

“Kiss the Rain”

by

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I turned over in my bed, trying to get comfortable so my mind didn't feel the need to wait out the storm. I could never sleep through the night if it was raining and I never understood how anyone else could. How could someone do something so peaceful and calming when only a windowpane away everything was so wild and tumultuous?

The rain beat on my roof like it was an angry child, throwing a tantrum about something or another. The wind snarled like a jungle cat and clawed at my home, searching for a way in--any way in. The storm had long since knocked out our power. I flipped my pillow over and tried to let the coolness of it soothe me. Thunder boomed. I jumped.

"Come on, Ivy," I scolded myself, "It's just a little water. It's just like a giant shower but without the scented body wash."

This thought calmed my racing heart ever-so-slightly. I closed my eyes slowly...

Boom! My heart leapt into my throat and my last vestiges of courage left me. I buried my face under my ocher-colored bedspread and tried to keep my whimper low. My room lit up suddenly, unnaturally. Lightning. I counted like my Aunt Gayle taught me to do when I was younger. One...two...*Boom!* My room lit up again as lightning struck some unsuspecting part of town. Judging by my count, the storm was only two miles away. No wonder it was so wild.

I counted again. One...*Boom!* I shot up in my bed, turning my head to my open bedroom doors. Thunder clashed and lightning flashed. One mile away. That was not why my heart began to race. Just before the boom of the thunder I could've sworn I heard a thud coming from downstairs. Except, I knew my father was still in his bedroom because he would have had to walk past my room to get to the stairs, and I would've noticed his lumbering frame. Our housekeeper, Catherine, had gone home early this afternoon because her ten year old daughter was sick with a fever, and Harrison, our cook, made up a silly excuse and left with her, because their clandestine two-year-strong relationship was the worst kept secret in the world. This meant

it wasn't possible for anyone to be downstairs, not without me knowing about it. Not to mention it was approaching one in the morning.

I slipped out of my bed, my bare toes sinking into the plush carpet. Perhaps the storm was so strong, it broke a window. With the way the wind was blowing, it wasn't exactly reaching. But I was still trembling as I slowly shuffled past my french doors and out of my room, my ears on alert for the tiniest sound. Perhaps all the late night slasher film marathons I had with my best friend Nicole were finally catching up to me. All I could think of was: dark stormy night, plus, unidentified noises in the house, plus, unsuspecting teenage girl, equals...

I shuddered. No more slasher movies. Ever.

I walked down the wide and airy upstairs hallway, past a bathroom, two guest rooms and my father's office, my back turned to his bedroom. When I reached the stairs, I tried to peer down into the house below. When my father got his new job and we moved into this estate, I was seven and I thought these stairs were the most wonderful things ever. They were the kind of stairs princesses and royalty walked down, the kind that curved around and made you walk down a bit before you were revealed to the entire downstairs. They were stairs fit for a Barbie, sure, but they were completely useless if you wanted to see something downstairs before it saw you.

There's nothing downstairs, there's nothing downstairs, there's nothing downstairs, I repeated to myself as I made my way down the royal stairs, shivering in my thin tanktop and sweatpants, my hand slippery on the banister. My stomach was tossing nervously and I cursed my mind as the Jeepers Creepers theme song began to tauntingly play in my head. I held my breath as I slowly went down all the steps one by one and stood in the large foyer.

From here the storm was not as loud, yet still unbearably so. After descending the stairs, there were several directions one could take. Directly ahead of me, there were the french doors that lead to the kitchen, which led to the dining room and a hallway that led to several other rooms. If I turned right, I could turn into the 'Family Room'--ironic, since I was the only member of the family home enough to actually enter the room. If I turned left, I'd reach the front door and the pounding rain beyond it. Of course, if I was smart I would've turned back and went upstairs to be a coward in the privacy of my own warm bed.

Thunder boomed again and I walked a few steps to look at the front door. It was still locked. On either side of it, there were full-length frosted glass windows, raindrops being pelted against it. If I looked closely, I could see the large shadow of...

I gasped.

"Don't scream."

I spun around, the urge to do just that bubbling up in my throat. I resisted screaming only because my mind had not processed what was happening yet. There was an unknown man in the dark interior of my own home. I knew it was a man because of the deep voice. Even with the small help of the moonlight, I couldn't see much besides the fact that he was almost a head taller than me (a feat for many, considering I was 5'11" and still growing--unfortunately) and he had broad shoulders, broad, *dangerous* shoulders. We stared at each other.

Then the lightning struck. It was even closer than before, sending neighboring car alarms into a frenzy. For that split second, the man was illuminated. He was wearing all black, and his long dark hair was matted to his face from the downpour. He had a strong jaw, and a freckle by his right eye, and a slightly crooked nose, like it'd been broken one too many times and could never get into its proper place again. His dark eyes were fastened onto me and the whites of them shone clearly. In that split second, I realized that he was not a man at all. Not really, anyway. He couldn't have been much older than I was, maybe nineteen at the most.

In another place, in another situation, he might be described as handsome. Handsome in that way teenage girls are inevitably attracted to bad boys. I could easily picture him with a leather jacket and a cigarette, riding his motorcycle through some town, looking for a small-town girl to love and then leave.

But this was not another situation. This, here, was the situation. A person I'd never seen before was standing before me in my home, broad, dangerous shoulders and all. Handsome or not, he could easily be some crazy axe murderer.

"Don't scream," the burglar said again, reading the intention easily in my, no doubt terrified, eyes. "I don't want to hurt you, but I have a couple friends outside who will have no problem doing so." He nodded his head to the window where I'd seen the shadow of another person. That begged the question, how many were out there now, waiting?

How could he sound so calm? My heart was trying to claw its way out of my chest and yet his voice was deep and unaffected, like he was talking to a friend about the weather.

"Wh-what do you want?" My voice sounded wrong, too high, too frightened. I tried again. "How did you get in here?"

He shrugged, ever-so-calmly. "The door was unlocked."

"Liar," I blurted out before thinking. One of the guy's eyebrows raised, only one, something I'd always wished I could do. "I-I-I mean...We have a s-s-security system. Every window and door locks automatically."

Now he smiled, something that made him look both younger and more dangerous at the same time. "There are ways," he simply said, taking his eyes away from me to casually look around my foyer. I could tell he was still watching me though, and besides, I didn't think anything in the room that would interest him. There was a white suede loveseat and a cherry wood coffee table that held purple hydrangeas in a vase that Catherine put out just this morning. On the wall above it was a painting of a meadow and on the opposite wall, a painting of a lake.

I couldn't help it. "Please don't...don't...Are you going to hurt us?"

His head snapped over to me at that. I could feel more than I could see his scrutinizing gaze on me. "Us?" One eyebrow lifted again. "How many of you are there?"

Hysteria welled up in my chest and I fought it down. I noticed he hadn't answered my question yet. What was I supposed to say? If I admitted that it was only my fifty-nine year old father and I, would that be better for me or worse? I could say that there were children here, too, perhaps invent a little brother or sister. Hopefully he had compunctions about murdering children.

"The truth," he demanded, once again reading my intentions easily.

"Just me and my f-f-father," I admitted, trembling but watching for his reaction.

He swore, his voice a low hiss in the quiet of the room. He dipped his eyes, not bothering to watch my every move anymore, as he quietly assessed the situation. Did this change things for him and his 'friends?' How did he get in the estate in the first place? It was practically as fortified as a prison. Just, you know, with nicer curtains and a better view.

"The storm," I exclaimed, suddenly realizing what I'd already known.

The guy looked up at me. "Excuse me?" Ever so polite.

Information flooded into my brain like a river, making me forget to be afraid for a few seconds. "That's how you got in. The storm knocked our power out. Our security system must be down."

He smiled again, smug, but hospitable. "You rich people think all you need is a couple of fancy locks and whistles and that will keep you safe. You could've saved a couple thousand and just bought a dog."

I tried to ignore him, my mind still working. I got that feeling in my chest that I often got at school, when I figured out a really tough problem. Like I was the smartest I'd ever been. "You must've been planning this for weeks then. It hasn't rained since last month. You knew that once it rained hard enough our security system might fail. But then...you couldn't be certain our power would turn off." I fixed him with a knowing look, ignoring the pounding of my heart. "Let me guess one of your friends knows something about wires, doesn't he? Probably worked at the electric company."

He grimaced and I knew I was right. "I suppose you knew I'd be here, if you've been planning this for a while." My heart stuttered and I began to think of all the times I changed after a shower, my curtains open, not knowing that I might've been being watched. What if...Oh God.

I backed away a step. Then another. The burglar watched every step. I couldn't even ask him. How could I?

Once again, he read my mind. I wondered how he did that so easily. He surprised me by rolling his eyes. "Calm down, Princess. I'm not here for you. I steal things, not people."

My fear ebbed only a bit. My face flushed and I shivered just as the sound of thunder shook the house. I wrapped my arms around myself, my hands rubbing at my skin. "Then I don't understand. May I...um, ask why you were so surprised to find out my father was home?"

Oh, sure, Ivy, now's the perfect time to have a polite little chat with the potential AXE MURDERER!

He seemed to consider my question for a minute, no doubt weighing the pros and cons of telling me. Though he was obviously a thief, someone who probably had many run-ins with the police, he had an intelligent manner about him. Finally he answered me, his words measured. "I...We didn't expect anyone to be home but a teenage girl, easily subdued if necessary. Your father could...complicate things."

Easily subdued if necessary. A thrill of both fear and anger shot through me. How dare he assume that just because I was a girl that I was weak? Was I not captain of the girls volleyball team? Did I not run two miles every morning and three afternoons a week on volleyball days? Did I not take a kick-boxing class (well, for two weeks, but still)?

Easily subdued my ass!

I could tell the burglar knew I was seething. But he just smiled and his mirth angered me even more.

"Stop it!" I hissed, clenching my fists.

"Stop what?" Knowing half-smile.

My pulse was beating hard in my neck. Adrenaline. I felt brave. "You don't know me. I'm not some weak teenage girl. I could outrun you. I could kick your ass."

He laughed at that, his head tipped back, the sound low, but sharp. Biting. Heart pounding, I set my feet and ran right past him. I was flying, at least, I thought I was. I hardly brushed past him before he, anticipating my actions, wrapped an arm around me and quickly pulled me back hard against him, his hand covering my mouth.

"Don't scream. And don't bite me."

Those were plans A and B. My pulse skyrocketed and despite his warnings, I tried to fight him off. I bucked and struggled against him but to no avail. He was immovable, passive strength emanating from his every pore.

"Are you done, Princess?"

I slumped against him, done fighting but still scared. "Don't call me that." With his hand covering my mouth, I wasn't even sure he knew what I said. Even so, he slowly released me and gently pushed me away until I had enough sense to back away and resume my previous space near the base of the stairs.

"What should I call you then?" he asked, the inquiry polite but curious. He was still watching me warily, eyes cataloguing my every movement even more swiftly than before.

"Catherine," I replied, the lie falling smoothly from my tongue.

"Well, Catherine, try to run again and I'll be forced to knock you unconscious. And I assure you my methods won't be pleasant."

His methods.... My throat constricted and I felt a panic attack coming on. Never mind that I hadn't had one since I was nine years old, I remembered what it felt like as if I had one every day since. My head felt light, my breath was shallow, coming quickly and more quickly still. I put my fingers to my temples, willing myself to breathe. *What if I die tonight?* I strayed away from that thought at once, gasping for air. Thoughts like that would only make it worse. *He'll kill me. He'll kill Dad. Stop it! Breathe, Ivy, breathe!*

"Breathe, dammit!"

The voice was not my own. Somewhere in my futile attempts for oxygen, I'd stumbled and fallen, my body slumped across several of the stairs. Without my notice, the burglar had strided forward and was now holding me up, one hand stretched around my back, the other gripping my chin and holding my head up.

He's going to murder me. In my own house. No. He'll knock me out, maybe tie me up and make me watch as he murders Dad. He's going--

"--to hurt you. Do you hear me, Catherine? I'm not going to hurt you. Just breathe. In-out-in-out-in-out. Okay, that's not working." I could barely hear his groan over the harsh sound of my wheezing. I would pass out any second now.

"Should probably let you just pass out. Would make my job a helluva lot easier. As it is, I don't feel like lugging you all the way upstairs. Catherine. Catherine?" My head was tilted up and though my vision was becoming fuzzy I could see the darkness of his eyes, fringed by long, numerous, dark-as-night eyelashes. They offset the harshness of his gaze, giving him a boyish appeal. "I'm going to help you breathe. Okay? For the love of God: Do. Not. Panic."

And then his lips were on mine. If I wasn't weak and woozy from lack of oxygen, no doubt I would've pushed him off, bit him, kicked at him, something. As it was, I let him pry my lips open with his. Before I could fully comprehend what he was doing, he blew his suprisingly cool breath into my mouth. Air. Wonderful, crucial, *vital* air! I needed more, had to have more. I clutched at him, desperate for him to breathe more quickly. His slow in-out-in-out rhythm was torture to my lungs. I needed more oxygen.

After a few more seconds, once my body realized he was not going to breathe any more than he was already doing, my breathing slowed of its own accord, trying to match his rhythm. My dizziness slowly receded, the burning in my lungs slowly leaving, too. Finally, thankfully, I could breathe. I did not feel panicked anymore, exhausted, yes, grateful, most definitely. The guy could've just let me suffer on my own until I turned blue in the face and passed out. But he helped me. He breathed for me, doing for me what I could not do myself.

Maybe that would explain what happened next.

Of their own accord, my lips closed over his, my hands clutching his shoulders. He did not react for a fraction of a second, his body completely still. But then his lips pressed back

against mine, his arms tightening the tiniest bit around me, the smell of rain shrouding me. My stomach flipped as his head tilted, deepening the kiss. My breath was coming more quickly, even though I barely had enough as it was. His hands slid up, up, until they sank into my mass of hair. The sound of thunder shook the house, jolting me out of my concentration. I gasped. What was I *doing*? Danger. This guy was dangerous. How could I forget?

Just as I felt the gentle caress of a tongue, my grip on his shoulders tightened and I pushed him with all of my might. My hand connected with his cheek as I leapt backwards and ran an opposite corner of the room, the same one that the burglar had been standing in when I'd first seen him. We seemed to have traded places.

He stood slowly, one hand on the stair's banister, the other rubbing at his cheek. "Okay, *oww*," he intoned dryly.

"You kissed me!" I exclaimed, panting ever-so-slightly.

"Correction. *You* kissed *me*."

"I did not!" I denied vehemently. "And even if I did, *hellooo*, I couldn't *breathe*. I can't be held responsible for anything my brain chooses to do when it's *dying*!"

"Whatever you say, Princess," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "That's the last time I try to help a person having a panic attack. Next time I'll just smack them in the face."

"Stop. Calling. Me. Princess."

He grinned, his teeth extremely white in the darkness. "Make me."

"Maybe I will!" I challenged hotly, folding my arms across my chest.

He chuckled, not scared in the least. "What're you going to do? Attack me with your lips. Again?"

I growled, actually growled, but backed off. "I did not kiss you," I said again, my voice significantly more calm.

"Whatever you say," he repeated, slowly stepping down from the third step, until he was on the ground level. "Now can you be quiet? You'll wake up daddy dearest. Of course, he wasn't supposed to be here in the first place but--"

"Why do you keep saying that?" I interrupted my voice not any quieter, confusion chasing away all remnants of other emotions. "Of course he's supposed to be here. It's July."

He blinked. "You say that like it's supposed to mean something."

Now I blinked, realizing. So he didn't know my dad was a Justice. Sessions ended late June or at the very latest early July. My father's session ended only two weeks ago. "You should've done your homework," I said with a proud smile, relieved he didn't know as much as I thought he did.

Thunder clapped and I heard a creak upstairs. I threw a frantic glance to the burglar, who must not have heard because he was looking at me with curiosity glinting in his dark eyes.

"Look, I said quickly. "Just take whatever you want. But my father's a supreme court justice and if he catches you he'll personally see to it that you go to jail."

I blinked as I caught the meaning of my own words. I hadn't meant to warn him, had I? I'd meant to tell him not to hurt me or my dad. Why would I care if he went to prison?

To my surprise, he laughed, as deeply as he laughed before. "There are much worse things than jail," he said, and the inflection in his voice showed me that he believed that, body and soul. Which begged the question, how would he know? Had he been to prison before? And if so, for how long? Is that why he seemed to radiate danger?

I didn't have time to ask any of those questions. Heavy steps resounded from above our heads and this time I knew he'd heard. He took five steps away from the stairs, just enough to not be seen at a first glance. No matter what he said, I knew he didn't want to get caught.

"Go!" I whispered to him, as I approached him and the stairs, wondering again why I was trying to help the person who broke into my home.

"Ivy? Honey, are you down there?"

I sent another frantic glance to the burglar, brushing past him and trusting him not to hurt me as I turned my back to him. I cleared my throat. "Yes, Daddy?" I called, hoping my panic didn't show in my voice. "Sorry, I was just getting some water. Did I wake you?"

"Ivy..." the burglar murmured softly, making me shiver. I didn't turn around.

My dad didn't even come down the stairs, content with my reply. "No, no. This torrential downpour did. And then, well, I could've sworn that I heard talking."

"Oh." I searched my mind for an excuse. "Yes, I was just, um, trying to calm myself down. You know how storms upset me." He probably didn't remember.

"Of course, dear," he said after a pause. So he didn't remember. I wouldn't hold it against him. He tried his hardest despite it all. "It looks like the power's out so be careful going up these stairs."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Night."

I heard the slow creaks of my father's footsteps receding and strained my ears for the sound of his door closing. I heard it, just before lightning lit up the room again. I turned to my left, expecting to see the burglar there but encountering only air. My eyes quickly scanned the darkness of the entire room but he wasn't here at all. I looked over at my front door, the hulking shadow gone, the latch turned to the side. Unlocked. It had been locked before, I was sure of it.

I bit my lip, begrudgingly admitting his skills. He moved like a ghost, got into my house and out of it with hardly a sound. I moved to my front door and pulled it open silently. The sound of rain falling heavily against my porch filled my ears as I looked out into the stormy night. Through the rain, he was nowhere to be seen. I closed my door and locked it, repressing a wistful sigh. He didn't even take anything. There was not any evidence that he'd been in my home. In fact, if it wasn't for the faint scent of rain on my skin, it was like he hadn't been here at all.