

I love how it feels to be held by you. Your hands are warm against my skin, your timid gesture of tenderness. The lights are low and my heartbeat is loud. I can feel your hands shaking against my body with tremors brought by uncertainty. I want to tell you that it is okay for you to touch me. I know how much courage it must take for you to put your hands on me. I want you to know that I'm okay.

*Am I okay?*

You sway me across the dance floor, tightly pressing me against your body, pushing heat against my face as you whisper the words to the song in my ear...but all that I can hear are the hushed and harsh whispers of the man before you — the one whose hands on my waist led to his hands on my chest and every other part of me, the one whose breath was hot against my face as he spit the words "I love you," who slammed me against a wall and trapped me there until I agreed to let him.

Everything about you in this moment is too familiar; the pressure of your hands on my body, the stickiness of your breath as it touches my face, and the feeling of you directing my body to the beat of the music.

I am terrified. Standing with my body pressed against yours in the middle of a sea of billowing dresses and freshly pressed suits, it takes every ounce of courage for me not to run away. As the music slows you step on my dress for the hundredth time. It's the dress that took me months to find. It's the dress that my mom agreed to buy after a series of thrift-store-fails and tear-studded outings; the dress that allowed me one evening of sanity in the company of you, a man who so genuinely cares for me. You let me escape the harshness of reality for one night; no childcare pick-ups or dinner fiascos or folding laundry — just you and me and your wide eyes constantly catching me in your gaze.

The amount of thought that you put into making tonight perfect isn't lost on me. Your months of scheming culminate now, the moment when your quirky proposal and sideways smile distinctly alert me to your heart.

We spent weeks coordinating our outfits — you in that charcoal suit that I loved and me in the royal purple. We bought matching shoes for the event — crisp white lace-up Vans which hid beneath the folds of my dress but screamed against the gray of your ensemble. The first time I saw it all together, when I stepped out of the car and into your arms, my breath got lost somewhere in my throat. The sight of you pressed against the blue sky, strikingly handsome with a smile flooding your face, was exactly the way I always imagined you as my prince. In that moment, the sun setting behind you, casting your hair into a warm glow, I began to believe the promises that you made to me — promises which spoke of hope and comfort and confidence. Before tonight I had spent so many hours convincing myself that I would be okay, that you, my prince, would take care of me and in turn I would forget the hole in my heart for a few hours.

Just one night.

Your grandmother gasped when she saw me, muttering something to your mother about how beautiful I am. You, though, didn't say anything. You stared at me the same way that you do now as we move underneath the pulsing lights of the room. Earlier, when my hands were my own, I was able to cover myself self-consciously as your eyes ran up and down my body. But now I am powerless to shield myself from the exposure of your naked gaze. I want to hide, but there's nowhere to go. There is no escape. That's what tonight is supposed to be.

Before we left your family wanted to take pictures, and for a second you took your eyes off me to gather the bottom of my dress into your hands. The waves of sheer fabric tumbled over your arm as you led me down the steps. I was self-conscious the entire time. I hated that you were staring at me, but I hated it more when you looked away.

I was nervous with so many other people around us, but you didn't seem to mind. You gently brushed hair away from my eyes so that you could hold my gaze, the same way that you do now as the music surrounds us. I like that. I like being the object of your affection, the one to whom your eyes gravitate to even in a sea of bodies.

I like being your princess.

The smile still hasn't slipped off your face, but as your greedy hands gather me against you I can't meet your eyes. It is the first time that they don't meet. My heart is racing and my head is throbbing. I can feel the pressure of your touch on the small of my back as your fingers snake their way up my spine; an innocent gesture for you that means everything to me.

I press my burning face into your shoulder. You clutch at the sheer fabric of my dress, forever pulling me closer into you as the music swells around us. I love the feeling of your chest against mine, your heartbeat shattering my own. I want so badly to be with you in this moment. But I am stuck somewhere between two worlds; the deafening roar of skewed reality constantly washes over me. I desperately want to lose myself in your embrace, but as your hands move over my body, I recognize the sting that still echoes in my bones.

Your hands are a vice, trapping me against you, just as the man before you did. He selfishly pressed himself on top of me, hands on either side of my face as he pinned me down, ruthlessly whispering harsh reminders of broken promises. The dark hallway, his hot breath filling my nostrils, innocents sleeping on the other side of the wall, his body crushing mine.

I can't breathe.

Your hands are an iron, searing whatever flesh the last man left in your wake as the thin fabric of your shirt exposes the quickening pace of your heart. Your hands on my body are crippling.

This isn't a dance anymore. This is hell.

I can't breathe.

An hour ago, we were the first people on the dance floor and now I cannot wait to get off. I just wanted one night of escape and now I crave my exit.

For months I have been forgiving the other man, over and over again I have told myself that I refuse to lose myself to him any longer. I have forced myself to imagine a world where I could forgive him. I thought I had. For the first time I thought I was done.

I can't breathe.

You told me that you didn't want to know about him. You said that you didn't care what I had done because you didn't know me then, and you didn't want to know my past mistakes -- not in light of the woman that I had become, the woman that you knew. I thought that was charming in the beginning, but now, standing under the lights unable to breathe, I want you to know how much I ache to curl into a corner and weep. I want you to know that after all of the convincing I had tried to force on myself, I am not okay.

My face buried in your shoulder paints your suit with the remnants of my made up face. I want you to tell me that everything is alright. I need you to tell me that you love me. I need you to hold me close to you until I stop trembling.

I need you to let me go. I need you to let me breathe.

I swear that I am going insane. I came to you looking for a reprieve from the heartache. But now I want out. I want to be able to look into your eyes and not see his. I want to be able to love the feeling of being held by you without feeling vile for allowing myself to be touched. I want to feel worthy of your affection. I want to be the princess that you assured me I am.

I wish that you knew that I am falling apart. Do you feel it as I fall limp in your arms? Do you notice as my body trembles against yours? Do you not hear my breaths getting caught as they desperately try to find their way out of my throat?

Perspiration slicks your skin. I see the vein pulsing in his neck as I watched the sweat drip down his face. I can feel your hands on my waist. I can feel the pressure of his fingers as they explored me.

Everything in me wants to scream. Everything in me wants to push you away from me.

As you run your fingers up my spine, a bout of paralysis overtakes my body. There is nothing that I can do. I am stuck. I am back in that dark hallway. Desperately looking for a way out, crying as the other man pushes me to the wall.

I want to be anywhere but in your arms, but I know that you love me and I also know that I have nowhere to go. So I let you hold me as we move through the crowd, and I let your hand stay on the small of my back, and I let you whisper your serenades in my ear; all the while crying against your shoulder the tears of fear, which you mistake for tears of joy and press me further to you.

In that moment I am no longer a princess.

I am nothing.