

Three Black Roses

Every day.

Every day he taunts me.

With his dashing smile and his tumbling curls.

When he makes her smile...

I don't understand why she thinks he's better. It's not like she never liked me. She liked me until *he* came along.

They sit at a table in the corner of the cafe. Right across from each other. She laughs at something he says. She laughs really hard. I'm sure it wasn't that funny.

She just wants to impress him. I never made her impress *me*. I knew who she was and I loved who she was. She puts a mask on for him. She pretends to be what he wants. The real her is what I want.

They get up and leave, having finished their coffees. I count twenty seconds in my head, then I get up and leave as well.

I see them half way up the street, as I walk outside. I turn in their direction. I make my feet go quickly, so I can get close enough to them to hear what they're saying.

Anna talks about the book that she's reading. Her favourite character. She doesn't name him but I know who he is. If Gene knew her at all, he'd know that she's read that book three times before.

But Gene doesn't know Annie like I do.

Three Black Roses

Anna takes his hand, just like she used to hold mine. Fingers laced through his. Her fingers fit better laced through mine. His hands are too big for hers. Anna needs a small, gentle hand; she's so fragile.

They turn the corner back to Anna's house, where they'll spend the rest of the day. He'll go home around ten. She'll sit on the couch for about fifteen minutes after he's gone.

I take the long way to Anna's house, so they won't notice me.

I arrive just as they sit down on the couch. I sit by the window right where the basement starts, it's right above the ground, and isn't very tall, but I can see just fine.

I sit on the damp grass as Gene and Anna watch TV from the couch.

Gene puts his arm around Anna. My Anna.

At 10:28 Gene walks home.

I stay to watch Annie as she sits on the couch for a while after Gene has left. I'd like to think it's because she's unhappy with Gene being there and she's relieved he's gone.

But I know it's the opposite. I know she misses him. I never knew if she did that when I left. I should've watched more closely, like I do now.

After Annie retreats to her bedroom, I move away from the window.

I walk home, with my earbuds in. I play the same song on repeat, everyday. Back when Annie was mine, it was our song.

It's still our song.

Three Black Roses

Anna collapses into the chair beside me.

“What'd you do yesterday?” She pulls out her phone, “I tried to text you, to ask if you wanted to hang out with Gene and I, but you didn't answer.”

“Oh sorry,” I say, “I would've loved to hang out with you guys, but I went to some art thing out of town. And sorry about not texting you. I left the house and *then* I realized my phone was dead.”

“That blows,” she says. “How'd you survive?”

“Barely.”

She laughs.

“Charlie?” She looks at me with a strange look.

“Yeah?”

“You didn't go to Mia's before, did you?”

“No.”

Mia's Cafe, where she and Gene had been.

“Okay,” she says, “I just thought I saw you there.”

“Maybe it was my evil twin,” I suggest.

Three Black Roses

She laughs again.

“What’re you doing tonight?” Anna asks me.

“I have swim practice,” I say.

“Right,” she says, disappointedly, “it’s Wednesday.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Why were you asking?”

“Gene and I are going to the movies to see that new horror flick,” she says, “then we were going to go back to his house.”

“Sounds like fun,” I say, “maybe next time.”

“Yeah, what day are you free?”

Saturday and Sunday.

“Sunday,” I say.

“Sunday, then?” She pleads with her big, brown eyes.

“Sunday,” I confirm.

“I gotta get to third period,” she says. “I’ll see you later.”

Annie picks up her binder off of the cafeteria table and struts out of the room. I love the way her light brown hair sways when she walks.

Swim practice was cancelled today. I guess I’m going to the movies.

Three Black Roses

Gene pays for two tickets at the box office. Anna buys an extra large popcorn. Butter in the middle and on the top, so that the butter gets to every piece of popcorn.

Once they go into the movie I get in line for a ticket. I buy a pack of peanut butter cups and a medium root beer.

I sit two rows behind Anna and Gene. I think about how Annie used to always throw popcorn at the people in front of her, if she knew them.

But Annie knew everyone. Everyone likes Annie.

The people sitting in front of Gene and Anna go to our school. Anna does not throw popcorn at them. Gene's not as much fun as I am. Gene might be embarrassed.

Wouldn't want to upset Gene.

When the movies over I hurry out of the theatre before they can see me. I hide around a corner outside the theatre. When they pass me I pretend to be looking at the movie posters on the wall.

Annie doesn't even look my way.

After I can't see them, I take a shortcut to Gene's house. I climb a tree near the living room window and wait for them to arrive.

Gene and Anna sit on the couch together while Anna does her homework. Gene helps her every once in a while. When she finishes her homework it's late, and she leaves.

I don't stay to watch how long Gene sits on the couch after she's gone.

Three Black Roses

I follow Anna home, indirectly. Her house is in the same direction as my house is.

She walks home alone. I would've walked her home, if I were Gene. He should know that she hates to be alone.

But Gene doesn't know Annie like I do.

"The movie was so good!" Anna exclaims. "I wish you could've come."

"Yeah," I say, "I'll see it when it's on Netflix or something."

"I'll watch it with you," she says.

"Deal."

"How was practice?"

"Good," I say.

"That's good," she says. "I haven't seen you swim in ages! You've got to tell me when your next meet is."

"You want to come watch me swim?"

"Yeah," she says, "just like I used to."

"Okay." I smile. "I'll let you know when the next one is."

Three Black Roses

“Perfect.”

The bell rings.

“Well,” she says, “off to Chem.”

“Have fun,” I tell her.

Ponytail swishing, she practically skips out of class. She's facing away from me, but I know that she's grinning.

Like she always is.



Gene and Anna go to dinner on Saturday.

They walk to a restaurant downtown. Gene has bought Annie a black rose. She set it beside her plate on the table

They eat dinner in a low candlelight. I eat my dinner a few tables away.

Annie doesn't look even my way.

They laugh and talk and eat their food.

Gene pays. Annie doesn't like it when people pay for her. It makes her feel bad.

But Gene doesn't know Annie like I do.

Three Black Roses

Gene walks Anna home. She carries the rose the whole way home. Gene doesn't stay tonight. I think that's odd. I follow him as he walks home. I don't know why he's acting like this. I need to find out.

Gene takes a wrong turn on the way back to his house. He's walked this route a million times, surely he's not lost.

He walks all the way down to the beach. I carefully follow him.

He sits on a rock down at the beach, looking out to the water.

He left Annie for this?

I hear someone behind me, as I watch Gene from behind a tree. I make sure I'm hidden in the shadows.

Gene turns around when he heard her too.

A beautiful blonde girl wearing a pink, flowing dress passes by me, right towards Gene.

"Maria." Gene smiles as soon as he sees her.

"Gene." Maria's hair blows in the wind.

Something's not right.

Maria and Gene sit on the rock until it gets dark. I keep thinking, hoping, that they're friends, hanging out at the beach together.

While the sun sets they stand on the rock together.

Then Gene pulls something out of his jacket.

A black rose.

Three Black Roses

He gives the rose to Maria and kisses her.

Kisses her.

Kisses her.

Kisses her.

He kisses this girl. This girl who I've never seen before. This girl who is not Anna.

How could he do this? How could he do this to my poor Annie?

She can't know. Anna can never find out. I won't let Gene break Annie's heart.

She's fragile.

Maria leaves with the Rose in her hand. I stay in the shadows until she's gone.

I step out from behind the tree, as Gene looks out in the water. He holds one last ball rose in his hand.

"Hey, Gene," I say, walking out onto the rock with him.

"Charlie," Gene turns around quickly, "what are you doing here?"

"Taking a walk," I reply calmly.

"It's getting dark," Gene says, "you shouldn't be alone down here."

"I'm not alone," I say. "What are *you* doing down here, Gene?"

"Same as you," he replies.

"Really?" I ask. "You didn't strike me as the 'take a walk' kind of guy."

"People can surprise you."

Yes, they can.

"I thought you were with Anna tonight," I say.

Three Black Roses

"I was," he says. "We had dinner."

"Fun." I stand right beside him on the rock.

"I should get going," he says.

"So soon?"

I push my sleeve down over my hand and reach down to grab a large rock.

"I never learned how to skip rocks," I say.

"You can't skip that rock," he says. "You'll need a flatter one."

"This rock isn't for skipping," I say.

He gives me a confused look before I hit him with it. It's easier than I thought it would be. Easy to remember what he did to Anna as I hit him as hard as I can in the back of the head with that rock.

He doesn't have time to react. He falls into the water, unconscious, with blood pouring from the back of his head. I throw the rock into the water, as far as I can. The splash from the rock hits his lifeless body.

"For Anna," I say.

I notice that he dropped the black rose when he fell. It lies on the rock near my feet.

With my hand still in my sleeve, not daring to leave my fingerprints anywhere, I pick up the rose. I carefully pluck the black petals off of it.

"He loves her." One petal.

"He loves her not." Another.

Three Black Roses

“He loves her.” I throw the petals into the water once I've taken them off.

“He loves her not.” They float next to Gene's body.

“He loves her.” They float on top of red in the water.

“He loves her not.” There's one petal left.

“I love her.” I let the last one go into the water.

The petals of the black rose float on the water, surrounding the body and hovering over Gene's blood.

When I get back home my mother is too drunk to know that I was gone.

Perfect.



I wake to a phone call on Sunday morning.

“Hello?” I answer the phone.

“Charlie!” Anna's voice comes from my phone. “You have to come over now!”

“It's only seven, Anna,” I say. “You told me ten.”

“I know, but I need you to come over,” she says.

She's crying. Sobbing.

Three Black Roses

"Why?" I ask. "What's wrong, Annie?"

"Gene's dead." She has trouble getting the words out.

"What?"

"They found him in the lake," Anna says. "They're saying he slipped off of a rock and hit his head. He drowned."

"Oh my God," I say, "I'll be right there."

"Thank you," she says.

When I arrive at Annie's house, she clings to me like a child to their mother. We sit on her couch, she cries on my shoulder.

"Gene was..." she chokes up, "everything."

"I know," I run my hand through her hair.

"Who would do that to him?" She sobs. "He was so caring. So nice."

"They said he slipped," I say.

"He's not clumsy."

"People can surprise you."

She cries all day.

"You're the best," she says to me. "Thank you for staying here with me."

"It's the least I can do," I say.

"Will you stay over?"

"Of course, Annie."

Three Black Roses

I stand in the graveyard with Annie after the burial.

“I loved him so much,” she says, looking down at a monster’s grave.

“I know,” I take her hand in mine. Her fingers lace through my fingers and fit in between them perfectly.

A tear runs down her face.

“And he loved me,” she says.

And that's what she believes.

But Annie doesn't know Gene like I do.

