

Alison Ruth

All the Words You Sing

Red hair dye crushed through Nicoletta's fingers. In a bathroom mirror more shard than glass, her hair piled on her head, she saw her face burn under Clairol's asphyxiating chemicals. Her dark eyes narrowed either at the deception or the chemistry that created it. She'd already opened the window, but it only opened to another garden apartment, to another window she could almost reach if she were just a little taller. She was nineteen but could still hope. She leaned her face against the screen to catch any breath she could, while the dye scalded her brunette hair into a color only the rarest of women had been born with.

The plastic gloves on her hands wrinkled bloody while her watch ticked from the safety of the soap dish. Her sentence was counted in minutes, unlike Eddie's, counted in years. He had wrapped her fingers around a stolen onyx ring. "Not worth enough to sell," he told her in a voice that tempted girls to hear him sing rock 'n roll from back in the decade when Bill Haley and the Comets caused riots. So she was only one of many, whereas there was only one of him—bare arms, Les Paul Deluxe, and a passion that only the rarest of men would not try to hide. He was not much taller than she was, but there was no equality between them, not when he closed his eyes to her and opened his mouth.

The first night the house lights flashed on a woman with shining red hair to her waist and a diamond ring on her left hand, Eddie caught his breath in the midst of "Fever" to bend the microphone toward her. Her husband dropped his beer to snatch her back. It was then Nicoletta resolved to search out that precious color from the come-hither boxes that lined the beauty supply store.

For she had the fear of heartbreak perpetually with her, praying on her knees that time was not so fast, and the women who pursued him not so insistent. Even winter nights they would pose in little more than leather jackets and desire, calling his name over the din of his ferocious band, and when Nicoletta wasn't seething, she was wondering how it would feel to be that wanted. And every once in a while, she would suck in her breath to see the other woman, blushing with her husband's arm wrapped around her. Nicoletta knew, even if the husband didn't, that his wife only leaned on his arm so she wouldn't swoon when Eddie finally discovered her in his spotlight audience. She wears her husband's ring, Nicoletta repeated to herself; even now his arm claims her neck. But that had not yet stopped Eddie from seeking her, and she wondered if the thief in him desired a woman with a diamond more than a woman without.

Dye crawled down the side of her face from her looping pile of hair. She prayed to her eyes, to whomever controlled her from above, to give her the only thing she wanted—not a B.F.A., not a studio job in Manhattan, not even a bank account that would pay a salon to color her, but all of her elusive Eddie's desire.

Her mother had sent her father to her earlier that July, his jaw set but his eyes pretending to be reasonable. He angled his Ranger XLT in front of her building into a parking space where a K car would have seemed a doubtful fit. He was breathing hard but trying to hide it after he'd run up the two flights. Nicoletta was not ready for this visit. Too late to make ice cubes, she offered him water warm as the room. Traffic south on the Parkway was unpredictable, since cars seemed to spontaneously combust around the Newark exit, and rubberneckers always crept whenever

they saw fire leaping from an engine. So she still wore pajama shorts and a T-shirt from the college she told everyone she'd attended, just not for how long.

Her father touched her flame-colored hair. "You're trying to look Irish?"

She closed her eyes. There was no other way to hide.

He drank some water and set the glass on the floor. His arms had a girth that came from cutting wood and hammering it together most of his life. "Gina, Angie, Josie came by the house, looking for you." He counted her high school friends off on his fingers, as if they were too numerous for him to remember without assistance.

"You told them where I was?"

"Your mom did." He shook his head. "I would've lied."

Ash from a factory incinerator drifted in from the window. It floated down to the empty couch and the TV with only three channels on the dial, to settle on the bare floor. Her father would not have constructed a building like this.

"Isn't it hard for you," he asked, staring at her bare feet. "To see him only twice a month?" She nodded but he didn't need to see her answer.

"So how could you do this for the rest of his life?"

"It won't be forever," she reassured him. "He'll be out in twenty-three months."

Her father rubbed his eyes with his fingers, as if trying to push them back in. "Nicky," he sighed, nearly kicking the water glass with his boot. "Do you think he won't ever go back inside?"

She stared at her father. "No."

"I don't want him to steal for you." He pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his shirt. "Yours," he said, unchaining himself from the wall to hand it to her.

Nicoletta unfolded a check for five hundred dollars, a contractor's decisive bid.

Her father raked his hand through his hair. "You can add another zero to that if you leave one zero in prison."

She crumpled the check in her fist. "What if someone had asked Mom to leave you if you were in trouble?"

"Trouble like losing a job?" He paused to let her lips burn. "Or trouble like robbing jewelry stores up and down New Jersey?"

"Some of them got their gold back." She clapped her hand over her mouth.

Her father stared at the most beautiful of his daughters as if she were in need of an exorcism. In the Church of the Madonna, her mother had rocked her linen-swathed body quiet at her baptism before handing her to his mother, who listened to WQXR every opera Saturday, always singing the doomed heroine's part during the glorious Italian performances. Now in an apartment more fit for his day laborers, her son's breath smothered as he faced a girl half his size with twice his determination. "Keep it."

Nicoletta would have reached for him, not to thank him, for he almost made her doubt what she knew she wanted, but to let him know she also could not control what she wanted to most. He reached for her first, as if he would carry her down both flights of stairs and backwards through time if it would break the spell. He had to leave with his arms empty. But his kiss remained on her cheek, the only place where Eddie had never kissed her.

Between those too brief, too early prison visits, where she was condemned only to look at what she could not have, there was sharpening pencils at work, ignoring ringing phone calls from prying friends, stifling in her apartment. In that church of stone and stained glass, God had blessed her with mercy and her grandmother with magic, and it was in her imagination she

resided, aided by memory. It was real enough that she had to close her eyes whenever she thought of Eddie's mouth on hers, and let the chills seep through her skin, so that she shimmered Dairy Queen cool inside. She had won what all the girls wanted, but only for an icicle bright December, measured in the duration of a few thousand dollars' worth of bail. It was his freedom to spend, and he would drive her shivering to a rime-glazed beach in a T-bird with a cold heater. But after hours kissing, the leather interior sweltered against their bare skin. She had unrolled the window to let the snowflakes dust her glowing face. He tasted her again. "Like icing."

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