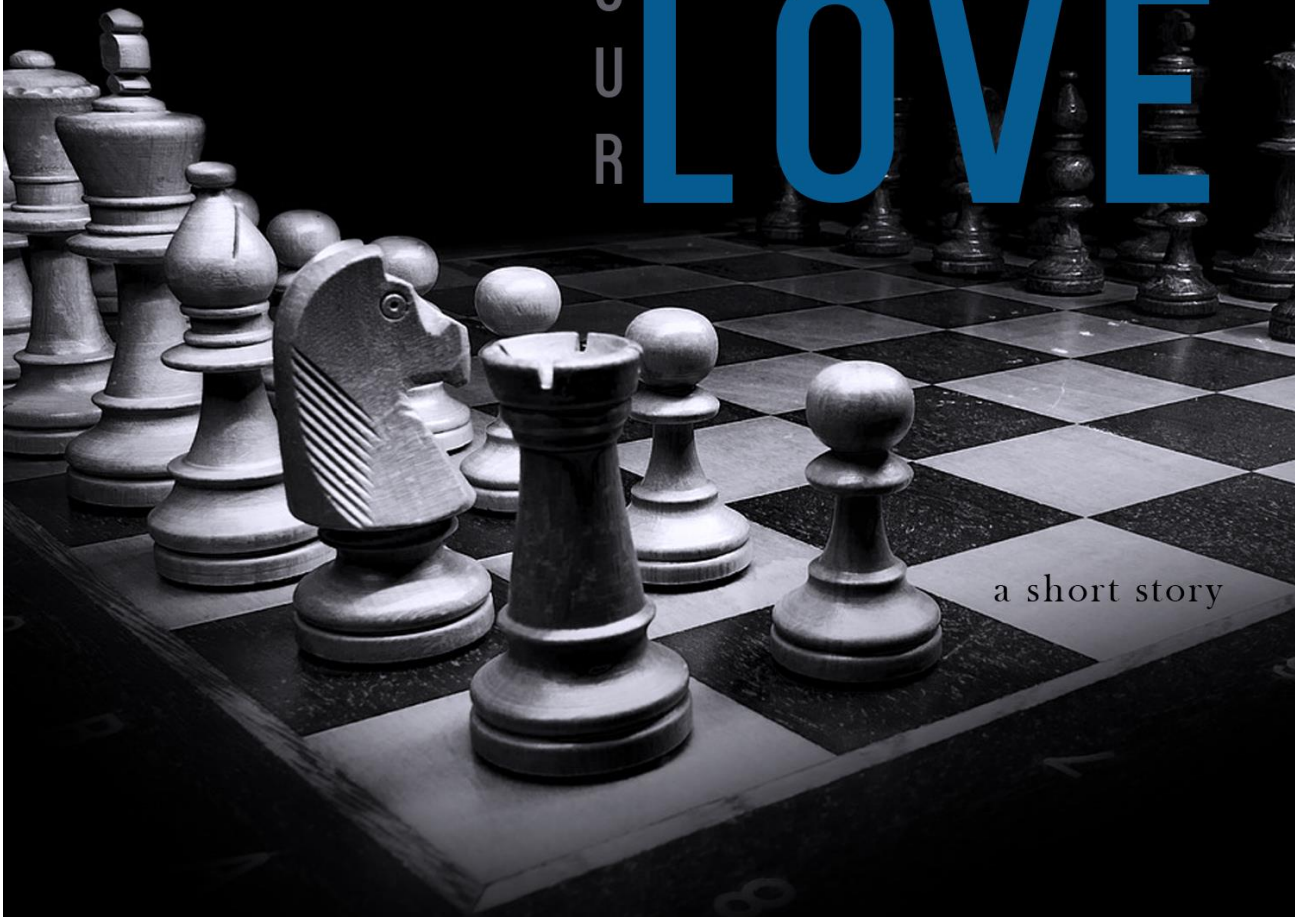




BRUTAL

IS
OUR

LOVE



a short story

willowy whisper

BRUTAL IS OUR LOVE

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I AM DETACHED. I shouldn't be. Reality, by this time, should be all I know. Everything should make sense.

But it doesn't. I feel suffocated. I can't breathe through the bandages. I know I'm sitting in front of a mirror. Not because I can see, for I can't. I haven't seen daylight in so long that I ache for the warmth of it.

It will be worth it. I don't ask for assistance when I start peeling. The bandages tug loose easily. They unravel down my neck, damp with sweat, reeking with a fleshly stench. *Worth it.*

I keep my eyes closed. No more bandages. Behind my closed lids, I see pink. *Now open.* The command is easier to think than do. I gather strength, inner courage . . . but I don't want to see myself. *I must. I must look.* I've spent fourteen years, three months, and one day waiting for this. My pawns are falling in place. I've moved one square at a time, but I'm finally getting closer.

My lashes flutter. It's happening—I'm staring at myself in the mirror. I don't know what to think, what to do, so I simply take it in, one feature at a time. My eyes are a different shape. They were always almond-shaped. Now, they're rounded. They're still hazel. That's okay, though. Easy fix. I'll get contacts later. I study my brows. I can't pin-point the difference, but they arch differently. Less bushy, too. Already, I don't recognize myself.

My nose. I'm jolted by the change. How did they make it smaller? It makes me look less like a thug, more like a professor. For some reason, it makes me feel smart. Perfect nose for a pair of sophisticated, wire-rimmed glasses to rest upon. I may have to consider that. Who knows? It might do wonders to my appearance.

My cheeks are unshaven, so I can't inspect for scarring. I'm not really worried, though. The plastic surgeons have my full confidence. They better, after what I paid.

My lips are what grab me, though. They don't feel like my own. They are fuller. Even the coloring is more vibrant. I moisten them, pucker them, tighten them into a line . . . and try not to imagine Lorraine kissing them.

"Mr. Andrepont." A nurse sweeps into the room, carefully surveying the results. I watch her expression change so many times that I don't know what she's thinking. She says on a quiet note, "Are you pleased?"

Pleased? I don't know what to think. I'm a different man. I have a different face. But then again, wasn't that the point?

When I don't answer, she finally comes closer. Her brows are quizzical. "Mr. Andrepont, I wonder if I might ask you something personal."

I don't care. I simply nod.

"Most people who want this kind of procedure . . . well, they have reasons." She crosses her hands across her chest. "I mean, sometimes they're unusually unattractive or plain. Sometimes, they're aging movie stars who can't come to grips with the fact that they're getting older. And we've had so many patients that have been in accidents, where the surgery was done to help normalize their face."

I stare at her through the mirror. Glare, really—because I have no idea how I'm going to answer this.

She blinks. "Excuse me for being blunt, Mr. Andrepont, but you're none of those things. You're young—and think what you like, but you were a very handsome man."

I'm not now. I know that. I look deformed, but only slightly. That's not the point. The point is that I look different. That's the plan. That's the goal. That's the next pawn, scooting across the chess board.

When I don't answer, the nurse finally shrugs and walks away.

I'm glad. I want to be alone. I fold the bandages very gently and lay them across my lap. I try to think, try to imagine step two. My chest works faster. So close to the end.

In a few more weeks, I'll see Lorraine.

I've always had a bulking, muscle-toned build. In fact, I've gotten comments about it. Mountain man, they called me. I always took pride in that. I've spent the last few years, though, thinning down. I've lost the muscle I worked so hard for. Now, I'm on the brink of being skinny . . . and I cringe with the word.

But those were necessary precautions. I can't take any chances of being recognized.

"Sir, would you like some pretzels or a soda?"

I tear my eyes away from the airplane window.

The flight attendant—an overweight woman in her fifties—leans in closer.

"No," I say. "How close are we?"

I think she's hard of hearing. She shuffles closer still, until she's practically standing in the empty seat beside of me. "How what?"

"How close are we?"

I can tell she still can't hear me. She smiles awkwardly, nods, then moves over to the next seat. "Pretzels or soda?"

I look back at the window. Squares. The world is squares. So funny how everything . . . all those people, houses, lives . . . all just squares. Like a chessboard. It doesn't make sense. But then again, life seldom does.

I wonder if all this is for nothing. Lorraine is smart. She always was. Maybe that's what I first loved about her. What if she looks at me the first time, into my eyes, and knows?

That won't happen. I have been way too discreet. I have changed everything. My hair color, my clothes, my physique, my face. I even spent four months learning a different accent. There is no way in the world Lorraine would ever know who I am.

Adrenaline sears through me. I grip my hands in my lap. I know I'm insane. I know this is an obsession, a vengeance thing . . . I know that.

But Lorraine killed my baby.

I can't just sit back and do nothing.

I still feel like I'm trapped in someone else's body. I feel lost when I get off the plane. I feel lost in the airport. I feel lost on my chessboard. I wish the burning in my chest would go away, but it doesn't. It intensifies with each step I take.

I go to the bathroom first. Everything is in order. I look great. I don't even recognize myself. Afterwards, I grab a bite to eat, find a taxi, then head straight for her neighborhood. As I stare out the window, I'm choked down with memories. *I can't do this.* Then I remind myself. I've been planning for fourteen years. I can't believe how much of my life has been obsessed with this plan, how much money I've spent. But money was never an issue. It's the one thing I've had plenty of my whole life. Maybe things would have been different if I'd had a real family, a real home. I didn't. The

only love my parents ever showed me was handing me money . . . and in my mind, that wasn't love at all.

Maybe that's why I fell so hard when Lorraine came along.

I see her house. Her car is parked out front. She's home.

"Slow down." I say it softly, pressing my fingers to the window. I want to run. I want to see her. I know I can't.

"This your stop, Mister?"

It takes me a minute to gather my voice again. "No," I finally force out. "Keep driving."

I wish I could have gotten a glimpse of her. I'm numb, listless—and when I check into a small motel, I collapse onto my bed. *Pawns in place*. Another square closer. *I'm almost there*.

It takes a week and a half before it actually happens. I remember how much she loved to take walks at the park. I took a wager that she still did, and spent every day on a bench, watching for her.

Now she's here.

I see her start up the path at a comfortable jog. She's wearing braids, sweat pants, a T-shirt, and Sketchers.

I can't stop shaking. I smooth my palms over my jeans. Got to get control. This must look natural, casual. Everything hinges on this moment.

She's getting closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

I can't think. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say, how to stop her . . . my pawns are retreating.

Lorraine jogs by me. She doesn't even glance my way. My plan has failed.

I can't do this. I jerk to my feet. I hurry back to my motel room. I ball my fists . . . punch the pillows on my bed, until I'm sweating and panting. I'm so angry with myself. What if I can't get up the nerve? What if all of this was for nothing?

Can't think like that.

Today was a fail. Tomorrow won't be.

It is five more days before something actually happens. I'm at the park again, because I don't know where else to meet her. Once, I followed her car to the grocery store, but the place was so crowded, I didn't get my chance. Another time, I followed her to a small white church. Lorraine must have found religion. I didn't go inside. No thank you. I'll just stick to the park.

For the first time today, I see her. She's walking a dog. I'm surprised at this, because I never thought she cared about anything but herself. Why else would she—

I stop that thought. No time now. She's getting closer.

A raucous noise startles me from behind.

I tear my eyes away from Lorraine—just long enough to glimpse what's happening.

A boy on a bike. No training wheels. Maybe his first time. The slope is chugging him faster. He's panicked. He's gripping the handlebars, closing his eyes . . . and heading straight for Lorraine. I leap from the bench, but not in time to stop him.

He collides into Lorraine. I watch her legs tangle, even as she doubles over the boy on the bike. The small dog is caught somewhere beneath, choked around the leash, crumbling under a wheel. Silence.

I react without thinking, rushing forward, helping Lorraine to her feet.

She barley notices me.

The boy drags his bike from the scene, whimpering about a skinned knee—but it is the little dog that snags my attention.

The animal doesn't move.

"Anthony, are you all right?" A burly father appears to pull his son away, then bends to inspect the knee. "Let's go find your mother. I think you'd better ride in the grass, until you get better without the training wheels." Father and son hiked up the slope.

I am left alone. With Lorraine.

"Pepper." She stares down, steps back. A hand rushes to her throat. "Why isn't he moving?"

I bend to inspect the dog, feeling the throat for a pulse. Nothing. I press fingers into the soft fur and leave bloody. "The rib cage is crushed."

I look up just in time to see the display of tears. "Oh my."

I don't know what to say. I feel like I should comfort her. I have to catch myself, because I know I shouldn't. "I'll get a box somewhere." I swallow. "For the dog."

"Poor Mrs. Swanson." She brushes tears off her cheek. "Pepper's not even my dog. I walk him for Mrs. Swanson sometimes, when her fibromyalgia is acting up."

I don't know why she's telling me all of this. I listen anyways.

"Pepper isn't much, but Mrs. Swanson will be lost without him. That big empty house . . . first Mr. Swanson, now Pepper . . ." She lets her words trail off, then composes herself. "I guess I will need a box."

"We can walk over to the ice-cream stand. They might have one."

She nods. "Okay."

I take charge and start down the sidewalk, aware that she's only a few steps behind me. I can't help the butterflies in my stomach. They are so wild that I scarcely breathe.

The dog is in the box. At this point, the stranger should say he's sorry, maybe shake her hand, then part ways. But I'm not a stranger. I don't let go of the box. "I can carry this for you."

She reaches for it. "No, you've been so kind already." She hesitates when I don't hand over the box. "Really, Mrs. Swanson just lives down the street. I don't want to take up your time—"

"Time is the one thing I have plenty of." I offer a smile. "I'd be happy to walk with you."

She finally shrugs, smiles, then starts down the sidewalk. She's quiet as we walk. I know her mind is elsewhere, probably on the dog—then she surprises me. "You remind me of someone."

My stomach clenches. I grope for calm, but I'm already shaking. "Really?"

"Do you live around here?"

"I'm visiting."

"Oh." She picks up her pace. "Well, I feel like we've talked before."

"I doubt it."

“Probably not.” She laughs then, softly.

I’m not prepared for how it affects me. The sound of her laugh . . . after all these years. I’m undone. I’m torn open. What am I even doing here? Then I stop myself. Pawns in place. I have to remember that . . . have to remember that she killed our child. That is a sin I can’t forgive. I’ll do whatever it takes to retaliate.

“Oh no.” Lorraine stops short. “She’s in the lawn.” She turns fearful eyes my way. “How am I ever going to tell her?”

My voice is genteel, “May I?”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“It will be easier—for both of you.” I open the gate for her, allow her to walk through first, then trail behind her.

A silver-haired woman straightens, a fist full of weeds in both gloved hands. “That was hardly a walk at all,” the woman says, squinting against the sun. “Was Pepper acting up again?”

“I’m afraid not,” I say.

The woman blinks, shifting her gaze to me, as if noticing me for the first time. She sees the box. “Who are you?”

I don’t say anything at first, merely approach her and surrender the makeshift casket. “I’m sorry to say, ma’am, that Pepper has been in an accident.”

The woman’s cheeks drain instantly. Her chin quivers as her eyes roam about, no longer sure where to rest, until finally her gaze settles back on my face. “Little Pepper isn’t . . . he’s not . . .”

“I’m afraid so.” This comes from Lorraine. She steps forward to lay a light hand on the old woman’s caving shoulder. “It was no one’s fault. I’m so very sorry.”

Mrs. Swanson’s lips part in a horrid gasp, even as she careens, knees giving out—

I step forward just in time.

She falls into my arms and I sweep her up, shocked at the speed of my reflects.

“Oh no!” Lorraine is in a frenzy. “I knew she couldn’t handle it . . . oh my. Better carry her inside. Do you think I should call a doctor?” She opens the door for me, then leads me through an immaculate hallway. She points to an upholstered, antique settee in a well-decorated living room. “Lay her right there. I’ll grab some pillows.” She disappears from the room in a flash.

I gently lay the woman where I’m told, then take her hand and pat it gently.

She doesn’t stir.

“Should I call a doctor?” Reentering the room, Lorraine asks the question for the second time.

“No, I don’t think so.” I answer quickly, responsibly, my new accent doing wonders to disguise my voice. “She’s just fainted . . . I think she’s coming around.”

As if on cue, the woman lifts her head, disoriented. Tears start down her cheeks. “Lorraine?”

“I’m right here, Mrs. Swanson.” Lorraine presses a hand to the woman’s cheek. “Try to lay still, all right?”

“Was Pepper good for his walk?” she whispers.

Lorraine nods. “Very good. He always is.”

The woman half chuckles, half sobs. “Not where cats are concerned,” she murmurs. “Pepper always chases after them, barking like he does . . . but he never means them no harm.”

“Of course not.”

The woman shifts to a sitting position, and despite Lorraine’s advice not to, she stands to her feet. “Please take the box with you,” she says on a tremor, looking to me. “I haven’t the heart to bury him.”

“We’ll take care of everything,” I say, careful to insert the *we*.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Swanson swabs at the last of her tears. “If you both don’t mind, I believe I’ll go upstairs. I’d like to be alone. I’m very tired.”

We watch in silence as she hobbles up the winding steps, disappearing from view. We wait until we hear her bedroom door click shut.

“You were wonderful with her.” Lorraine’s smile is bittersweet. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“I do.”

She blinks. “How?”

“Eat dinner with me.”

The thought obviously startles her, and it’s not until we’re back outside that she actually responds, “Do you like broccoli soup?”

“My favorite.”

A smile beams on her face. “Then I guess it’s settled.” She straightens her shoulders, brushing hair from her face. “But first, tell me your name.”

“Bart Ales. Yours?”

“Lorraine.” She points down the street. “That’s my house right there. Bring the box—and follow me.”

We’re sitting at a dining room table in a house that is elegantly small. Her taste hasn’t changed much. Still simple, yet classy. A lot like her.

“So tell me about yourself.” She’s stirring her broccoli soup when she glances up. “Are you married?”

I blink at how blunt she is. I should have remembered that, though. She was always that way. “No,” I answer. “You?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

This time, it is she that blinks. She takes a long sip of her soup before she responds, “I was hurt.” A pause. “A long time ago.” She folds her napkin. “I guess I never got over it.”

“So he broke off the relationship?” I know I’m prying. But I already know the answers. I just want to hear it from her lips.

“No.” She’s draining pale, even as she stammers, “No, he didn’t. I did.”

“Why?” I’m no longer eating, no longer attempting to pretend aloofness. I need answers. I need them now . . . fourteen long years, and I can’t wait a second. “If you loved him, why would you do that?”

She’s startled at my tone. “It was complicated.”

“Really?” I’m losing it. My entire façade, all these years of waiting . . . positioning my players, rearranging my pawns. Why am I blowing it? I have to make her love me. I have to win her trust. I have to make her depend on me . . . give me her everything, fall so hard that she can’t climb out. Then I have to hurt her. I have to ruin her life, just like she did mine. When that has happened . . . that’s when I kill her. Checkmate. I know it’s wicked. Maybe insane. I can’t help it, not after what she did—

“Thank you for helping with the dog.” She stands abruptly to her feet. I know she senses something. I see visible warning bells go off in her eyes. “I’ll show you to the door—”

“Why was it complicated?” I stand, too. “Two people loved each other. Shouldn’t that have been enough?”

“Excuse you,” she throws back. “You don’t even know anything about me—”

“Don’t I?” I circled the table.

She backs into the wall. I hear the air rush from her mouth. “Who are you?”

“Guess.”

“What?”

“Look at me.” I corner her. I place an arm on each side of her, trapping her next to me. “Look into my eyes . . . see how much you remember.”

“I don’t know you,” she gasped, but she doesn’t move. She simply stares in shock. I know what she’s thinking. She feels the truth, but her eyes deceive her.

“It’s me, Lorraine,” I whisper. I’m way too close to her face. I want to kill her. I want to kiss her. I love her. I hate her. Then the words rumble forth, “Why did you murder our child?”

Silence.

She’s crying. The tears come faster, faster, faster.

“Tell me.”

She looks away.

I grab her chin, turn her face back to me. I step closer. My nose brushes hers, and the impact sends chills down my back. “I . . . I have to know, Lorraine.” I’m sobbing. “I have to know why you’d do that. To me, to our child . . . I need to know.”

She crams her eyes shut, but the tears still press through. “I didn’t want to.”

“But you did.”

“They forced me—”

“Who?”

“My parents.” She swallows. More silence. “They arranged the abortion . . . they did everything.”

“You could have said no.”

“I was sixteen—”

“You didn’t have to kill it.”

“I didn’t want to—”

“But you did!” I’m screaming. I slip my hands around her neck. Pulsating. Pumping. I could kill her so easily.

I almost think she wants me to. She isn’t fighting.

“You didn’t have to leave me . . .” The words drift into a whisper. “You ruined my life. You’re the only person I ever loved . . . and you destroyed me.”

“Not just you.” Her words come out barely audible, “I destroyed myself, too.”

I don’t know what is happening.

She’s falling forward . . . she’s pushing her head into my chest. She’s weeping. She’s clinging to me.

And I don’t push her away. I let my arms fall around her. I hug her close, burying my face into her hair, squeezing. *Lorraine*. There is no chessboard. Not right now. There is no fourteen years. There is no game. There is no plan.

I just hold her.

We sob together.

I don’t know how long we stand here. It feels like only a moment, but when I finally open my eyes, the room is getting dark. I start to pull away, but she doesn’t let me go.

“Wait.” Her voice is breathless, frantic.

I can’t even speak. I just wait.

Then, softly, “I don’t want to lose you again.”

It’s too late. When I don’t answer, she releases her hold. I think she understands.

“Then tell me one last thing.” She brushes wet hair away from her face and demands my eyes.

My chest quivers.

“Tell me I’m forgiven.”

I can’t do it. I pull away, moving through the darkness, stopping at the door. I pause. I turn around. I can’t do it, but I do it anyways . . . and the words slip out, “I forgive you.”

In the darkness, I hear muffled sounds, as if she’s constraining sobs.

“Goodbye, Lorraine.” With those parting words, I make my escape. I run. I don’t stop running until I’m at the airport. I wait for hours. Finally, I’m on a plane. I’m soaring in the sky again, leaving behind a woman I only want to take with me. It’s too late. I know that. What we have . . . it’s not love. It’s past that. It’s something wrong, something broken, something almost brutal. A dead child lingers between us, creating a barrier much too great to ever crumble.

I know what she’s doing right now. She’s still sitting in that little dining room, in the corner, hugging her knees.

I look out the window. *I am free.* That realization pounds through me, springing light into dark places, all throughout my soul. I am not oppressed. I am not tormented. I don’t know why . . . but I am free.

I smile. With one hand, I sweep across the chessboard and scatter the pieces. There are no pawns left. There is no game now.

THE END