphazardly on the edge of the table. He shot Vanessa a look of amusement, a similar expression on her face.

"You know, it's impossible for the cleaning crew to get in here with you two drunkards refusing to leave."

"Wow," Gina giggled. "We should get out of here and hit up a bar."

Laughing, I leaned sideways to hit her on the arm. "We are in a bar!"

"You're both totally wasted. How nice." He shook his head and stepped forward to stop the bottle from sliding off the table.

In a surprise move, I was faster. I grabbed it, slamming it to my chest. "I'm not done with it!"

"Darlin', I think you are. It's empty."

"Aw!" Gina sighed. "He called you darlin' in that cute little accent of his!"

I wrapped my arms around the bottle, lightly kicking the side of her leg with my foot. "Shut up, you are so drunk!"

"Am not!"

"You're both drunk," Vanessa interrupted. Despite my protests, she snatched the bottle easily from my hands. "Gina, you rode with me, and you're leaving the same way. Rory, Asher's going to take your keys, so you don't get any bright ideas, and he'll take you home."

I expect you to be here on time tomorrow. "

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

"Tomorrow?" I whined. "But it's Wednesday! "

"You said you wanted to work."

"But I'm drunk, you said so!" I sputtered.

Vanessa chuckled. "In that case, she can come in bright and early tomorrow, and Rory, you can enjoy your headache."

With a groan, Gina flopped against the couch.

I tripped for the second time on the way to his car, and once again, he reached out to steady me before I fell. I giggled as he propped me against the car and fished his keys from his pocket. "I am so drunk!"

"I've noticed." He opened the passenger door. "Inside you go, hopefully in one piece, please."

"You're so sweet." I tapped his cheek with my hand. "So sweet."

"My mother raised me right." I slipped, Asher grabbing my elbow and directing me into the passenger seat. "Whoa. Thanks. You know who else says that? Keanu Reeves. He says whoa a lot."

Shaking his head, he shut the door and walked around to the other side of his black Toyota Tundra.

He climbed into the driver's seat, lowering the volume on the radio, and started the engine.

He pulled into traffic with one hand on the wheel, his right arm leaning on the center console. "What's your address?"

Grunting, I struggled with my seat belt. "You don't already know?" I yanked on the strap. "Isn't that in my paperwork, too?"

"I looked over your information. I didn't say I memorized it."

"Well, you certainly memorized my birthday! What the hell is going on with this fucking seat belt?"

"I remembered your birthday because it's this month.

There was nothing sinister about it." He hit the brake as we were stopped by a red light.

Undoing his belt, he reached out to grab the lock at my hip.

"Sit back, Rory." I didn't move. He shot me an exasperated look before reaching across to grab the strap.

"Asher?"

His gaze shifted to mine, our faces inches away from each other, with his arm stretched across my chest. "Yes, Rory?"

"You're pretty for a guy. Did you know that? Of course, you know that." I trailed my fingers across his chin. I dropped my hand. "Asher?"

He swallowed, his gaze lingering on my mouth. "Yes?"

"The light's green. "

He swore under his breath, clicking my seat belt. He settled back as someone blew their horn behind us. Rolling his eyes, he pressed on the gas, and the vehicle roared through the intersection. He released a long stream of air harshly through his nose. "I need your address."

"Too bad. I don't know," I sighed. "I live with Sullivan. He's not there. I don't want to be there either."

"You can't sleep on the street."

"I can sleep with you!"

The truck swerved but thankfully stayed on the road. "You can do what?"

"Well, not with you!" Laughing, I swatted his arm. "I can sleep at your place! You're rich; you've probably got a huge house with twenty beds!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

I leaned on the center console toward him, a teasing smile on my face. "About how big your house is?" I wiggled my eyebrows then sat back, rubbing my throat. "Stupid belt is trying to cut my throat." I frowned. "I think I left my duffel bag in my locker."

We were stopped by another red light, and he hit the brake as gently as he could. "You can get it tomorrow."

"I'm not going back tomorrow, remember?" I sighed at the sound of my seat belt

popping loose. "Asher, my belt! I need you to fix it again."

"You are going to be the death of me."

"Blame the belt maker! "

He smiled, but he didn't move. "I fully blame Jack Daniels."

"Yummy Jack. Do you have Jack at that huge house of yours?"

He pressed on the gas when the light turned green. "You're not having any more liquor tonight." He shook his head as he noticed me pouting out of the corner of his eye. "That doesn't work on me, Rory."

As soon as we parked in his driveway, I climbed out of the car, almost slipping. He steadied me, his hand on my arm. "I told you to watch your step, darlin'."

"I can't help it if your car is eighty feet off the ground!" I shouted.

Wincing, he covered my mouth with his hand. "You have to be quiet, Rory! It's four in the morning!" He quickly jerked his hand away. "Did you lick my hand?"

"What? No, my lips are parched."

"I felt you-" He shook his head. "I'm not standing in my driveway at four in the morning arguing about whether or not you licked my hand. I'm not."

"I think you are, sir." I poked his chest. "Wow, do you work out?" I poked him again. "Cause, wow."

He laughed at my dazed expression. "You're going to regret this in the morning and

not because of the headache."

"Says you." I grinned, dizzy, but something inside me twisted. Because deep down, I knew he was right .

He started to pull away, but my grip on him tightened. "Rory..."

"I can't walk."

"Nor can you operate a seat belt. It's amazing."

"If you're trying to get in my pants, you're gonna need better compliments."

He placed his hands on my hips, mindful of the fact we were standing in his driveway where all of his neighbors could see had they been awake. No doubt a few of them were currently glued to their windows by now. "Compliments aren't what you want right now."

"And what do I want?" I squealed when he suddenly scooped me up into his arms. "Not so fast, the world is spinning!"

Grunting, Asher carried me to the front door, taking the stairs two steps at a time.

He entered the living room, sitting me down on the couch, and I flopped back against the huge cushions, watching him with hooded eyes as he disappeared into the kitchen.

He returned with a glass of water and stopped in the doorway at the sight of me curled up with a pillow, my eyes shut.

"Rory, are you awake?" He lowered the glass onto the coffee table, quietly removing my shoes, and shifted me comfortably on my side. Grabbing a huge fleece blanket

from the back of the couch, he covered me with it.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

The scent of coffee was the first thing I noticed.

The second was the blanket tucked under my chin.

My head throbbed, my mouth tasted foul, and my memories were...

blurry. I sat up slowly, the blanket slipping down my shoulders.

I was in my clothes from the night before, minus my shoes.

A glass of water and two ibuprofen waited on the coffee table.

As if summoned by the movement, Asher appeared from the hallway, barefoot, dressed in joggers and a plain black T-shirt, holding a steaming mug in one hand and a phone in the other. "You live."

"Barely. Did I...?"

"You licked my hand and tried to seduce my seat belt."

I groaned, dropping my face into my hands. "Please tell me I didn't say anything else embarrassing. "

"You called me pretty."

I peeked at him through my fingers. "I regret nothing."

He chuckled, setting his mug down and leaning on the back of the couch. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm surviving." I cleared my throat. "Thank you for last night. I can't remember the last time I got that drunk. I'm sorry I made it weird."

His expression softened. "Rory, whatever you're figuring out, I'm your friend. You have nothing to apologize for; we all have our low points."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

His phone buzzed. Pulling his cell from his pocket, his eyes narrowed as he stared down at the screen.

"What is it?" I paused when my phone started buzzing, one vibration after the other, and snatching my phone from the coffee table, I swiped open the screen, literally feeling the color drain from my face.

Sullivan Masters' Girlfriend Spotted Leaving Club with Asher Lark—Hollywood's Golden Boy #2?

Beneath it, there was a photo of last night. His arm was around my waist, his hand on the small of my back. My arms around his neck. I didn't remember doing it, the two of us outside the club next to his truck .

I was startled as my phone suddenly rang. I barely noticed Asher lingering in the background, the phone ringing again before I decided to answer it.

"Sullivan..."

His voice came through cold and flat. "I'm going to ask one question, and I want you

to answer it honestly. Did you sleep with him?"

I didn't hesitate. "No."

"But you were with him."

"I was drunk. Gina and I stayed late, and I wasn't in any shape to go home alone—"

"So you went home with him," he cut in, his voice tight.

"He took care of me," I snapped. "That's it."

"I'm sorry if I'm not comforted by that. You told me nothing was happening between you two."

"Nothing is happening."

"Rory, the whole world thinks otherwise." His voice finally cracked a little. "And if I'm being honest? So do I."

I pressed a hand to my chest, trying to breathe. "You don't get to say that. Not when you've been distant, not when you haven't been calling me."

"I was trying to protect you! Trying to keep you out of this mess, to give you some privacy, but instead, you walked right into it with someone else."

"I didn't plan this."

"You let it happen. I don't think deep down you cared how it would appear to everyone, especially me. "

His words hit harder than I expected. I slumped against the couch, wondering how this suddenly spiraled into something uncontrollable. I hadn't gotten drunk with the intention to hurt anyone. I had simply wanted to escape for a split second, to disappear from the mess that was suddenly my life.

"Are we breaking up?"

He didn't answer right away. "I don't know what we're doing anymore."

This time, he didn't say he loved me. He simply hung up.

Forty-eight hours passed. He hadn't called.

There were no texts or messages explaining he needed distance or time.

I told myself it didn't hurt. That it was probably for the best, and I deserved it.

Back at Euphoria, the music felt too loud, the lights too bright.

The set list was solid, the crowd responsive, but everything inside me felt off.

I kept my head down, focusing on transitions, resisting every instinct to glance around for connection. I hadn't seen Asher since the morning after the photo went viral. He hadn't tried to talk to me, and somehow that made everything worse.

"You've been running at Level Ten Avoidance since you walked in tonight." Gina slid into the booth, shutting the door quietly behind her. "You gonna tell me what's up, or do I have to pretend I haven't seen the headlines?"

I kept my hands on the mixer. "There's nothing to tell."

She raised an eyebrow. "So the photos were a collective fever dream?"

"Nothing happened. I was drunk. He gave me a ride."

"But you didn't go home."

"I didn't want to go back to an empty house." My voice cracked on the last word, and I hated it.

"Okay. So nothing happened... but something's happening."

I didn't respond.

Gina sighed. "Have you talked to Sullivan?"

I shook my head, watching the lights swirl across the dance floor.

"He hasn't called or answered any of my texts."

I can't blame him for ignoring me. I told him I loved him, and then he had to see pictures of me and Asher...

"I ground my teeth together. "Nothing happened, it was a fucking error in judgment, and it's turned into be a malicious lie. Now, Sullivan won't won't call, and Asher won't look at me. "

"You're literally stuck in the worst episode of The Bachelor. "

I laughed, though I felt like crying. "Yeah, except the only thing I'm getting is a scandal for ratings."

She nudged my arm with hers. "He's here, by the way. He came in an hour ago. He's been hiding in his office for most of the night."

"He knows where I'm at, if he wanted to talk to me, he would have already."

"Maybe he's waiting for you to make that first move."

You said nothing happened, that it was a misunderstanding.

If there's one thing I know for sure about Asher, it's that if he says something, he means it.

Maybe you should ask yourself exactly what it is you're waiting on, him to call or for you to decide what truly makes you happy. "

I looked at her. "He's my boyfriend."

"Is he?" She walked out of the booth before I could answer her.

I sat on the edge of the bed, duffel packed at my feet. Sullivan found me in the bedroom doorway, his suitcase in his hand. He looked exhausted. For a second, neither of us spoke .

Finally, he set down his bag at his feet. "You're here."

"I didn't want to not be when you got back. It felt weird."

"This feels weird."

After the conversation with Gina, I had decided to call him one more time, and surprisingly, he had answered. His movie was moving into the final stages of pre-

production, his presence no longer needed until they finally started filming in a few weeks.

I nodded, unsure of exactly what to say. I went with honesty. "I haven't slept well the last couple of nights."

"Neither have I." He leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed. "I had the pleasure of seeing the photos again on the flight."

I didn't respond.

"They hurt, but what hurt more was realizing I wasn't surprised."

"I didn't do anything wrong. Regardless, I never meant to hurt you."

"I know." His voice was calm. "That's what makes it worse, Rory. You didn't mean to. It happened anyway."

I looked down at my hands. "I was so angry at you for being gone all the time. You didn't check in or text me."

"I didn't think you needed me to. I thought you were strong enough to hold it all together."

"How can you say that with everything that was going on? With everything they were saying about me? "

He studied me, a frown on his face. "We had discussed all of that. You said you were okay, and then suddenly you're not?" He snorted. "I guess it's a good thing Asher was there, so you didn't truly do something scandalous."

"This isn't about him. I didn't fall into someone else.

I started realizing how alone I felt when you were supposed to be the one I depended on.

You make it sound like I betrayed you in some way.

I got drunk and crashed at a friend's house.

I would never have judged you in the same way had you done that. "

"I have a job to do, I can't be here every second of the day to make sure you're..." He exhaled. "We're supposed to be in a trusting relationship. You said you loved me, but the minute I'm not here, you turned to someone else for support."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. I tried very hard to be that person, the one you thought you saw in Australia. It took forever to say I love you because deep down, I wasn't sure. I care about you, but I don't think we're right for each other anymore."

He looked up at the ceiling for a long second. When he looked at me again, his voice was low and steady. "You're probably right."

"I hate that it's ending this way."

"Me too."

The VIP party was in full swing.

Lights pulsed across the floor in gold and amber, glasses clinked, and laughter floated through the air.

I stood near the edge of the crowd, drink in hand, heels already making me regret listening to Vanessa.

She had ordered me to mingle. I was off the clock, not allowed to lurk in the booth all night.

So now I was here, smiling when spoken to, nodding through conversations I barely registered, pretending I wasn't scanning the room every five seconds.

I had never been so aware of someone in the room without looking at them.

Asher was across the room, talking to a group of investors near the bar.

He was dressed in sharp black, sleeves rolled up enough to feel unfair. He hadn't looked at me once.

"Need another?" Gina held up an empty glass beside me, her eyebrows raised.

"I doubt another episode of drunk me is a good idea."

She followed my gaze, lips twitching. "Oh. Got it."

"I didn't say anything."

"Why do you look like someone died? "

I let out a hollow laugh. "Because something did."

She didn't ask what. Instead, she nudged her drink toward me. "At least toast the end of something that mattered."

I clinked her glass gently with mine and took a sip. It burned, but not enough.

"Did you do the breaking, or did he?"

"We both did," I shrugged. "We realized ultimately it wasn't working. I want to cry," I added. "Or break something."

"You're not ready to cry yet. You're in the numb zone." She sipped her champagne. "Besides, we don't break things here. We seduce lighting rigs and kill with bass drops. It's much more productive, and Vanessa doesn't send us a bill."

I managed a real laugh this time. I sensed him before I saw him. Gina glanced between us, before shooting me a small smile and disappearing into the crowd. I shifted uneasily on my heels as he came to a stop next to me.

"Enjoying the party?"

I didn't look at him. "I'm trying."

"You clean up well."

Readjusting my grip on my glass, I forced myself to look at him. "Was that a compliment?"

Asher looked calm and composed, and somehow it made the uncomfortable feeling in my gut feel worse. "It's merely an observation, but if you want to take it as a compliment, I won't argue." His eyes never shifted from me. "You look like you're trying hard not to see me."

"Vanessa asked me to be sociable," I shot back.

"Right," he chuckled, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes. "Well, you're doing a great job appearing you'd rather be anywhere else."

We stared at each other, that familiar heat rising in the silence.

"Why are you here?"

He shrugged. "Same reason you are. Pretending everything's fine."

"I'm not pretending."

"Sure, you look totally fine."

"What the hell do you want from me?" I glared at him, cradling the champagne glass against my chest. I suddenly couldn't stop the wave of annoyance that crashed over me, the last few weeks taking a toll on my patience. "Did you come all the way over here to hurl veiled insults at me? You've been ignoring me all day. As you can see, I'm fine."

I don't need anyone, especially you, checking up on me. "

Something flashed across his eyes. He took a step back. "I'll leave you to it then."

He faded into the crowd, swallowed by the lights and the sound before I could think of anything to say. I downed the rest of my drink.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

With the club closed, an unfamiliar kind of quiet settled over the place.

Only the sound of my own footsteps echoed through the building as I carried two coffees.

Asher sat on the edge of the stage, reading something on his phone, sleeves pushed up, sneakers unlaced.

He looked up when I approached, expression unreadable.

"I brought a peace offering." I lifted the cups.

He arched his brow. "Am I supposed to guess which one's poisoned?"

"No, that one's mine." I handed him the other cup. His fingers brushed mine, and I ignored the warmth that momentarily unsettled me.

He took a sip, his eyes lingering on me a little longer than necessary. I settled onto the stage beside him, and for a few minutes, we drank our coffees in silence, side by side, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"You're here early."

I lowered my cup into my lap. "I spent the first part of the morning looking for an apartment. I need to borrow the printer, so I can get my employment verification for the property manager."

That made him pause. "Do you need help moving your things?"

I stared down into my coffee, watching the swirl of cream fade. "I don't have anything to move. I don't own a vehicle, I always used Sullivan's. That's next on the list."

"Take the night off."

"I couldn't do that to you guys," I shook my head. "Gina's talented in a lot of ways, but she's a terrible DJ."

He chuckled, his shoulder brushing mine. I didn't move. "You're allowed to take time off, you know."

"I'm not used to people giving me permission."

He gave me a half smile. "Then get used to it."

I looked at him, really looked at him, at his quiet confidence, the way he never pushed. I wanted to say thank you. I didn't.

Sighing, I slid off the stage. "I need to get going."

He said nothing, and I walked quickly up the stairs to the break room. A row of computers lined the back wall, set up for employees who needed pay statements, manage their PTO, or watch mind-numbing state-mandated training videos.

Minutes later, I was cursing under my breath as the printer jammed again. On the floor, one leg folded under me, I tried to pry a rogue page free without tearing it in half.

"You know," Asher's voice came from the doorway, "I think this place is actively trying to ruin your life."

I didn't look up. "If I die here, make sure they play a remix of my last set at the funeral."

He laughed as he approached me. "Need backup?"

"Only if you're trained in printer CPR."

He crouched beside me, close enough that I felt the warmth of him along my arm. "Let me."

"You're not going to fix it," I warned, sitting back slightly as he took over.

"Confidence, Rory. Confidence."

The silence stretched as we knelt there, shoulders brushing, breathing the same dusty air and the faint scent of printer ink and cologne. I shifted slightly, the small space growing smaller.

"This is kind of cozy," I muttered, voice too light to be casual.

He looked at me, eyes steady, unreadable. "Yeah, it is."

His hand was inside the printer, but his body had shifted toward mine. Our legs were pressed side by side now, warmth bleeding through denim. My hand rested beside his on the floor, fingers curled tight to stop myself from doing something stupid.

I looked at his mouth, then I looked away.

Asher pulled the paper free with one clean tug. "Mission accomplished." He stood, offering his hand. I hesitated a beat too long before taking it. He pulled me up and didn't let go right away. His hand lingered in mine.

"Um, thanks."

He lifted his hand slowly, deliberately, and reached for a loose curl that had fallen over my cheek. He brushed it back behind my ear, fingers trailing across my skin. My breath hitched. His hand dropped, but his gaze stayed locked on mine.

"I should try to print those forms again," I whispered.

Neither of us moved. His eyes dropped to my mouth. "Probably."

I withdrew my hand from his and took a step back, turning to face the computer.

He exhaled through his nose. "Rory." I stopped, back turned. "Tell me I'm not imagining this."

My breath caught. I wanted to turn around and say something bold. I remained where I was, staring at the computer screen in silence, afraid to look anywhere else.

Without another word, he walked out.

I sagged into the desk chair. I hit Print and almost cried in relief as the printer worked perfectly, the papers sliding easily into the tray.

Two days later, I was in the break room at Euphoria, warming up takeout, scrolling through my phone like it was any other quiet moment, until the notification popped up.

Sullivan Masters Confirms Breakup with DJ Fetish.

My thumb hovered. I tapped the link. The quote that appeared next was polished, probably drafted by a PR rep in under ten minutes without a thought to the fact that real humans were involved.

"After a lot of reflection, Rory and I have decided to end our relationship. It wasn't an easy choice, but it was a necessary one. I have the deepest respect for her and the time we shared. We kindly ask for privacy as we both move forward."

I snorted under my breath, closing the article, and almost childishly, I tossed my phone onto the table, the thud breaking the silence of the room .

Gina stepped into the break room, raising an eyebrow as she eyed my phone. She sat down beside me at the table. "You okay?"

I turned my phone around to show her the headline.

She winced. "Damn. You didn't know that was dropping?"

"Nope." I set the phone face-down on the table.

"Want me to go unplug the router and start a fake fire?"

"Tempting, but I'm fine, truly." I was, but it didn't stop the burn in my chest. I hadn't realized how final it would feel seeing it in print.

She watched me carefully. "You know they'll be waiting to see how you respond."

"I'm not going to post anything."

"Nothing at all?"

Shaking my head, I picked at the label on my water bottle. "I don't care what anyone thinks about it. Let him have the narrative. He's a celebrity. I'm just a DJ, and that's the only thing I care about right now, getting back to that."

She nodded, quiet for a second. "You sure you're okay?"

I wasn't, not completely, but I was done bleeding for a narrative that didn't care about the truth. "I'm sure."

"You're not just a DJ, you know," Gina studied me, her gaze soft with understanding. "You're a wonderful person who took a chance on love, and it didn't work out."

I gave her a small smile. "Thanks."

She bumped her shoulder against mine. "Don't thank me for telling the truth."

ONE MONTH LATER

Summer heat clung to the walls, and the dance floor throbbed with sound.

I was back in the booth, comfortable, focused, alive in a way I hadn't been in months.

Asher had been everywhere I looked the entire night, arms crossed, not saying a word.

Something felt different in the way he watched me.

His eyes followed me with a sharper kind of hunger.

The second I stepped out of the room, he was standing in front of me.

"What do you want?"

"Same thing I wanted the day you wouldn't turn around at the printer. "

For weeks, something had been happening, changing in a way I was constantly knocked off balance. Maybe it had always been there, my mind distracted by the whirlwind that was my doomed relationship with Sullivan.

Before I could process what was happening, I grabbed his shirt, clutching it in my hands, dragging him closer as his other hand slid to my waist, pulling me flush against him.

His mouth devoured mine, and I kissed him.

I'd forgotten every reason I shouldn't. At that moment, suddenly none of them mattered.

We broke apart for breath, and I tugged on his shirt, pulling him across the hall to the storage closet.

I had barely shut the door before I was pushed up against it.

His hands flattened on either side of my head, his body caging mine in. It didn't feel close enough.

"You sure about this?"

"I've never been more sure about anything."

His mouth found mine again, deeper this time, more claiming than cautious. One of his hands slid beneath the hem of my shirt, skimming my bare skin. When he finally pulled back, his breath was ragged, eyes locked on my mouth. "I've been thinking about this since the day I saw you."

I tugged him in for another kiss, and he groaned, his mouth trailing down my jaw, to my neck, to the sensitive spot beneath my ear. I gasped, my head falling back against the wall, fingers tightening in his shirt .

"You drive me crazy," he muttered against my skin. "Do you know that?"

"Good because I've spent every moment lately thinking about how it would feel to finally have your mouth on me... until I forget who I am."

He moaned, and I swear I felt it all the way down to my toes. His hands slid down to the backs of my thighs, and suddenly I was off the ground, his body pinning mine, the door holding me up. I wrapped my legs around him without thinking, heat pooling low in my stomach.

His mouth found mine again, weeks of restraint finally breaking. I melted into it, fingers threading into his hair. His hands were everywhere, gripping my waist, sliding up my spine.

The sounds he made in response nearly undid me. His lips left mine long enough to trail down my jaw, then lower to the hollow of my throat where his mouth lingered.

I arched against him. "Asher—" My voice broke around his name, half a plea, half a warning.

Breathing hard, he pulled back to look at me. His eyes were blown wide, mouth red. "Tell me if this is too much."

"It's not enough." I tugged at his shirt, desperate to feel skin, needing him closer. He let go to pull it over his head and toss it aside. My hands were on him immediately, warm, firm muscle and skin beneath my palms .

He groaned as I kissed down his throat, letting my hands roam, savoring every inch. His fingers found the hem of my shirt, pausing.

"Off."

He lifted it over my head, his gaze dropping the second it hit the floor. "Fuck," he whispered, voice thick. "You're..."

I didn't let him finish. I grabbed his face and kissed him again. When his hands

reached behind to unhook my bra, I trembled, but I didn't stop him. I wanted this. I wanted him. The moment it came off, his hands were back on me, lips trailing fire across my collarbone, my chest, everywhere I ached.

He looked up, eyes heavy with want, and pressed his forehead to mine. "Last chance," he whispered. "Tell me to stop."

"Don't you dare."

He carried me across the room, laying me gently on the couch.

It was a blur to remove our clothes, and when he finally pushed into me, we both stilled.

His forehead pressed to mine, his fingers lacing through mine.

I lost my breath the second he moved, slow at first. I met his thrusts easily and arched into him, his name slipping from my mouth again and again.

"Rory," he groaned. "God, you feel..."

"I know," I whispered. "Please, please..."

He kissed me through each thrust, hitting deeper each time, making my body unravel around him. My release hit hard, shattering through me, and he followed a breath later, burying his face in my neck as he broke apart in my arms.

The room was silent except for the sound of our breathing. When he finally looked up, his hair was damp, his eyes soft. "You're going to ruin me, you know that?"

"That's okay." My fingers brushed down his jaw. "I'm a little ruined, too."

We lay there for a moment longer, tangled in each other. His thumb traced slow circles against my hip. "What are you thinking about?"

"Whether the club has a spare blanket stashed somewhere. This couch is great for making out, not so much for sleeping."

"We could always try again. Solely for research."

I elbowed him gently. "You're insatiable."

"I'm honest."

I let my head rest on his chest, my palm flattening against the warmth of his skin. "Don't ruin this with your charm."

"Too late."

We froze as a sharp knock rattled the door, followed by Gina's unmistakable voice. "Hey, Rory? Are you in there?"

I scrambled to grab my shirt from the floor, shoving it over my head in pure panic. "Uh, yeah?"

"You weren't at the booth. Vanessa was wondering where you— Wait, why is the door locked? "

I yanked my jeans on one leg at a time, stumbling half-dressed across the room as Asher fumbled for his shirt behind me.

"Give me a second!" I called out, tripping over his belt.

"Oh, my god." Gina's voice was much closer now, clearly right at the door. "Oh. My. GOD."

I could practically hear the grin in her voice. I unlocked the door halfway and cracked it open, trying to peek through without revealing my flushed face or Asher buttoning his jeans behind me.

She stood there, eyebrows arched so high they were practically in her hairline. She leaned one shoulder against the door frame. "So... was this a staff meeting? Or more of a private rehearsal?"

"Can you not?"

Asher appeared behind me, fully dressed. "Hi, Gina."

"Hi, Asher," she replied sweetly. "Nice shirt. Or is that Rory's? Hard to tell in this lighting."

He coughed, trying not to laugh.

"I'm going to die," I muttered.

"Nope," she chirped, stepping back. "But you are going to come back to the booth and face Vanessa eventually. Don't worry. I'll stall her. You've got about five minutes to look less like you've been thoroughly... never mind." She turned on her heel, cackling as she disappeared down the hallway.

I shut the door and leaned back against it, groaning .

Asher walked up, slid his hands around my waist again, and kissed my temple. "Well, that could've gone worse."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're enjoying this."

"Maybe a little."

"I hate you."

He grinned. "You really, really don't."

I sighed, but didn't move from his arms.

No, I didn't. Not even a little bit.

Later, after the club had cleared out and Gina had stopped smirking every time she looked at me, we found ourselves tucked away again, this time in the back corner of the rooftop, where no one could overhear us.

Asher leaned on the railing beside me, a few inches of space between us. "I should probably apologize." His voice was low, eyes fixed somewhere in the distance.

"Don't."

He looked at me. "You sure?"

"I wanted it. I think I needed it."

"I'm not good at this part," he admitted. "The morning-after conversations or the what are we now stuff. Usually I disappear before it has a chance to come up."

"Yeah, me too. This doesn't feel like that."

His jaw tensed. "No. It doesn't."

We stood in that quiet a little longer.

"I don't want to make promises I can't keep," I whispered.

"I'm not asking for any. I want to know if this was real for you. It was for me."

I studied the angles of his face, his eyes watching me with a hint of vulnerability lurking underneath. "It was real."

He stepped closer, enough that I could feel his warmth again. "I don't want to rush you. I'm not going anywhere. You should know that."

My throat tightened, a swell of something heavy and full sitting right behind my ribs. "I don't know what I'm doing," I confessed. "I'm figuring a lot of things out, regaining who I am again, but I know I don't want to pretend this didn't happen."

"Then we won't."

He brushed his knuckles against my hand. I laced my fingers through his and smiled.

Gina gave me a look as I passed the bar that was equal parts smug and nosy. I flipped her off discreetly. She blew me a kiss. Asher trailed a few paces behind me, suddenly very interested in his phone as if we hadn't made out like sinners on a church couch.

I tried to focus on resetting the booth, but when I looked up, he was watching. And every time he caught me watching him back, he smirked.

"Rory."

I turned to see Vanessa in the doorway, her face unreadable. My heart sank a little. "Hey."

"Can I see you for a minute?" She barely looked at him, as if knowing nothing she would say would matter to him. He ignored her, flipping casually through his phone from his position on the couch.

I followed her up to her office where she gestured me inside and shut the door behind us. She didn't sit. Neither did I.

"I don't care what you do in your free time, but you know I want to be kept in the loop when it comes to anything that might shift the dynamic in my club. "

"It won't affect anything."

She raised an eyebrow. "Does he know that?"

I swallowed and nodded again, unsure exactly what to say to diffuse the situation. My heart beat wildly in my chest, the thought of being fired suddenly a glaring possibility.

"So, it's something."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes, it's something."

She studied me for a moment, then, surprisingly, she smiled. "Good."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

Vanessa leaned a hip against the desk. "You've been walking around like a closed book since day one. Now you've got color in your face, passion in your sets, and a guy who would throw himself in front of a train if it meant buying you another five

minutes of sleep."

My lips twitched. "That's... dramatic."

She shrugged. "So is he." She studied me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I am."

She smiled again. "Then I'll leave it alone. I'm going to suggest keeping the storage room on lock-down from now on."

I couldn't stop myself from blushing. "Everyone knows, don't they? "

"Only everyone who has eyes... and ears," she smirked, motioning for the door.

"Now go play something filthy and unapologetic. You've earned it."

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

Most of the crew had cleared out, only a few lingering bodies at the bar.

Asher was waiting in the booth, leaning back with one hand on the mixer, the other tucked casually into his pocket.

He looked up when he saw me. I felt myself start to sweat at the look on his face, swallowing nerves that suddenly erupted at how much he truly affected me.

One look, and I would collapse into a puddle on the floor, my insides nothing but mush.

I slipped behind him. I reached for the volume slider to give my hands something to do.

"You good?"

I adjusted a knob that didn't need it. "Vanessa gave her blessing.... That and told me to keep the storage room off-limits. "

He chuckled softly, brushing his knuckles along the back of my hand. "You know, it wasn't the sex. I liked you before I ever touched you."

I didn't have anything clever to say back, something my chest cracking as if under a weight that I carried for far too long. I let go of the mixer, and did the only thing that felt right. I kissed him.

The break room smelled of burnt coffee and floor polish. I leaned against the counter,

eyes half-lidded, scrolling mindlessly through my notifications.

DJ Fetish and Hollywood Star Asher Lark Heat Up The Night!

My thumb froze over the screen. I tapped the article before I could stop myself. A photo of us leaving the club the night before, my hand on his chest and his mouth dangerously close to mine. A moment frozen in time that was stripped of everything it actually meant.

Australia's hottest DJ has moved on from Sullivan Masters... with his industry rival.

I stared at the screen for a full ten seconds before I locked it and set the phone face down on the counter. Fighting the urge to throw up, I stared at the phone, ignoring how it buzzed a happily little dance across the table.

Gina pushed open the break room door at that exact moment, a protein bar in one hand, iced coffee in the other. "Good afternoon, did you know you're trending?"

"You don't say?"

Ignoring my sass, she walked over and flipped my phone around. "Someone sent me the link five minutes ago. You and Asher are on the front page, complete with heavy breathing."

I rubbed my eyes. "Shit."

"You look hot, though," she offered, sipping her coffee. "He looks like a man who's finally been fed."

Groaning, I dropped my forehead against the table. "I hate it here."

"Rory? Are you okay?"

I didn't answer. It wasn't embarrassment or anger. I felt exposed, again .

The break room door creaked again. Gina glanced over her shoulder, lifting her eyebrows. "And that's my cue to leave."

I knew it was him without looking, her action and the way the room quieted too familiar to believe it was anyone else. Head on the table, I listened to her slip out, closing the door behind her with a little too much grace.

"Rory?"

I closed my eyes for a beat, then lifted my head to meet his gaze. He stood a few feet away, hands in his pockets. "You saw it?"

"It's kind of hard to miss. You're on half the front page of the internet."

"Of course I am.."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "There's nothing to say. It's happening again."

His brow furrowed. "What is?"

"This." I gestured vaguely. "Being a headline. Having something real turned into a punchline or a poll."

Asher approached the table slowly. "It's not a punchline to me."

"That's not the part I'm worried about."

"I know."

"I don't want this to become something you regret," I said, barely above a whisper .

His jaw tensed. He closed the space between us. I kept my eyes on him as he lowered himself into a chair beside me at the table, taking my hand in his. "I don't regret a single second of you."

"I need time to figure this out."

He brushed his fingers against mine. "You've got it."

"I need to do something."

"Okay." He didn't question me. He merely pressed his lips against my hand before releasing me, and he rose to his feet. "If you need me, you know where to find me."

I nodded, and after he left, I continued to sit there, staring at my phone. With a shaky hand, I retrieved it from the table. I scrolled to Sullivan's name and paused. I pressed it.

It rang three times when suddenly the line clicked.

"Rory?"

His voice felt too casual, as if I hadn't ripped us in half just weeks ago.

"There's an article about me."

He paused. "Which one? You've been making a lot of headlines lately. You've had quite the rebound."

I exhaled through my nose. "Is that why you didn't call to check on me? You were waiting for your ego to feel better?"

There was another pause on his side. "Don't pretend that I didn't try. You agreed to walk away. "

"No, I'm the one who stopped apologizing for needing more."

His voice shifted, smooth but edged. "So this thing with Asher? That's more?"

"I wanted you to hear it from me before someone else spun it into a lie. I don't know exactly what is happening with him, but it's happening on my terms. Regardless of how we ended things, I don't want you to think I'm doing it to hurt you."

"Okay."

That was all he said. There was no fight, no apology for the past or regret about where we had finally ended. All he offered was one last breath of something that used to be everything.

"I hope he knows what he's getting."

He hung up before I could ask what he meant.

Music pulsed softly over the speakers, more ambiance than beat. Chairs stacked, lights low, the kind of hush that only came after everyone else had left.

I slipped back in the booth, half-expecting Asher to be gone.

He wasn't. He sat on the stage steps, elbows on his knees, phone in his hands but not really looking at it.

His head lifted the second I stepped into view.

When our eyes met, he didn't smile. I couldn't find the strength to either, and I lowered myself beside him on the steps.

Without a word, he handed me a water bottle.

It was half-drunk, probably his, but I took it anyway.

After a long moment, he leaned back on his palms, stretching out his legs. "You okay?" he asked, not looking at me.

"No, but I'm getting there."

He nodded, understanding exactly what I meant. "Did you call him?"

I didn't flinch. "Yeah." I looked down at my hands. "I needed to close something, or at least stop reopening it."

"And?"

"I think I finally did."

He exhaled. "Good."

Hesitantly, I rested my head on his shoulder. He didn't move for a long time, then he reached over and laced our fingers together.

Somehow, I ended up at his house. I hadn't planned to stay over. I borrowed one of his t-shirts and curled up on the couch, smelling of sweat and music.

When he pulled a blanket over us and settled behind me, it felt like I belonged there. I let myself believe it. I ignored all the screaming alarms as I settled against him and closed my eyes. I was half-awake, head on his chest, when the buzz of his phone broke through the stillness.

"Shit."

I blinked up at him. "What?"

Asher sat up, already typing. "Vanessa. Twice. My publicist. My agent."

"What happened?"

He opened his email, and I watched his jaw tighten. "They want a statement about us."

Frowning, I sat up, staring at him. "About what?"

He turned the screen to me.

Sullivan Masters' Ex In Hot Club Affair With Rival Star - Breaks Her Silence in Private Call.

I stared at it, stunned.

"There's a quote from his camp. Someone's decided to spin your call like a betrayal. You know how drama sells."

My throat went dry.

"Did you say anything to him that could be twisted?"

"I don't know. I didn't think it mattered."

His jaw clenched. "It shouldn't, but they're going to make it matter."

I stood up, beginning to pace. "This is exactly what I didn't want. This is why I never wanted to do this in the open."

His voice was calm, but firm. "So what are you saying?"

My throat tightened. "I'm saying I don't know if I can do this, under a microscope with strangers dissecting every glance and every word I say."

He didn't speak right away.

"I thought I could handle the attention," I continued, pacing now, trying to outrun the weight of what I was saying. "I've done it before, but this feels different. They're trying to turn me into a version of myself I've worked so hard to bury."

I stopped moving and looked at him. "I need space."

"From me?"

I shook my head, but it didn't make what I was saying any easier.

"I need space from everything, especially the spotlight, and this version of me the world keeps trying to write without asking who I actually am."

" My voice cracked, but I didn't stop. "I can't lose myself again. I barely survived it the first time."

Asher looked like I'd peeled back something raw, something he didn't know how to put back, and yet, he nodded.

I grabbed my jacket from the back of the couch. He didn't move or try to stop me. He sat there, jaw clenched.

My hand on the knob of the door, I paused with my back to him. "I'm not walking away from you," I whispered. "I'm walking away from the version of me that lets other people decide who I am." I waited for him to say something, but he didn't.

I opened the door, stepped into the hallway, and closed it gently behind me.

The next few days, I buried myself in work, hours at the club, rehearsals, schedules, mixes.

Every time Asher texted, I answered. Every time he stopped by the booth, I smiled.

I wasn't cruel. I simply wasn't... available.

He noticed. He didn't say anything, not directly to me, but his touches were gentler.

His gaze lingered longer. It wasn't about him. It was everything else.

The change was subtle at first. A slower reply to my texts. A missed call he didn't follow up on. A night where he didn't stop by the booth at all. And then one night... he wasn't there. Not missing from the crowd but gone.

I tried to brush it off. I didn't have the right to expect anything. Still, I found myself

scanning the floor more than usual. Looking for that familiar shape leaning against the wall, arms crossed, eyes only on me. Nothing.

Gina caught me pacing near the bar, fingers fidgeting with the hem of my sleeve.

"Looking for someone?"

"What?"

She didn't smirk or tease me. "He's not here, Ro. You're not the only one who feels things, you know. You pulled away, and now he's pulling away, too."

"It's not that I don't want him."

"I get it. You're scared you do, especially after everything that happened with Sullivan."

That's when it landed. This wasn't about fear of being seen. It was about fear of needing someone who might not always wait.

Without another word to her, I left the club, focused on nothing more than reaching him.

His house sat dark from the street, windows glowing faint gold from one room.

I stood on the sidewalk for a full minute before I buzzed his door.

He didn't answer right away. I started to turn around when I heard the click of the lock.

The door opened slowly, revealing Asher in sweatpants and a black t-shirt, barefoot,

hair slightly damp like he'd recently gotten out of the shower. At first he didn't say anything and neither did I. He didn't stop me when I stepped inside.

"I know I've been distant." I shut the door behind me.

"And I know you've noticed." When he didn't react, I rushed onward.

"I didn't mean to hurt you." I let out a shaky breath.

"I told myself I was protecting us by pulling back. I see now that wasn't true because I was protecting only myself.

I was trying to stop from falling too hard, from needing you too much. "

His jaw clenched.

"And then you stopped showing up," I whispered. "That's when I realized I already do. I miss you, not the texts or the sex, but you. I can breathe when you're around. I miss that version of me I become when you're around."

He stepped closer in one slow movement. "Why now?"

"Because I thought I was being smart by holding back. All I was doing was watching something real walk away." I fidgeted with my hands, my shirt, anything to ground me to reality. "I don't want to be afraid of this anymore."

"What are you saying, Rory?"

"I'm saying I'm all in if you still want me. "

His hand reached up, fingers brushing the side of my face. "Come here."

I went to him willingly, wrapping my arms around him as if I feared I'd fall, and I closed my eyes at the feeling of him holding me almost so tightly I couldn't breathe.

Asher leaned back to look at me. His eyes searched mine. Whatever he saw there must've been enough, because he smiled, and he bent to kiss me, anchoring us back together, one heartbeat at a time.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

It wasn't some red carpet moment. It was a normal night at Euphoria.

The kind of night with a smaller crowd. Industry people, insiders, regulars who knew the club's heartbeat by name.

The lights were low and the bass steady, the atmosphere electric in that effortless kind of way.

I was adjusting the tempo on the second set when I felt it, a subtle shift in the air.

I didn't look over my shoulder, simply finishing my track before I stepped away from the table.

Asher was near the edge of the floor, in a fitted jacket and black tee, a drink in his hand. The second our eyes met, his mouth curved, an expression that shouted to the world, mine .

I walked straight into his space, placed my hand lightly on his chest, and stood on my toes to kiss him. There was nothing shy about the caress, nothing showing an uncertainty, but one that made a firm statement.

The room didn't gasp. There weren't camera flashes, only a hum of awareness. A few people exchanged knowing glances, and there was no mistaking Gina's slow-clap from across the bar.

When I pulled away, he smiled down at me. "So we're doing this?" he asked, low enough that it was only for me to hear.

I threaded my fingers through his. "Yeah, I think we are."

A photo of us went up within the hour, a candid that was blurry with low-light, obviously taken from someone's phone in the crowd. It was already on at least three gossip accounts before I made it to the backroom.

The comments were a war zone.

@shay_loves_books: Asher was seen kissing Rory in the VIP section at Euphoria! they're together!?

@keiona.nicole86: Is this real life or a Wattpad AU?!

@charity.riddle1: finally. been shipping this since he showed up

@shayisbooked: she downgraded huh

@michaella.r3ads: she looks happy for once. y'all should chill

@ashley_reads_smut: ok but when is the collab dropping???

Gina peeked over my shoulder and gave a low whistle. "Fuck, you broke the internet."

I lowered the phone. "I didn't mean to."

"Didn't mean to fall for him either, did you?"

I rolled my eyes, not answering her, continuing to scroll the endless comments. I paused only when she shoved her phone into my face.

"Tell me you've seen this. It's on his Instagram!"

I blinked at the screen, trying to make sense of what I was looking at. I looked at the photo of me and Sullivan, one I didn't remember being taken. His arm was around my shoulders. my head tilted toward him. We looked... happy.

Underneath it, there was a caption.

Some people move on like it never mattered. I'm not built that way.

The comments below the image were already spiraling.

@glennyssduarte: we were rooting for you two :(

@jenthelibrarian_: that's lowkey a guilt trip

@positivityb4negativity: boy please, she upgraded

@amymartineztriplebphotography: so desperate

Gina didn't say anything for a long moment. "He's not over you."

I shook my head. "That's not what that is."

"It's not?"

"That's an attempt at control. He couldn't be the one to walk away, so now he wants to be the one everyone pities."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you gonna respond?"

"I'm pretty sure I already did."

"Oh shit, incoming at two o'clock."

She scrambled off before I could question her, and I blinked in surprise as once again a phone was shoved into my face. I stared at it, then at Asher, eyes trailing his tight jaw, and how hard his eyes were as he peered down at me.

"Is this a fucking joke?"

"It's Sullivan."

"I know it's Sullivan," he snapped. "I didn't think he'd be this much of a manipulative, little—" He ran a hand through his hair. "He posted that knowing exactly what he was doing. He wants sympathy. He wants to make you the villain for having the audacity to move on from him."

"I know."

"I want to punch him in the fucking face."

The words jolted me in their raw honesty. "You don't need to."

"I know I don't. It doesn't mean I don't want to." He exhaled sharply and shoved his phone into his pocket. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I hate that he knows how to pull strings."

Asher stepped in close, his hands warm against my hips. "He only has power if you give it to him." He tugged me into his arms, and I went willingly. "I hate that he gets under your skin."

"I hate that I let him," I whispered. I looked up at him. "I didn't think you'd be this mad."

"I'm not mad." He brushed his fingers along my jaw. "I'm furious, but not at you."

I grabbed his shirt. "I don't want to think about him anymore."

"Then don't."

He kissed me, and every single thought in my head went quiet.

The next morning, I was wrapped in one of his shirts, feet tucked beneath me on his couch, scrolling through my phone while he made breakfast barefoot in the kitchen.

Another headline dropped, another comment with an attempt to spin the story.

I stared down at my phone, unable to look away from the headline of the article.

Sullivan Masters Reportedly 'Heartbroken'—Close Source Claims He Thought Rory Would Come Back.

Underneath it, a photo of me from last night in Asher's arms. I stared at it for a long time, thumb hovering over the screen.

He appeared behind me, holding a cup of coffee. He caught the headline on my screen and let out a sharp breath. "You want me to throw your phone in the ocean?"

I accepted the coffee. "I don't want the hassle of having to get a new phone."

He sat beside me, arm draped across the back of the couch. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

His eyebrow lifted.

"I don't owe anyone a statement. I don't owe the internet closure. He can bleed for attention all he wants. I'm not interested in playing that game anymore."

Asher studied me for a second, then leaned in, kissed my temple. "I'm proud of you."

I looked over at him. "Thanks, it took me long enough."

"Guess I'll keep making breakfast then."

"Guess you better."

He disappeared back into the kitchen, mumbling something about eggs.

I stayed on the couch, fingers idly tracing the lip of my coffee mug, the photo pulled up on my phone.

I stared at it one last time, then locked the screen and set it face down on the table.

Quietly, I padded into the kitchen quietly, watching him at the stove, shirtless, sweatpants hanging low on his hips, the morning sun cutting across the muscles in his back.

I leaned against the doorway. "You always cook shirtless? "

He glanced over his shoulder, smirking. "Only when I'm trying to impress someone."

"You're doing a terrible job," I lied.

"Is that so?" He turned off the burner and crossed the kitchen slowly, the playful glint in his eyes shifting into something darker.

When he reached me, his hand found my waist, sliding beneath the hem of his shirt I was wearing.

"You're walking around looking that attractive and expect me to concentrate on eggs?"

I caught his bottom lip between my teeth. "I'm not hungry for eggs."

His mouth was on mine in an instant. His hands gripped my thighs, lifting me onto the counter, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, tugging him closer until there was nothing left between us.

His hands slid beneath the oversized shirt, fingertips tracing fire up my spine as he pushed the fabric higher, exposing skin inch by inch.

He broke the kiss. "Take it off."

I slipped the shirt over my head, and it hit the floor. His mouth found my neck, kissing a trail from my collarbone to the spot below my ear that made me shiver. I arched into him, fingers curling into his hair, tugging him closer, needing more.

He made a sound, low and desperate, against my skin, then lifted me easily, carrying me down the hall with my legs wrapped tight around his waist. I didn't care where we were going. I just needed him.

We barely made it to the bed. Even as he laid me back as if I was fragile, there was nothing gentle about the kiss that followed.

He traced the line of my thigh with his palm, sliding his hand higher, watching my face as I gasped and tangled my fingers in the sheets.

His mouth followed, slow and purposeful, until I was trembling beneath him .

When he moved over me, I couldn't shake the realization that hit me. I was his, and he was mine.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

ONE WEEK LATER

The bass thumped through Euphoria, pulsing in my veins as I guided the track toward its peak. With a quick twist of a knob, I sent the current song spiraling into a cascading finish, ready to blend into the next. My heart raced with the rhythm, adrenaline and joy tangled together.

I spotted Asher near the bar where he usually watched my set.

He never missed a performance if he could help it.

I flicked my gaze back to my equipment, queuing up the next beat, but something in the corner of my eye made me pause.

I risked another look. A woman leaned in toward him, her blonde hair catching the light as she laughed at something he said.

She rested a hand on his forearm, the act casual, almost familiar.

I didn't recognize her, but the way she leaned into him told me everything I needed to know.

I tore my eyes back to the turntables, forcing my hands to keep moving. The next track's intro was already humming in my headphones. I took a steadying breath, trying to shove aside the image of her hand on his arm. It shouldn't matter. He was with me now.

My gaze darted up again. The woman stood hip-to-hip with Asher, her body angled into his.

She wore a stylish off-the-shoulder top, long legs poured into tight jeans, confidence radiating from every pore.

Next to her, his tall frame was relaxed, one hand casually in his pocket, the other holding his drink.

He gave her a polite smile at something she said, reserved, but engaged.

They were close enough that she had to lean up to speak into his ear over the music.

As she did, her lips almost grazed his skin.

He tilted his head down toward her, saying something back.

The intimacy of the gesture sent a pulse of hurt through me, swift and unexpected.

Jealousy speared through me so sharp I nearly missed a cue. I tore my eyes away, heart hammering. The sensory overload crashed into me alongside the jealousy, making my vision blur for an instant.

I tried to refocus on the track that was ending. With a shaking hand, I slid the crossfader to bring in the next song. I could feel the kick drum in my ribs, a physical reminder to keep the show going. So I forced a grin, raising my arm to hype the crowd as the new song took over.

A cheer rippled through the dancers.

I dared another glance toward the bar. She laughed again, tossing her head back, and I

saw Asher's face light with a small grin.

Whoever she was, she wasn't some random girl from the floor.

I tried to tell myself he was being friendly, that maybe she'd shown up uninvited and he was too polite to brush her off.

They're probably exchanging pleasantries. Old friends.

Each time my gaze found them again, a new fissure cracked through my composure. One moment, he nodded at something she was saying, his lips curving into that gentle half-smile I knew so well. The next, she was leaning closer, whispering directly against his ear. He didn't exactly step back.

I forced my eyes shut for a beat, drawing in a breath that tasted of copper and nerves.

When I opened them, I stole one last look at him.

I watched as she stood on tiptoe and said something close to his ear.

His eyes flicked upward, and his gaze met mine.

I saw his brow crease, an uncertainty in his expression.

He stepped back from her, opening a small space between them as if suddenly aware of how it might look.

I bit down hard on my lower lip, fighting the swirl of emotions threatening to overtake me.

I threw a bright smile toward the crowd and raised an arm in feigned triumph as the

next chorus hit.

They hollered back, feeding off my energy.

Only I knew it was fake. I chanced a final glance toward the bar.

Asher was still there, a few feet away from her now, his attention torn between her and the stage.

Even across the distance, I could see the concern etched in his face as he watched me. I tore my gaze away, focusing on the kaleidoscope of dancing bodies instead.

The music had barely faded when Gina appeared with a water bottle and a proud grin. I took it with a nod and the tightest smile I could manage.

As soon as I stepped down from the booth, I saw the woman again. She was still standing there, her drink held loosely in one hand. Her body was angled toward Asher, who stood stiffly beside her, arms crossed, jaw tight. When he spotted me, a look of relief crossed his face, but she moved first.

She stepped toward me, hand outstretched, smile polished to perfection. "You must be Rory." The words were wrapped in honey with a hint of something sharper beneath. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Can't say the same." I shook her hand with a firm grip.

"I'm Elle Holloway. Asher and I go way back."

"That explains the lingering."

Her eyes lit with amusement, and maybe a touch of something more. "Old habits."

"I'm sure." I gave her a thin smile.

Asher stepped closer to me, his hand gently brushing the small of my back. "Elle was just leaving."

Her gaze flicked between us, her expression unreadable before slipping back into something more composed. "Actually, I was telling Ash how happy I am for you both."

The way she shortened his name made me grind my teeth. I tilted my head. "You always congratulate people by touching their arm for twenty minutes?"

Her smile twitched, faltered slightly before she forced it back into place.

"Touché." Elle turned to Asher. She kissed his cheek and walked off with the kind of sway you only learn from breaking hearts.

I didn't say anything until we were out of sight, tucked in the far corner of backstage, behind crates and curtain lines. The second I knew we were alone, I spun to face him. "Who is she?"

"She's an actress."

I snorted. "Of course she is. Who exactly was she to you?"

"We filmed a movie together once, and we dated for a while."

"How long is a while?"

He sighed, but he humored me by remaining there, answering my questions without avoidance. "About five years. We broke up right around the time Euphoria opened."

Her career started to take off, and we wanted different things."

I wanted to continue questioning him, but I was burning deep down with a feeling I suddenly couldn't rationalize, something I hadn't felt in a long time about another person. "She touched you like she had some kind of a claim to you."

"She doesn't."

"I know that." I stepped closer to him, all the way into his space. "But watching her pretend that you were still hers? That lit something in me I didn't realize I could feel."

He stared down at me, not moving.

"I'm not jealous because I think you want her. I'm jealous because I know she wants you, and I'm not in the mood to play polite when someone makes it that obvious."

His hand came up, fingertips brushing my waist. "You think I didn't notice?"

"I realized watching you with her tonight that I'm territorial."

His mouth parted slightly. "Yeah?"

I stepped closer, almost flush against him now. "Yeah, so the next time someone starts circling, you need to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"That you're taken," I said, dragging my nails lightly along the hem of his shirt. "And if that's too subtle, maybe mention I bite. "

He laughed, low and rough, and kissed me hard. His hands gripped my waist, firm and unforgiving, and I gasped as he spun me, pressing me up against the wall behind the crates.

"You don't get to say things like that," he growled against my mouth, lips brushing mine with maddening control.

"Like what?" I whispered, pulling at the hem of his shirt, fingers sliding beneath to trace along the warm skin of his back.

"That you bite," he muttered, voice tight, body tighter. "That I'm taken. You don't get to say that and then behave as though we're not going to do something about it."

"Oh, we're doing something."

Asher lifted me in one swift movement, my legs wrapping around his waist without a thought.

His mouth crashed to mine, and this time it wasn't careful or measured.

It was devouring. His hands slid under my thighs, and I gasped into the kiss as his hips ground into mine through the thin fabric between us.

The friction hit just right, and I moaned before I could stop myself.

He pulled back to breathe, forehead resting against mine. "I don't care who else wants me. I'm yours."

I cupped his jaw, eyes locked on his. "Then show me."

His hands were suddenly everywhere, desperate as he struggled to get as close as he

could to me.

Mine weren't much better, sliding beneath his shirt, dragging it up, feeling every inch of skin.

He hissed when my nails grazed his ribs, and I kissed him again.

His mouth moved down my neck, and my head hit the wall behind me with a soft thud.

The beat of the club throbbed outside. I didn't care.

In this corner of shadows, we were the only thing that existed.

I rocked against him, my breath stuttering as his hand slipped between us, bold and sure.

"Say it again," he whispered, voice wrecked.

"What?"

"That I'm yours."

"You're mine." I dragged my fingers through his hair, tugging hard enough to make him curse under his breath. "You've always been mine."

He groaned against my neck. His hand gripped my thigh, lifting me to grind us together again, the friction setting my nerves on fire.

"Well, shit."

We froze.

"I'm gone. I saw nothing. You two carry on." Gina's voice was a mix of horror, sarcasm, and barely concealed glee as she spun on her heel and disappeared back around the corner.

I dropped my forehead against his chest with a groan, heat rushing to my cheeks. I peeked up at him. His eyes were closed, jaw tight, breathing shallow. "We should... probably not finish this in a hallway. "

His eyes opened slowly, gaze locking with mine. "You're implying that it's a bad thing."

"We'd get banned from the building."

"It'd be worth it."

We didn't move right away, the bass of the club thumping a few yards away, and a quiet, intimate burn lingering in the space between us.

Finally, I eased away. "Later."

"Count on it."

I stirred beneath the sheet, limbs tangled with his, my head tucked under his chin. For the first time in years, I wasn't rushing anywhere. Asher's hand traced lazy circles across my bare back, slow and distracted. I could feel his heartbeat against my cheek, calm and steady.

"You're awake."

"Didn't want to move." His voice was rough, sleep-worn.

I tilted my head to look up at him, and he was already watching me with that look, one that saw too much, yet somehow made me feel safe instead of exposed. I sat up, the sheet pooling at my waist as I stretched. "I should check my phone."

He reached over and handed it to me. "Whatever it is, it can wait."

I unlocked the screen, scrolling lazily. I stopped the second I spotted a now familiar name.

Spotted: Asher Lark cozying up to ex Elle Holloway at Euphoria.

Underneath it was a photo of her laughing with her hand on his chest. He was smiling back.

"What is it?"

I turned the phone around. "This."

He took it, eyes narrowing. "Unbelievable."

"Of course she'd leak this," I said, grabbing the phone back. "She knew exactly what she was doing last night."

"She's trying to start shit, you know that."

"So does the rest of the internet now." I climbed out of bed, pulling on my shirt as my phone buzzed again.

DJ Fetish: Homewrecker or Rebound?

I swore under my breath.

Asher followed me into the kitchen. "Hey. Look at me."

I stopped, turning to face him.

"She can post whatever the hell she wants. It doesn't change where I woke up this morning."

I stared at him, fingers twitching at my sides. "You don't care that they're calling me a rebound?"

He gave a sharp laugh. "That's the last thing you are, Rory. There hasn't been anyone for me in a long time." His fingers brushed my jaw, thumb stroking the space beneath my lip. "You're it, Rory."

His words hit deeper than anything Elle or the internet could throw at me.

Smiling, I leaned into him. The kiss we shared was slow at first, he wanted to memorize me, and I let him. His hand slid to the back of my neck, drawing me closer until there was no space left between us.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

By the time I walked into Euphoria that night, I was all eyeliner, bass lines, and purpose. Gina raised an eyebrow when she saw me in the hallway.

"I assume this means we're pretending the internet doesn't exist?"

"I'm here to do my job."

"And I'm here for hydration and quiet reflection."

Rolling my eyes at her, I headed straight to the booth, fingers already twitching for the controls.

Asher was nearby watching me. I didn't need to check in with him.

We were fine. The lights dimmed. I let the music speak for me, ignoring anything that was trying to attack me, to invade the peace I had found and was trying so desperately to protect .

After the set, I climbed down from the booth and found him waiting at the base of the stairs.

"You're unbelievable."

"Took you this long to figure that out?"

He didn't smile. He stepped closer, hand hovering at my waist like he wasn't sure if he could touch me in front of everyone. "I wanted to say something earlier, but then

you walked on that stage, and I—" He paused. "You drive me insane, Rory. It's getting harder to breathe when you're not near me."

I laughed, soft and careful, trying to tamp down the panic rising behind the pull in my chest. "That sounds dangerously close to something you can't unsay."

"I know."

The world spun on outside our little bubble, but something between us shifted again. I knew exactly what he meant. I was this close to falling.

If I hadn't already.

I was two shots deep into a post-set cool down when Gina slid into the booth across from me, eyes narrowed. "You gonna tell me what's going on," she asked, "or do I have to drag it out of you with tequila and emotional blackmail?"

I reached for the lime wedge. "Pretty sure you answered your own question."

She snorted. "That set? You were possessed. The crowd practically wept. Asher looked ready to propose mid-bass drop."

My lips twitched. "Stop."

"Nope." She pointed her straw at me. "You're glowing like you were laid and got a raise at the same time."

I didn't respond.

She leaned back, smug as hell. "Knew it."

I shook my head, fighting a smile. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it?" Her tone softened, cutting through the teasing. "You're not freaking out. You're not running. You didn't flinch when Elle tried to stir the pot."

"She doesn't scare me."

"No, but what you're feeling does."

That landed harder than I expected. I stared down at my shot glass, the lime half-melted on the rim. "It's..." I paused to find the words. "He sees through all of it and somehow he still wants me."

"Sounds a lot like love, babe."

I exhaled slowly. "Yeah, that's the problem."

She reached out and clinked her glass against mine. "It's the best kind."

We were on the couch at his place, legs tangled, a half-watched movie playing low in the background.

My head rested against Asher's chest, the rhythm of his breathing lulling me into a comfortable daze.

His fingers traced patterns along my arm while his other hand toyed with the hem of the blanket we shared.

My phone buzzed, and I lazily glanced over, staring down at an unknown number. I sat up too fast, fingers cold around the phone.

"What's wrong?"

I stared at the screen. The number wasn't saved, but I knew it, digits unable to forget from a lifetime ago. I blocked the number, lowering my phone onto the coffee table.

"Nothing, I'm fine."

He studied me. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm going to get some water." I escaped into the kitchen and stood there for a minute. I didn't hear him follow me, his tall frame hovering behind me.

"Talk to me."

I shook my head. "It's not important. "

"Rory."

"I need a minute."

I found him on the balcony, legs stretched out, hoodie sleeves pushed to his elbows, and a mug in his hands that had long gone cold.

He didn't say anything when I joined him.

He slid the mug to the side and opened the blanket he'd wrapped around himself.

I sat down without a word, tucking myself against his side.

"That number is someone I haven't heard from in years."

Asher didn't react

"It wasn't a boyfriend," I continued. "Not officially, anyway.

It was... complicated." I stared out at the lights beyond his balcony, heart pounding harder than it should've.

"I was eighteen. Dumb and broke, desperate to matter to someone.

He was older. He said all the right things, took care of me in ways no one ever had, but it came with strings.

It was subtle at first, what I wore, who I saw, where I worked. It eventually got worse."

The words tasted like ash in my mouth. I hadn't said this out loud in years.

"I used to tell myself I stayed because I was strong enough to handle it, that I wasn't those other girls who needed saving. Truth is, I stayed because I didn't think I deserved better."

His arm came around my shoulders, his hand resting against my ribs .

"I left after he broke a chair in front of me on my birthday. He didn't hit me. It was always a veiled threat that it could happen. I didn't think it would happen until that night. It took something that violent for me to finally realize if I didn't leave, I would be the next thing he'd break."

He pressed his lips to the top of my head, silent in a way I knew he was choosing in order to comfort me and give me the space I needed to keep going.

"I never told anyone all of that," I murmured. "Not even Sullivan."

"Because he didn't want the whole story. He wanted the version that didn't mess with his image of you."

I closed my eyes. "I didn't want you to see that part of me."

"I want all of it, Rory, especially the parts you think are too heavy."

I didn't cry. For the first time in years, I let someone see me and didn't feel smaller for it. Asher didn't say anything else, he merely pulled me closer.

Eventually, I turned my face toward his and kissed him softly. His hand came up to cradle my jaw, his thumb brushing over the curve of my cheek. I climbed into his lap without thinking, legs folding around his waist, my forehead resting against his.

We sat there for a long time in silence, the city lights flickering across the balcony.

The next morning, I woke up to my name trending. Not DJ Fetish. Rory Jones.

Some anonymous forum had dropped a timeline of my past. Pieced together from old photos, club fliers, public records no one should've been able to dig up.

I stared down at the opening line of the article.

"Not everything about Rory is as curated as her playlists..."

I stared at it for a long time before clicking through. Mentions of the man I told Asher about. Mentions of the state I left in. A photo from the bar I worked at when I was barely legal and completely lost.

And the kicker?

The blog was run by a PR account previously associated with Elle.

Holding his mug, Asher appeared behind me as I sat frozen at his kitchen table. I didn't speak. He leaned down, scanned the screen, and I felt him stiffen .

"Tell me she didn't—"

"I'm not sure she posted it herself, but she certainly lit the match." My mug hit the table harder than it needed to as I stood up. "I've spent years building this life, and she thinks she can dig up a version of me she doesn't understand and weaponize it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"You may not approve of it."

His eyes narrowed slightly, not from judgment, but from recognition. He knew what that tone meant. "Well, by all means," he shrugged, "go take care of business."

Elle didn't expect to see me. She was seated on a velvet-backed lounge at a hotel bar, laughing too loudly at someone who wasn't listening. When she spotted me, her smile faltered, then rearranged itself, a mask slipping back into place.

"Well, this is an unexpected visit."

"I figured I'd cut to the chase and come right to the source."

She raised an eyebrow. "I didn't post anything. "

"No, you planted enough seeds that someone else did the watering."

Elle leaned back, crossed her legs, eyes glinting. "I didn't lie. I clarified."

"You exploited what you didn't understand. You took pain that didn't belong to you and tried to make it a punchline."

She didn't flinch. I could tell by her face that she truly believed she hadn't done anything wrong.

"You think exposing someone's past makes you powerful?"

"I think it makes me smart to expose people who try to rise too fast." Her mouth tightened. "Asher and I have a past you'll never understand, Rory." She took a sip of her drink. "I'm not trying to ruin your little fantasy. I'm trying to help you realize what world you're in now. This isn't some fairy tale where you come out on top.

We've already seen how your first attempt went.

"Her smirk returned. "Once he realizes I'm willing to take him back, he'll leave you. He always comes back to me."

"You're confusing history with relevance, Elle."

Her smirk faltered.

"Whatever you had with him? It's over. You're not the unfinished chapter, you're the footnote." I tilted my head, eyes locked with hers. "And let's be clear, I don't need some fairy tale ending. I need him, and he's already mine."

I walked away and didn't look back.

I posted it to my story first and then to my feed. It was a simple video. There was no filter, no styling, only me with no makeup wearing a hoodie, a messy bun on top of my head.

"My name is Rory Jones. You might know me as DJ Fetish. You might not. Either way, here's what I want you to know. I don't owe anyone my trauma. I don't owe anyone my past. But since someone decided to leak a version of my life that fits their narrative, so let me tell you mine."

I looked into the camera. "I was young when I started out on my own, barely sixteen at the time. I stayed in situations I should've run from, and I stayed silent when I should've screamed.

I learned a hard lesson. I built something that no one handed me.

No one saved me. I saved myself, and I'll keep doing that until there's nothing left. "

The video cut to black, and I ended it with a simple caption.

"You don't get to write my story. I already have. "

It didn't take long for the video to go viral. Comments poured in, some expected, some not.

@missem_violet: this is what true bravery is.

@coratalksalot: Thank you for saying what so many of us feel.

@captivated_craft: you survived. you thrived. you own it.

Verified names I didn't follow were reposting the clip. Music blogs were calling it one of the most 'defining public reclamations of the year'. My inbox filled with interview requests I had zero interest in answering.

Elle, meanwhile, was quiet. Her PR account had gone dark. The blog was scrubbed.

An anonymous source finally admitted she'd 'encouraged the piece,' and the internet flipped on her fast. The same voices who once echoed her rumors were now calling her petty, jealous and irrelevant.

I didn't need to say another word.

I was curled up on the couch, hoodie over my knees, laptop open but ignored, when my phone buzzed again. I stared at Sullivan's name for a long beat before opening the message.

I saw your video. I should've been a better listener when you were with me. I hope you're okay. I hope he's good to you. You deserve that.

I didn't reply.

Asher came in a few minutes later, sliding a mug of tea into my hands. He sat down beside me, and I leaned into him, a comfortable silence that no longer felt strange to me settling between us.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:54 am

"Hallelujah, Thursday is over!" Gina hopped up onto the bar. The lights in Euphoria were dimmed, the crowd long gone, nothing left but a few staff, sticky floors, and glitter confetti in questionable places. "I've got a brilliant idea. Let's get hammered."

"I'm surprised you have one idea," Asher muttered beside her.

"My one beats your zero." She flipped him off with a grin, and he laughed, shaking his head.

I bent to readjust my shoe, one hand bracing on his shoulder for balance. "I'm gonna have to pass. I am dead on my feet."

Gina's gaze cut to us, and her eyes narrowed. "You look pretty alive to me."

I straightened. Neither of us said a word .

She let the moment breathe, lips twitching. "Anyway." She slid off the bar. "I'll go get drunk by myself as the strong, independent woman I am, unless you two decide to make it a throuple."

"Bye, Gina," Asher and I said in unison.

She cackled all the way to the back hallway.

Asher leaned against the bar beside me. I slipped off my heels with a groan and stretched my toes, wiggling them against the sticky floor. "God, that feels indecently good."

He chuckled under his breath. "You're really out here trying to seduce me with your feet now?"

I glanced at him sideways. "If it works, it works."

Smiling, he pushed away from the bar. "If you're ready, we can head out. I need to lock up my office first."

I grabbed my shoes, hesitating for a moment, before I chose to follow him. I stood inside the doorway, watching him.

He glanced up, his gaze catching mine. "You following me in here for a reason?"

"Maybe." I took several steps closer to him. "You didn't ask me not to."

The space between us shrank until I was close enough to feel the warmth coming off his skin. "You always do that."

"Do what?"

"Leave room to let me decide. "

"Because I won't ever take something you're not ready to give." His voice cracked around the words. "Even if I'm dying for it."

I stared up at him, heart thudding, breath catching in my throat. "What if I'm ready now?"

His hand came up slowly, knuckles brushing my cheek. "Then I need you to come here."

Our mouths crashed together, and his hands found my waist. I gasped when he turned us, pressing me gently against the desk.

I tugged at his shirt, yanking it up, needing him closer.

He groaned as I dragged my hands over his chest, my nails skimming across muscle, and he kissed me harder in response.

His body pressed flush to mine, thigh sliding between my legs.

I arched into him without thinking, grinding down on the pressure he gave me.

The door creaked open. "Asher, you better not be—" Vanessa stepped halfway into the doorway, took one look, and raised an unimpressed brow. "Seriously? You two couldn't wait until you got home?"

Embarrassed, I buried my face in his chest.

"Office is off-limits for extracurricular activities, lover boy," she added dryly. "You want her to stick around, don't get her banned from the building."

He cleared his throat. "We were... locking up."

She gave him a pointed look. "Right. Well, lock it up somewhere else. Time to go home, kids. "

Then, with the air of someone who'd seen too much and cared just enough to make it awkward, Vanessa disappeared down the hall.

Asher sighed into my hair, then pressed a soft kiss to the top of my head, his hand firm at my waist. "So..." he murmured, voice low. "Where were we?"

I snickered against his chest. "Apparently about thirty seconds away from needing to find another place to work."

He chuckled, his lips grazing the curve of my jaw. "Let's get you home before that happens."

"Home?" He had never called it mine before; lately there had been a silent acceptance that I had taken up space there. I didn't press the issue. I had my own apartment, but no matter the circumstance, I found myself repeatedly at his doorstep.

He kissed me again, slipping his hand in mine. "Home."

The ride was quiet in that easy, late-night kind of way, his hand on my thigh, my fingers laced through his. Music hummed low from the speakers, nothing urgent about the silence between us .

Asher dropped the keys on the counter, then turned to face me. I barely had time to speak before his hands were on my waist again.

"We have a bed now," I whispered, teasing.

"I know." His mouth brushed mine. "But I kind of liked the desk."

I smiled into the kiss, and he deepened it, his fingers slipping beneath the hem of my shirt.

"Rory." My name came out as a sigh from his lips, and he blinked languidly as he gazed down at me.

His thumbs stroked slow circles against my hips, the motion rubbing the fabric of my shirt.

"Rory, look at me. I want you to know there are no expectations here, no demands, no judgments.

" He brushed his knuckles down my cheek.

"This can be your sanctuary. I can be your sanctuary if you want it. "

I didn't answer him vocally. I couldn't at that moment, blinking away tears that threatened to spill at the sincere, heart-felt words that came from his mouth.

With a single look, I knew he meant every word he said.

I could see the desire mixed in his eyes, watching as his dark eyes swirled with the need that was slowly building.

There was also restraint there too, a need for permission, and it was this more than anything that made my decision happen.

I closed the distance between us and looped my arms around his neck, rising on my toes to bring my mouth to his .

Asher dug his fingers into my hair and pressed our lips together.

He took control of the kiss, and I fell into him, clutching with needy fingers as he slipped his hands free and lifted me clear off the floor.

His hands palmed the cheeks of my ass gently, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, my hands pulling at the strands of his hair.

His muscles tightened with each step to his bedroom, but I never worried that he would drop me. It was only when he lowered me onto his king-sized bed that I

allowed myself to let go of his shoulders. I fell against the soft mattress, hair spreading out beneath me.

I watched with hooded eyes as he peeled the cotton shirt off his chest, tossing it to the floor but instead of reaching for his pants, he climbed onto the bed and slid a knee easily between my legs.

He positioned his hands on either side of my head for balance, and his gaze took in the sight of me below him.

Keeping my eyes on his, I reached out to trail my fingers down his bare chest. I watched as the muscles beneath the taut skin jumped to attention, him inhaling sharply as I wrapped my fingers around the waistline of his pants.

He caught my hand with his, shaking his head, the silence stable between them. He squeezed my wrist before he let go. I dropped my hands and inhaled as he dipped his head, lips brushing slowly against the slope of my neck. My head tilted back, eyes closing, as he pressed kisses along my neck .

I opened my eyes again only when his touch left me to watch him scoot off the bed.

I followed, reaching out, and when he tried to stop me, I smacked his hands away.

Quickly, I jerked free his belt from the waistband, pulling at the buttons and zipper until they gave way.

Another quick jerk sent his pants and boxers to the ground, and he stepped free of them, eyes glued to me.

The sight of him hard and ready sent a shot of desire through me. I licked my lips. My response brought about a low moan from him, and I gazed up through my lashes

to find him watching me with parted lips.

It was Asher that moved first, hands reaching out to grab the fabric of my shirt.

I helped him rid me of my clothing, both of us working to rid my legs of my jeans, and it wasn't long before I sat there in nothing but my skin.

He took his time looking over my body, and I flushed at the close attention.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Good." He took a step forward, eyes scanning me as if trying to memorize every detail of my body.

Finally, he made his way around to the other side of the bed, and I shifted to face him.

I fell against the bed, and he followed, stretching out slowly to rest his body comfortably on mine.

His mouth covered mine, my body was shaking as I wrapped myself around him.

"Asher... "

"God, Rory, when you say my name..." His hands roamed over my body, stroking my skin, and he lowered his mouth to drift slowly across my chest. "Are you good?"

I trailed his hands down my arms. "I'm perfect. Are you?"

"I'm more than perfect." He brushed his lips against mine. "We can stop if..."

I jerked his mouth back to mine before he could say anything else. He groaned from surprise as it exploded again between us, hot sparks that burned and never seemed to extinguish. He pulled us upwards, and I went eagerly, letting his hands guide me while we continued to kiss.

He was the one to break away first. I sat there watching as he opened the drawer next to his bed, and he pulled out the tiny condom packet.

I continued to follow him with my eyes as he pulled the condom from inside and slowly slid it onto his length.

It was the most erotic thing I had ever seen in my entire life.

Asher extended his hand. Unsure of exactly what he wanted, I slid my hand in his and gasped when he pulled me cleanly off the bed. He twisted me to face the mirror of his dresser, his chest at my back, and he leaned forward to brush his lips against my shoulder blade. "Do you want me?"

I licked my lips, eyes on his reflection. "Yes."

"Do you need me, Rory?"

"God, yes. "

He sat down on the bed, his hands on my hips.

He was silent as he directed me back with small steps, and I felt another shot of desire go through me as he splayed my legs apart, so I straddled his.

The move brought my hips forward, my breasts thrust out, and I was completely exposed to the mirror.

"Keep your eyes on the mirror, darlin'." He pulled me backwards, and I almost lost my balance, throwing out my hands to grab his thighs.

Every thought flew from my mind at the sight of him releasing me to slide a hand down to the base of his cock, the other sliding past my waist and up my torso to rest comfortably over my right breast. My breath became trapped in my throat as I watched him rub the tip of his cock teasingly along my slit.

A whimper of need clawed its way from my throat. "Asher, please..."

That was all it took, the simple whisper, and he was buried deep inside of me.

His length stretched me, filling me so swiftly that I lost my breath completely.

I cried out, eyes glued to the mirror. He responded by grunting, squeezing my breasts before he grabbed my hips again.

He began to guide me up and down his shaft in quick, strong jerks, and I met each thrust with my own.

It was almost too much, the experience of watching him slide inside of me.

I grabbed at his thighs, digging my nails deep into his skin, but he didn't seem to notice.

Asher cursed, grunting and crying out my name, and I replied in kind, my gaze locked on the mirror.

Our thrusts grew harder, my body jerking, breasts bouncing.

My mouth went dry, mind blank, the pull of what I knew to be my orgasm growing.

His grip tightened more to the point of bruising, but I didn't care.

I only wanted him to continue, for the pleasure to overtake me till the point I no longer knew where I started, and he began.

I cried out as he jerked me hard onto his length, thrusting until he was buried all the way inside of me.

I had to bring out my hands to keep from colliding with the floor, and I couldn't help but grunt as my knees hit the soft carpet.

He stayed buried inside of me, but the minute we were steady, him on his knees behind me, he began to thrust, building the rhythm again between us.

The orgasm that erupted was violent and washed over me. He gripped my hips and slammed into me, the muscles of my walls tightening around him. "Fuck, Rory!" He came in a rush of fluid, my name the last thing that escaped him before we collapsed onto the carpet.

I closed my eyes, panting as I fought to regain my breath. I rolled to cuddle against his side, and he drew me into his arms. Covered in sweat, I was content to lie there tangled in the sheets, staring at the ceiling fan spinning above us.

His breathing slowed beside me, and he draped his arm over my waist, pulling me closer. "You okay?" he murmured, lips grazing the shell of my ear.

"I love you. "

"Say it again."

"I love you."

His hands trembled against my skin. "I love you too, Rory," he whispered. "I've been falling since the second you walked into Euphoria. I didn't know how fast until this exact moment."

I touched his cheek, thumb brushing the corner of his mouth. "It was fast enough to catch me."

Epilogue

Sunlight spilled across the hardwood floors, catching on the scattered vinyl records and unpacked boxes labeled my stuff; though most of it had blurred into ours already.

I sat cross-legged on the floor of the living room, headphones half on, one ear tuned to the mix I was tweaking on my laptop. The other ear was tuned to Asher, who was in the kitchen attempting to figure out how our fancy new espresso machine worked.

"It's hissing," he called out. "Is it supposed to hiss?"

"If it starts talking, then you should panic."

He laughed, a warm sound that floated in the air, and that sound hit me like the drop in my favorite set, unexpected and addictive. He walked into the room a minute later, coffee in one hand, a bagel in the other, barefoot and shirtless with his hair a mess and his smile lazy. "You're staring."

"I'm allowed."

Handing me the mug, he leaned down to kiss the top of my head, then plopped onto the couch beside me, legs stretched long, arm draped behind me. His fingers found the ends of my hair, toying with them absently as I brought the mug to my lips.

The coffee was perfect. "You finally mastered the machine."

"I only sacrificed one button and mild emotional damage."

I leaned into his side. His body heat soaked into mine. I could hear his heartbeat where my cheek rested near his chest, steady and grounding. On the floor, my laptop screen dimmed, the half-finished track paused mid-layer. I didn't move.

His hand moved from my hair to my back, tracing slow circles he didn't realize he was doing. "So, are you starting to feel at home?"

I looked around at the cluttered room, the records on every surface, wires snaking across the floor, laundry we'd been ignoring for two days.

"No."

His brows lifted. "Not yet? "

I turned to face him fully, shifting so I could slide into his lap, knees bracketing his hips. His hands immediately found my waist.

"Because it already does."

"You know you wreck me when you say things like that, right?"

I brushed my nose against his, lips inches apart. "Yeah, but I love putting you back together."

Asher pulled me closer, our foreheads touching, and for a long moment, we didn't need anything else. No audience. No spotlight. No music. There was only us, and maybe that was the point.

It was pure obsession, not as a mistake, but a choice we kept making, choosing each other on repeat.