

Waltz of a Dying Candle

8 April 2012

I take those last few decisive steps into the room.

She looks at me, walks closer and folds her slender arms across her chest. One hand sneaks out of the warmth of her elbow to brush back a lock of blond hair from her shoulder. Just below her collar bone rests the fire opal her mother gave her four years ago, set against tendrils of silver leaves and vines. A delicate chain clasps at the nape of her neck. The violet and crimson stone compliments her fair skin and pulls my eyes downward to her breasts.

"Rebekah," I say after another minute of silence. "I missed you."

Before I can stop myself, I step forward and pull her into an embrace. My right hand cradles the back of her neck. I feel the cool metal chain pressing against my fingers.

I can't remember how long it's been since I've seen her.

She leans into me, clutching my shoulder blades. Her breath tickles my neck, warm and comforting. Now that we're closer, I notice the violet rings beneath her eyes.

Rebekah looks up at me before she drops her arms and leads me further into the room. It's small, not even a quarter of the size of the room I've been imprisoned in. There's a meager bed set up in the far corner with a single pillow and blanket, and beside that is a little table where a journal rests. A yellow pencil sits atop it, the graphite tip dulled.

"How did you get out?"

I blink and adjust the collar of my button-down. Of all the questions to ask me, that's the one she picks? "Used the butter knife to slice through the ropes. Took a while."

"She's going to notice you're not in there."

"I don't care about that right now."

She turns just enough toward me that I catch the challenge in her eyes. "You *should* care."

"Well, I don't. I wanted to see you. I told you I would come, and now I'm here."

She reaches for me. When I don't make a move to stop her, she walks closer and wraps her arms around me again, digging her fingernails into my back.

"I can't take it anymore," she whispers against my chest. The quiver in her voice chills my blood. "We need to get out of here. Please."

I gently disentangle my arms from hers and look down. I can see the tears fighting to escape from her eyes, but she somehow holds them at bay.

"We will," I promise. "We'll get out of here. We just need to decide when." I brush the pad of my thumb across her cheekbone, and she closes her eyes. A solitary tear slips through her closed lids, trickling down until it touches my finger.

"Tomorrow?" she asks.

I shake my head. "That's not enough time. I need to make sure Quinn's not around and that security's off-duty."

"Then...in a few days?"

I nod and try to smile. "In a few days."

"Friday? Can we leave on Friday? That's four days." Her fingers toy with the fabric of my shirt. "It's...well, it'll be my sixteenth birthday."

"I know," I murmur. My seventeenth birthday's only a few days after that. Every year, no matter how long it took, I'd get out and come down here for her birthday. She never made it for mine...but it's not her fault I'm locked away in the master bedroom. I release a breath I didn't know I'd been holding in. "All right, we'll go on Friday."

"Thank you." I hear the timid smile in her voice as she relaxes against me.

"Don't mention it. That's what friends are for."

I don't say anything for a while. I just hold her. And she holds me.

But inevitably, we pull apart.

She looks down at our feet, her cheeks a rosy pink. "Logan...?" She looks back up, her chest rising and falling with each breath she takes. The luminescent opal moves with her, almost like it has a life of its own.

"Hmm?"

"Have you ever wondered what our lives would be like?" she asks. "If...you know...if we hadn't been brought here?"

I swallow, but don't know what to say. "I don't—I try not to think about it. Besides, Quinn will be back soon. I'm running out of time." Rebekah's hazel eyes stare unwaveringly into mine. "I'll come back for you on Friday, okay?"

"Okay."

I slip back out into the hall.



The darkening sky calms me as I stare out the barred window in Quinn's bedroom. A low rumble in the distance brings my attention back to the stretch of driveway one floor below me. Small rings start to appear on the cement. Raindrops. The sound of the droplets falling from the sky creates a soft hum in the background.

My wrists are starting to hurt from the ropes Quinn wrapped around my wrists the moment I walked back into the room. Feels like she wrapped the braided twine around them at least three times. There's also stinging pain radiating from my back, and hunger pangs keep attacking my stomach.

I don't know how long I've been in here. But judging by the number of sunrises I've seen, it's been at least two days.

I tug on the ropes and Quinn's bedpost emits an aged creaking sound.

"You've been a very bad boy, Logan."

My body no longer seems capable of functioning, my limbs frozen with the surge of adrenaline that always comes when I hear her speak directly to me. The raindrops fall even harder outside, and another rumble of thunder disrupts the quiet.

Quinn's heels thump softly against the carpet as she crosses the room. Today she's wearing her black dress—the one that hugs her body all the way to the knees and has a layer of see-thru silk overtop that cascades to her ankles. Her ridiculous six-inch heels would make her

taller than me, if I could actually stand up. Rich, strawberry blond curls fall past her shoulders. Her eyes are the palest blue, almost like ice. Cold and dangerous, but inviting all the same.

"I thought I told you not to leave this room," she says, her voice reminding me of the hissing of a snake. I feel like a child, the way she's berating me. "Didn't I tell you not to leave this room?"

I fidget beneath her gaze, staring straight ahead and attempting not to pay attention to her. But then she reaches out and touches me, runs her fingers through my hair. I can't stop myself from looking up at her.

It's impossible to think when staring into the depths of her merciless eyes.

"Answer me!" Quinn slaps me across the face, and my head whips to the right. "Were you, or were you not, commanded to stay in this room?"

I swallow and meet her eyes again. "Yes."

"And you deliberately disobeyed."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway.

"Yes."

Quinn's eyes narrow. "Have I not been kind enough to you?" she says with a frown. "For the past four years have I not given you the freedom to eat and sleep whenever you please and do whatever you want when I don't require your services?"

I'm about to answer when she holds up a manicured fingernail and presses it against my lips.

"I'm not done," she insists, taking that same finger and tracing the shape of my lips as she continues talking. "I want to give you these freedoms, Logan. I want you to be happy. But if you don't follow even the simplest of my commands, how can you expect me to trust you?"

"You can't," I reply.

"Exactly. I can't." She moves to my left side and sits on the edge of the bed, her legs on either side of me. Her finger continues tracing the shape of my mouth while her other hand strokes my hair.

It's soothing. I feel relaxed despite being so helpless, protected though my life sits in the palm of her hand.

"You need to remember, Logan, that you belong to me. You are mine. Is that understood?"

"Yes." The word comes out like a defeated sigh. *I'm sorry, Rebekah...*

"Good," she croons, moving her finger from my lips to my cheek. "The moment you forget that, I won't hesitate to exact punishment."

I try to jerk away from her touch, but she keeps me still by digging her nails into my skin.

"You wouldn't like that, hmm?" She loosens her grip a fraction. "Then be a good boy and stay out of trouble. I won't beat you if you behave."

She won't beat me...

I relax against the bed and lean my head back, staring up at Quinn.

She continues stroking my hair and smiling down at me, her thighs pressing against my arms. We stay like this until I fall asleep.



When I wake up again, I'm alone on the floor beside Quinn's bed, my wrists still tethered to the post behind me. There's a timid knock on the door.

"Mistress Quinn?" a voice says. It's Gabriella.

When no one answers her greeting, Gabriella opens the door and steps inside. Immediately her eyes scan the lavish room—the rich silk curtains, the diamond chandelier, and the ruffled crimson bed sheets—until they fall on me.

"Oh," she exclaims, clearing her throat and taking a step back. "Mr. Reed," she says, her lip twitching. It's almost like she can't decide whether she should smile or frown. She walks over and begins dusting the bedside table next to me, methodically lifting items into the air and placing them back down after she swipes the cloth across the wood.

"Mistress said she would have food sent up for you soon," she says, rotating the glass figurine of a snake in her hand. With careful movements she dusts between the coils of its tail and polishes its long fangs.

"But I don't—"

"She also said it wasn't up for discussion," Gabriella interrupts. "I believe her exact words were, 'If he doesn't eat it himself, tell him I will force it down his throat.'"

My stomach contracts and I fight the urge to vomit.

"You were foolish trying to escape." Her voice is completely devoid of judgment. She's simply stating a fact.

"And you sound more and more like Quinn every day."

"*Mistress* Quinn," she corrects. She's watching me with disdain in her chestnut brown eyes, her full cheeks a bit flushed. Perfectly styled auburn curls frame her face. The only flaw I see on her perfect porcelain countenance is a small scar near her jaw.

"Doesn't matter what I call her."

Incredulity flashes across her face, but she quickly schools her expression and moves around me to place the crystalline viper back onto the bedside table.

"Why you?" she asks, more to herself than to me. Next she picks up the glass-encased candle and dusts the surface beneath it. "Why did she pick you as the favorite?"

I almost laugh at her. "Guess we'll never know."

"You've certainly grown more arrogant," she says, turning her back on me to clean the cream-colored lampshade. "You and that...*girl*...are both delusional if you think you can leave this place."

My mouth falls open the slightest bit. "How do you know about Rebekah?"

Gabriella's lips curl into a condescending smile, but she doesn't respond.

I struggle against the ropes tying my wrists together, suppressing a wince when I feel the twine rip into my raw skin.

"Answer me," I hiss, glaring up at her.

Gabriella's smile widens as she heads for the door. "Are you sure that *you're* not the one who's sounding more and more like Mistress Quinn, Mr. Reed?"



The light filtering through the curtains tells me it's morning again.

I must have fallen asleep—passed out or something—because I don't remember anything after Gabriella's departure the afternoon before.

My meal still rests on the bedside table where she left it, the mashed potatoes, roast beef, and steamed vegetables untouched. My appetite doesn't exist anymore. A few blackberries seem to have disappeared from the fruit cup off to the side, but I don't remember eating any of those. An empty wine glass sits beside the plate, its rim marred by the imprint of feminine lipstick.

I glimpse the butter knife where it rests on top of an embroidered napkin, and I lean over, latching onto the handle with my teeth. It lands with a soft thump on the carpet beside my thigh. With careful movements, I maneuver the knife into my hands and get to work.

My wrists ache, and I suppress the whimper threatening to give me away.

I look over at the crimson sheets, at the figure that lies beneath the comforter, facing away from me.

I struggle to sit up a little straighter, but any attempts end up twisting my arms into an uncomfortable position. Though I can't see my wrists, I can imagine what they look like—crusted with blood and bruised by the unrelenting pressure of the rope. I keep sawing at my

confines with the dulled blade of the butter knife, ignoring the sweat gathering on my fingertips. The blade slips a little, nicking my thumb.

A low groan scratches through my throat.

The comforter starts to move, and my hands freeze behind me, clutching the knife until they start to feel numb.

Quinn rolls over beneath the blankets. Her prurient eyes find mine, and she visibly relaxes when she sees I'm still here.

She reaches out and strokes my hair with her left hand, propping up her slender bodice on her right elbow.

"Good morning, Logan," she says, voice deceptively calm. "I trust you slept well?" Her eyes dart to my bloody wrists before returning to my face. I nod, fighting the panic sinking its greedy claws into my chest. "You know I hate doing this to you. If you behave, these things won't happen."

I tilt my head to the ground. "I know."

She clicks her tongue against the top of her mouth and sighs. Her hand cups my cheek, and she strokes my cheekbone with one of her nails. The gesture is so light, so gentle. I lean into her hand.

Slowly, very slowly, I resume slicing the rope. The pressure lessens a bit, and I take a deep breath. One down.

"You were asleep when I returned. I would have woken you, but having a tired pet takes all the fun out of things," she says. Then a wicked smile graces her lips. "My sweet, conniving, delicious little Logan...you disobeyed me again."

Her expression hardens.

I swallow, praying she won't notice what I've been doing this whole time.

"Should I tell you why I'm displeased? Or are you intelligent enough to figure this out on your own?"

A lump forms in my throat. She knows where I went. "I don't—"

She silences me with her finger, coaxing my mouth open. A crooked smile graces her lips as she touches the tip of my tongue.

"Tell me, Logan," she murmurs. "Tell me why you went to see the girl again."

She already knows. But she's making me say it anyway.

"We were planning to escape..."

Quinn laces her left hand through my hair and pulls, tilting my head back. An involuntary gasp breaks free as my head jerks backward, my neck bared to her.

"That *girl* is nothing more than a distraction for you, Logan. A temptation. How many times have your endeavors to see her ended in punishment?" Her voice, though forceful, barely rises above a whisper.

I'm silent as I kneel beside her, my wrists aching. Two down. Almost there...

"Answer me."

Acid infiltrates my veins, and I look down, swallowing my pride. "Every time," I tell her. "Every time I went to see her...I was..." My cheeks turn red. "I was punished."

Quinn ascends from the bed only to stand in front of me, her bodice draped in a thin, silk nightgown. I hear the scratching of the bedside drawer opening and closing, and then she's towering over me again.

"Look at me."

I obey instantly.

"Mmm, good boy." She unfolds her hand.

Shining in her palm is a violet and crimson stone, its frame a beautiful maze of vines and leaves. A small silver chain dangles from between Quinn's fingers. With her eyes on mine, Quinn reaches behind the back of her neck and undoes the clasp, locking it in place a moment later. The fire opal falls gracefully against her collar bone, its fiery depths glowing from within.

Rebekah's necklace. What's she doing with Rebekah's necklace?

My breath halts in my throat, and I feel tears burning in the backs of my eyes. I clutch the knife in my hands so tightly I feel my bones creaking.

"You understand now, don't you?" she asks, kneeling down beside me, her grin still in place. I can't look away from the stone nestled between her breasts. "You are not the one in control here, Logan. I am. That little girlfriend of yours—I can easily replace her. With a snap of my fingers her life could end. That's not what you want...is it, pet?"

"No..." The word comes out like a strangled moan. I'm so close now...

Quinn sidles closer, one hand returning to my face while the other falls to rest on the waistband of my jeans. She toys with the zipper, her fingers sliding beneath the fabric. Her frosty eyes assault my body as she looks me up and down, her talons tightening their hold on my chin.

"*I'm* the one in control. You belong to *me*, Logan Reed. Say it." Her voice is low and seductive against my ear. I feel her breath slither down the back of my neck.

I take a deep breath and meet her eyes one last time. "I'll never belong to you."

The severed ropes fall from my wrists.

I'm free.