

Rose Gold

Her chin rested in her hand and her mouth played with the idea of a smile the way it always did when she was thinking. She had been looking at the vintage poster on the wall behind the bar, but he barely registered it as he sketched her face in his mind, memorizing every curve and angle of it.

The string of pink and orange lights to her left made it seem like she was glowing like an ember in the fireplace. He felt all the warmer sitting next to her, and he was grateful for that as he saw the first starkly white snowflakes begin to drift down through the window behind her. She turned to him suddenly and the smile finally won over her face, reaching all the way to her coppery eyes.

“What?” she asked. He willed his heart to slow its frenetic beat and fought to keep control over his own smile.

“Nothing,” he replied, turning back to his drink. His eyes drifted up to the poster over the bar she’d been staring at. He lifted the glass to his mouth, then grinned lopsidedly into his drink as he saw the stylized roses in the center of the fading poster.

He was doing his best not to stare while they walked through the garden. The flowers piled up in the beds around them and clinging to the trellises above them were plenty beautiful. And the perfumed air was heavy, almost dreamlike. But she was walking next to him, and he was

doing his best to keep calm. First dates were always uncharted territory, but she seemed to excel at setting his nerves on edge.

She had a wide brimmed hat on to keep the sun out which wasn't doing much good with her head tipped almost all the way back to look at the star jasmine climbing across the arch overhead. The dappled light that peeked through the canopy played across her face, mirroring the freckles that were dusted across her nose. Her honey-gold eyes shone in the sun, and it was hard to tell if the light in the garden was coming from them or from overhead. He realized he'd been staring as she looked over at him and smiled, the sunlight catching in the curves and angles of her face.

"It's beautiful here," he said, "It's almost hard to believe it's real."

"I know!" she replied, with unrestrained excitement in her voice. "It's perfect here. If I could pick it all up and plant it at home, I would do it in a heartbeat."

"Yeah, but I don't know how happy the gardeners would be about that."

The nervous tension in the air popped like the cork off a bottle as she laughed suddenly, and the sound was almost exactly like a glass of champagne – crisp, light, and effervescent. But so much more intoxicating, and infinitely more valuable. He laughed too, far more easily than he ever had. The sun felt warmer now, the air a little lighter, and the colors of the flowers around them shone like stained glass, shifting kaleidoscopically as they swayed in the steady breeze. The silence surrounding them as they walked was content and comfortable now, but she broke it again.

"Oh! Those are gorgeous!" At the end of the path they'd been walking was a bed overflowing with roses, as if a tidal wave of petals and blossoms was breaking on a cliff, sending up a spray of petals in every color.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, “Which ones do you like best?”

“Definitely the pink ones. And the orange ones... and the white ones.”

“So, all of them?”

“Basically, yeah.” she said and laughed again.

He drank it in, savoring it before saying, “I’ve always wanted to grow my own roses.”

She turned to look at him and seemed to be studying his face. The remnants of her laughing smile lingered on her lips, making her eyes seem playful and catlike. She tilted up her chin and said, “I think you should.”

“Hmm. Maybe I will,” he said, unable to keep the smirk off his face.

“You gonna grow some for me too?”

“Only ‘cuz you asked so nicely.”

That smile crept back and it sealed the deal for him. It was done. She asked for roses. He’d grow her roses.

“They really are beautiful.” she said as she turned the vase around on the kitchen counter. It was filled with a dozen long stem roses, a few of which were in full bloom while the rest were still waking up. They all had pink petals at the outer edge, then a few rows of sunset-orange petals which became gradually lighter the closer they got towards the middle, then creamy white petals in the center.

“I still think you should have entered them in the contest,” she said.

“I could have, but I doubt they would have actually won.”

“So what? I think they would have been impressed. Even if you didn’t win, it still would have been fun.”

“I guess. But I’d much rather be here.” He said as he kissed the top of her head. He couldn’t see her face but undoubtedly, she was rolling her eyes.

“Maybe next year,” he offered. He was glad they weren’t face-to-face, or she would have seen his idiotic grin. But something in his voice must have given it away, and she turned to look at him, her amber-gold eyes boring into him as she looked up.

“I mean it,” she said, growing serious, “you should be proud. I know how hard you’ve worked, and you should get to show that off. And everyone should get to enjoy them too.”

“But I grew them for you!” he protested.

She huffed, and he couldn’t help but smile again. “Fine. I promise I’ll enter them next year.” He kissed the top of her head again as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “And when I win, I’ll use the prize money to spoil you rotten.”

She laughed into his chest as he held her tighter. “That’s all I ask.”

In the silence that followed, the sound of the radio in the living room got clearer, and the sultry notes of a soft jazz melody drifted into the kitchen. His grin crept back, and he asked, “Wanna dance?”

“Dance?” she said, pulling her head up to give him a curious look. “You know I’m not really a dancer. And I don’t even know how! I mean, not with a partner.”

“I’ll show you.” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist and taking her left hand in his right. She wrapped her right arm around his neck and stood on the tops of his feet. Her toes were cold even in late summer, but it barely registered and he gently guided them away from the

kitchen counter. The bottle of Malbec and two forgotten glasses sat next to the vase as a silent audience.

She giggled as he maneuvered around the kitchen in half-remembered patterns, and squealed when he dipped her until they both laughed. With her head nestled into his chest and his chin resting on her chestnut hair, they swayed gently, like flowers in a gentle breeze, and any doubts he'd had were carried away.

"I think you're right," he said suddenly, looking over at the roses on the counter, "they probably would win." She looked up at him with a doe-eyed expression, and in the faint orange light from the lamp in the next room over her eyes looked deep enough to dive in.

"But I don't need the prize, I've already got everything I need" he said.

She chuckled before sighing deeply and burying her head against his chest again. The embers of the sunset cast a warm rosy glow across the sky, and as the warm light faded through the window, the static charge of mischief and hope and love surged through his blood. His traitorous heart stampeded in his chest, and like a saint, she chose to silently enjoy the love song drumming through his ribs right into her ear.

As the next sun rose, it threw a golden light across the front porch as he stepped out of the front door. He turned back and shouted back into the house, hoping that she wouldn't come see him off and notice the second vase strapped into the front seat of the car.

"I've just got a couple errands, then I'll be right back!"

"Fine, but I expect a treat. This is what you get for spoiling me!" she called back.

It had taken all morning for the judges to make their way over to him, and he'd done his best to not collapse from fear as they took notes and examined his roses from every angle before nodding to him and moving on. Well into the afternoon now, the judges were making their way back around to hand out prizes and he'd started to sweat, though the heat had little to do with it. He'd been distracted, thinking about the little shop he might be able to stop by on the way home. "*It doesn't matter if I win or lose,*" he reminded himself, "*whether I get it now or later, I'll still be a winner.*"

He'd been so distracted that his heart nearly jumped into his throat as he saw the judges stop directly in front of him.

"Well," the head judge said, a satisfied smile on her face as she saw him try to compose himself, "here we are again!" She leaned down and scanned the placard with the name he'd picked.

"*Paulina.*" She read aloud. "Well, she's definitely beautiful. You should be proud."

"She is! Thank you... and I am, very proud," he said with a nervous smile.

"I think you should be even more proud now" one of the other judges said as he fixed a gold ribbon to the sign in front of his rose.

"Congratulations!" The first judge said, as she held out an envelope to him and they all began to clap. The noise barely registered in his ears as it was drowned out by the pounding of his heart, but the weight of the check in his hands seemed to be the only thing keeping him from floating off down to the little shop on the corner.

It crossed his mind to tell her immediately, to run to the little shop, then straight home to get it all done in one day. “No,” he thought, “*this would make a much better surprise.*” And he smiled as his mind began to work over all the things that would come next.

The balmy air and subdued chatter inside the bar were swept aside as the door swung open, and they stepped out of the rosy glow of the barroom onto the dark, silent street. Snowflakes had begun to stick to her hair almost immediately, glittering in the light of the streetlamp like a diamond crown. She smiled up at him and asked,

“Ready?” His heart thundered and his left hand shook in his pocket. Their misty breath drifted softly in two billowy clouds before they were drawn together and carried off lazily by the faint breeze.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” He answered with his own smile and took her left hand in his right as they crossed the street.

“Actually,” he said, “there’s something I’ve got to ask you.” He stopped, turning to face her before pulling his left hand out of his coat pocket.

The crisp January air swallowed up the background hum of the city, and the snow had begun to accumulate on the street between the dark, indistinct shadows of the buildings. It had coated everything in a clean white blanket, like a fresh sheet of paper laid out for the beginning of a story. Snowflakes hung in the air, catching the lamplight on their facets, and for a moment it seemed as though stars were drifting down to watch the moment unfold. In that new black and white world, silent and still, two silhouettes were poised alone on the empty street. She stood statuesque in the night, and he knelt on the snow-covered ground among the flakes of starlight,

as if they were on top of the clouds and not under them. And between them, there was only the soft glint of rose gold.

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