

"Mint"

LA Henderson

The pungent scent of freshly massacred mint leaves flooded my nose, giving my indignation a distinct taste.

"What do you think this means, Armand?" I hissed, my voice sliding underneath the sound of the string quartet playing in the more populated portion of the garden. "Are you naïve enough to think there are no consequences?"

He eyed me coldly from across the pavilion, his head perched far back on his neck. His arms were iron bars across his chest: cold, hard, and as arrogant as the careful slouch of his tuxedo slacks.

"As ever, you exaggerate," he pronounced with quiet steel. "This was not life-changing; there are no intrinsic 'codes of behavior' that accompany any action. I refuse to allow you to hold me to 'rules' that simply do not exist."

My breath hissed raggedly through my teeth, a small, detached part of my mind noting that I'd chosen the right shade of lipstick; if I were to lose control and bite the bastard no one would notice the blood.

"You've nerve. So much, it's a veritable miracle you can't feel!"

One of his eyebrows shot up with a corner of his grim smile.

"No, I definitely feel," he replied. "But nerves are connected to the brain - not to the heart. That's the problem with trying to cage men with lust."

I jerked, and my back met the climbing vines, knocking leaves down my dress with a series of rustles.

Apart from the sardonic twist to his features, he had not moved.

"Someone should teach you a lesson about human beings," I bit out as his form blurred. "You're despicable!"

Even through the tears, I saw his eyes flash.

"And you're pitiable," he rejoined, soft and low, the down-bow of the distant cello adding a perfect punctuation to his phrasing. "You could stand to learn a few lessons yourself, on nature. You're just a girl - you don't know anything about this world you've entered."

Armand's arms fell open for the first time as he took a dangerous step forward.

I pressed back against the greenery as he crossed into my space.

Implacably, he reached out his hand and made me meet his cold blue eyes.

The world went still and all I could hear was the sibilant sound of rustling ball gowns, as somber as the sea.

The corners of his eyes were soft and his lips were no more than a straight line, not pointing up or down. The points where his fingers met my face flashed with fire, although his grip was as gentle as the night we first met.

"Armand," I sighed.

"No," he answered, not breaking our gaze. "I have no obligations to you. You came seeking instant gratification, and that's what you got. Had you been willing to wait..." he shook his head, and his touch dropped away. "I won't lead you on, okay?"

He hovered for just a moment, half-turned, then abruptly spun on his heel and walked away, back to the string quartet and swirling ball gowns.

I sobbed in the harsh, clean scent of mint.