

# BETWEEN DESIRE AND DENIAL

SHAIN ROSE



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON



## CHAPTER 1: OLIVE

“I don’t love that girl, not when I’ve felt real love with you.” My boyfriend’s voice sounded beautiful and poetic in the crisp night air as he talked on the phone. “I’ll tell her soon, sweet pea. And of course the project is yours. Olive will understand.” The wind carried the words of the man I loved straight to me even though I was around the brick corner. They cracked like a whip on my heart and split it in two.

It was my best friend, Kee’s, wedding night. She’d married the man she loved, and I’d invited the man I loved to witness it. We’d watched her say vows in her childhood backyard and then we all went to stay at a luxurious HEAT resort about thirty minutes away. It’s there they held the reception where I thought I’d be dancing and snuggling my long-distance boyfriend.

Yet, he’d taken two calls already and then his phone rang again. I told him we didn’t have much time together, but he pulled me close and unclipped his one-of-a-kind Rolex from his wrist, “Time is nothing when you’re in love. Here, wear this. I promise I’ll be back in five minutes. Time me.”

And, like always, I’d melted under his spell. I’d missed him so much after months away from one another. My boyfriend and I weren’t seen together much. He was my professor after all, plus I traveled for work. But when we were together, Rufford was normally attentive, doting, and loving.

That’s why I was shocked he’d been outside for nearly twenty minutes and now I was hearing him on the phone with



BETWEEN DESIRE AND DENIAL

another woman.

“If she doesn’t understand, she still has to pass my class. So, she’ll have to comply. It’s why I’m here tonight. I told you. She and I need to talk things over.”

The conversation felt wrong, made my skin itch and my heart beat fast. I should have announced my presence right then and given him some sort of heads-up that his conversation wasn’t private anymore, but one of my biggest problems had always been that I was too curious.

Or paranoid.

“Of course that won’t happen. That’s over. I’ve told you that. I love you, adore you, and only you.” His deep voice rolled through the air. I knew that phrase—*I adore you and only you*—and it made me feel naive to have believed him.

Those words were ones anyone could interpret. I heard them. I knew the meaning of them. I didn’t question my hearing at all.

Yet, I couldn’t *understand* them. No way was the man I loved having a relationship with someone else.

I took a step back, not sure how I wanted to react. Then another and another toward the resort’s doors. They swung open to make way for the rambunctious, boisterous laughter of a man with a beautiful woman on each of his arms.

Dimitri Hardy was this phenomenal specimen of a godlike man that would have just the right amount of audacity and confidence to entertain two women at a wedding rather than one. He was the brother of the groom and a very close friend of Kee’s. We knew each other through her. We weren’t close, but when he saw me, his laughter died and those green eyes of his pierced through me, “Olive, what are you doing outside?”

“Oh. Olive, sweet pea, I was just finishing up my call.”



Rufford draped an arm around me, but my gut reaction was to jerk away from him now.

Dimitri's gaze narrowed but I hurried to explain, "my boyfriend and I just needed some air." Then I turned to Rufford, "I'd like to talk to you over there."

I pointed around the corner and Rufford frowned but he steered me that way rather than toward the reception. At least I contained myself until we rounded the corner, but then my anger had me blurting out, "Who the hell were you just on the phone with?"

Rufford's beautiful blue eyes widened. "Darling, so sorry I had to take a work call. How is Kee's reception going?" He glanced behind me and smiled at Dimitri, who'd decided to walk without a care over to the side of the building and lean on it, like he had nothing else to do.

Well, I did and I didn't care about the audience. "A work call, Rufford? Do you tell all your coworkers that you adore them?"

"Olive." He reached out and touched one of my shoulder-length curls. "I'm sorry you had to hear that. You know how some of these calls can go. I've got students—"

"Don't play me for a fool." Rage swam rapidly through my veins as I looked at him in his tweed suit and expensive shoes. He had a full head of gray hair that I'd always thought looked so distinguished, but now I felt like the age that color represented mocked me. "I'm not stupid. Don't treat me like I am."

He straightened then, wiggling his tie as he seemed to assess me. "No. You're not stupid, Olive. So, you must know I've been lonely while you've been gallivanting around the nation with Keelani Hale and Dimitri Hardy."

He hurled Dimitri's name as if I should be ashamed of my

actions. I knew Rufford always felt intimidated by Dimitri. He was an overly confident billionaire investor who traveled the globe with us as I worked for Kee handling PR and her hair.

“You knew I traveled for work, Rufford. I told you how my mom said I should ...” I choked back a sob and threw my hand over my mouth, willing back my crying fit. Rufford didn’t even try to comfort me. Straightening my spine, I took a breath before continuing. “I’ve been extremely blessed to have found someone I could work for who became a friend. She gave me the opportunity to heal and feel like I belonged while I traveled with her. It’s why I took your online courses instead of in person. But I told you that job was coming to an end.”

“Not soon enough,” he grumbled. “We should be working together now.” I’d had my next plan with Rufford. I’d been ready to take on his research and finish out my thesis. We’d studied the effects of social media on communities and people. It’d been interesting and enlightening. I thought it would be my stepping stone into the field.

“I was supporting myself through college, Rufford. You told me how proud you were of that.”

“I am proud you can be so independent, but I, unfortunately, am not as strong.”

“What are you saying?” I shook my head at him.

“We’ve been working hard. I’ve been up all hours of the night. I needed an assistant. And Veronica was there.”

“Veronica?” I choked out the name. He couldn’t be serious. “She just started in the master’s program, Rufford. And she’s ...”

What could I say? *She’s so young?* I’d been twenty-two once as well. Three years ago, I’d fallen for Rufford like he was God’s gift to man. Maybe even before then. He’d been a professor while I was an undergrad and always praised my knowledge. I

was quiet, but he made sure to give me attention. And then after I jumped from major to major, he did a great job of recruiting me into an online master's program for journalism.

I'd been so gullible. I flew out wherever he was just to see him, to sleep with him, to give him my everything. He'd been my first and my only.

"She's what, Olive? She's brilliant, honestly." He said the words almost condescendingly, like he was throwing me in the garbage and replacing me with her.

"You told me that once." Now my voice did shake, and my hands did, too, as I balled them into fists and tried my best to contain my emotions.

"Ah, well. She just has more passion and desire for the project right now. You understand?" He smiled softly and walked up to slide a hand onto my cheek. I didn't pull away. I couldn't. I missed his touch so much even when it was to wipe away a lone tear. Then he tapped the flower I still wore in my hair most days. I had a fake plumeria in every color for every outfit. They reminded me of my mother. Of how she'd been proud of me in her last moments, and now I didn't want him tainting any of that.

I took a step back so I was out of his reach.

"You've been so busy. Let's not fight about it." Rufford's voice was comforting, cajoling, and smooth as he broke my heart further. "You weren't that interested in this topic, and Veronica was."

"I can't believe this." I pushed the glasses on my face up and looked at the dark clouds in the sky, trying my best not to break down fully and start bawling in his arms.

He reached over to straighten those glasses in a soothing gesture. My heart squeezed in pain. I wore the glasses not

because I couldn't see but specifically because he told me they made me look more studious. "I love these on you. Can we just focus on that, baby? How good you look and how I missed you?"

I ripped the glasses off instead and put them in my purse. I leaned against the brick wall of the building to look up at him. "I want that. I really do. But I have to know, Rufford. I need you to say it. Tell me you aren't doing anything with her."

My mind still desperately grappled with the idea even though I knew the truth. I'd rooted so much in our future and now it felt like I was free falling. He'd told me so many times he loved me. But now I simply felt like another notch on his bedpost.

"Does it matter, sweet girl? You always want me. I'll take care of you first, okay? You know you need it. Let's talk about this later. Come on." He kneaded my hips with his thumbs and kissed my neck. "I adore you and only—" He stopped himself, probably realizing I'd heard him say exactly the same phrase to her. Suddenly, my body revolted at his touch as I heard those words. Rather than love, I felt disgust.

I shoved him back hard, and he stumbled and swore. "How many *students* have you said that to?"

I emphasized the word, and he curled his lip. "You're all women, Ms. Monroe. You all have come to me. They all have been consensual relationships."

"Or we were all just barely adults and you coerced us into loving you," I threw back without even thinking about it. I gasped as the words left my mouth, and then a sob rattled out of my body.

I'd been duped.

I felt his fear suddenly as he stood there staring at me, and I knew I was onto something. Any other time, I would have

concentrated harder, dug deeper, pushed further. I was studying to be a journalist, after all.

Right now, though, my heart was breaking.

I quietly watched as his face contorted with different emotions and then I saw how his brow dipped and his lips pursed. I knew this look. He was going to slather on the guilt now. “You’d accuse me of such a thing?”

“Rufford, you’d never let another person work on your life’s research if it weren’t someone you’re close to. So, she’s either brilliant or you’re fucking her.”

“Yes, well ... begs the question of what you are then, hm, love? You think you’re brilliant? Or am I just fucking you?” His tone had changed. There was no love anymore, just the vitriol he was spewing. “I mean, come on. You wanted attention, didn’t have many friends because you were spiraling in so many directions after mommy died and daddy wasn’t around. Why wouldn’t I take my chances on you even if you weren’t the brightest?”

I glanced at the watch he’d let me wear. I knew how much he loved it, so I unclipped it then.

He nodded. “Yes, it’s best we part ways, I guess. You’ll still have to work on a new thesis, or you can drop my class and reapply for another research topic in the fall.”

Reapply? That research had taken us over a year. I felt the panic rising in me; the resentment at him still trying to control me. He must have thought it would work, that I belonged to him in some way. “I’m so sorry, Rufford.”

“It’s okay, Olive. We’ll get through this.” He reached out like the delusional man he was. He truly believed I was going to simply give him back that expensive one-of-a-kind Rolex like he hadn’t just shattered my heart.



Instead, I dropped it on the ground in front of him and stomped my stiletto heel into it.

“Are you crazy?” I heard him gasp. “You bitch!” Maybe I’d taken it too far. I saw his face contort in fury, but it was then and there that a large figure stepped around the corner.

Dimitri Hardy stood taller than all of us, his hair ruffled, but otherwise looking completely put together. The two women he had with him stood off to the side, lingering. His attention wasn’t on them though. His gaze, instead, burned a hole into Rufford’s face.

“You’re not calling my friend that, are you, Rufford?” Dimitri Hardy’s voice came out like a smooth drawl, not at all concerned about the domestic dispute he was stepping in the middle of.

“Get out of my way,” Rufford growled, and his face reddened.

But Dimitri didn’t move a muscle. “You know that’s not going to happen, Rufford. Go on now. Leave unless you want to address the woman you supposedly love in a nicer tone than—”

“I don’t love her. I loved fucking—”

“God damn it.” Dimitri’s hand shot out fast to grip Rufford’s throat and shove him up against the wall. My eyes widened at how quickly the situation escalated. Even the women Dimitri was with gasped.

He glanced over at them and said, “I’ll call you both later. Get out of here.”

They listened immediately and then his gaze went back to my boyfriend, struggling like a rat caught in a trap.

Dimitri’s grip didn’t waver, and he stood tall, so tall and powerful that he probably never ever had to exert power and authority. Seeing him do it for me, for a person he couldn’t

possibly care much about was shocking. “Tell me, Rufford, why is it that you think I’ll let you even mumble a sentence like that without pummeling you, man? Come on now. You that dumb for a professor?”

Rufford thrashed and kicked to no avail, trying his best to loosen Dimitri’s hold in his struggle for oxygen. Even if I wanted him to suffer, I didn’t want him to have a heart attack.

“Dimitri.” I put my hand on his shoulder gently. “You need to let him go.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand, and it was a perfect representation of how feeble my date was in comparison to him. Dimitri looked completely unbothered by the other man’s wriggling, but his eyes held fire as he looked down at me. “Fine.” He yanked his hand back and let Rufford crumple to the ground. “Your boyfriend is a prick, Olive. I’m on a date and a work deadline. I hope you’re aware I don’t particularly enjoy breaking up spats between my best friend’s girl and her old fuckboy. So, let’s end the night easily rather than with Rufford’s bloody nose, huh? You leaving now?”

He didn’t glance at Rufford getting up and pulling himself together, but my date was keen on having the last word as he straightened his tweed jacket. “Olive, I’ll be in touch about your thesis.” He stomped off and left me standing in embarrassment in front of Dimitri who looked me up and then down to stare at my feet.

“You barely cracked his watch.”

I glanced at my heels and winced. Great, so he’d seen that. I lifted my chin and crossed my arms. Now was not the time for me to be embarrassed. Instead, I stomped on it five more times before it cracked slightly. “There.”

“You done?”

“I don’t know.” I gulped back the ache in my throat that threatened to cause more tears in my eyes.

“I hope so, because he’s old enough to be your grandfather. He’s not worth the tantrum.” Dimitri was always more honest than I wanted him to be.

“He’s not that old.” I rolled my eyes at him. “And love can transcend all age brackets. It doesn’t discriminate, Dimitri.”

He lifted a brow like he didn’t agree at all.

I waved him off. “You wouldn’t understand.”

And that was the problem. Most people didn’t. Yet, Rufford had given me life, helped me through my master’s program, taken an interest in me like no one else had. He’d given me confidence in myself and direction. Except now I knew he’d actually exploited my lack thereof, and suddenly I felt completely naked without him.

“Oh, Jesus. Are you going to cry?” Dimitri looked disgusted. “Please don’t. Everyone will think I did something wrong, Olive. I don’t have time for that.”

“You know what really sucks?” I sniffled, not at all worried whether Dimitri wanted to listen to me rant or not. He’d been around long enough. He had to call me a friend, even if it was begrudgingly. Sure, more so he was now my best friend’s brother-in-law, but before that, we’d all been sort of friends. Dimitri was there to support her, of course, and he mostly endured my presence more than anything as I navigated Kee’s business. “This was my fallback after Kee. I was supposed to finish my thesis and continue researching with Rufford. I mean, we never said it out loud, but that was the plan.”

“You’ll come up with a new plan,” he told me, completely uninterested. He was already glancing back toward the reception. The man was a well-known part-owner of a hospitality empire

and a ruthless real estate investor. He didn't have time for me.

I didn't have time for this either. I might not have found my way to the right man, but over the past year, I'd thought I'd finally found my way in what I wanted to do. I'd enjoyed researching with Rufford. I thought it was the start of my career. I'd formed that path, dedicated myself to it, and now it was like he was snatching it away. "What if I don't?" I whispered, a sudden ball of fear building in my gut. "I loved him, and he took advantage of that. I wasn't even a smart enough journalist to see—"

Dimitri's green stare hardened as he looked down at me. "Olive, he's most likely been doing this to women since he became a professor a million years ago."

"Well, thanks for making me feel better," I said sarcastically as I glared at him.

He tapped his expensive loafer on the pavement of the alley like he didn't have time for this. "What I'm saying is he's a damn expert at being a dick. The playing field was uneven."

"But—"

"A man that's supposed to love you made you cry. That alone gives you enough reason to walk away from him. Even worse, he did it in the alley of your friend's wedding reception."

"She's my best friend." I nodded, starting to believe what he was saying.

"Well"—he tilted his head and his eyes sparkled—"technically, I think I'm her best friend."

My jaw dropped before a giggle slipped out. "You're kicking me when I'm down?"

"I'm being honest."

"It doesn't suit you." I threw back as I crossed my arms.

He hummed like it was a challenge then suddenly stepped

close to me. The night air shifted as the cool wind whipped between us. “Is that so, Ms. Monroe?”

It was definitely not so.

Our height difference, him being close to six six and me being only five four, along with the tension between us was suddenly amplified. And his arrogant ass knew that everything suited him while he stood there so close to me in the moonlight. Most women—including myself, even though I avoided the pull—were irresistibly drawn to him. His dark wavy hair framed a face that was somehow rugged and refined, every strand falling perfectly into place without effort. Even though he stood there in an expensive tailored suit, he didn’t have to try to own the space. He just did with his broad shoulders, his confidence, and a smile that held familiarity but also mystery.

My heart and libido lurched at the same time. For a second, I forgot my heartbreak and that I should be dwelling on that. Closing my eyes, I took a step back to break our connection. “It is. I’m just as much Kee’s friend as you are. And probably more so now since I’ll be working with her forever after Rufford gets through with me.”

“Yes, well, it is probably just best to let it go and do your thesis over,” Dimitri said as if it didn’t matter much either way to him. “Should we go back to the reception?”

Yet his words rattled me. “Let it go?” I murmured and then, I said it again, “Let it go?” And that’s when the ball of fear turned to fury, warped from pain and heartbreak to wrath. I’d let it go with my father, let the rage over him not being the man he should have with my mother go. And I’d regretted it ever since.

I took a deep breath and balled up my fists. “No. You know what? I’m *not* going to just let it go.”

I stomped past Dimitri back toward the reception doors and whipped them open without looking back to see if he was following. I didn't have time to wallow. I needed a new plan, and I felt it deep in my bones. I could cry later, but tonight I was making sure I had a place in the master's program that I'd put so much effort into. And I was going to put Rufford in his place at the same time.

I just needed to get some liquid courage to do the deed.

"I'm not letting it go with anyone ever again," I grumbled as I made my way through people dancing and went immediately to the bar. I plopped down on one of the velvet upholstered barstools and leaned over the dark mahogany bar with intricate carvings. "Sir, I need a drink."

I said it loudly enough that the bartender glanced over but then his eyes flicked behind me to Dimitri waving him away. "Hold on a second. Slow down, Olive. Jesus, what do you mean you're not letting it go?"

I glanced at the bartender who had immediately listened to him, and I narrowed my eyes back at Dimitri. "Are you telling him I can't have a drink?"

"I just waved him off for a second." He looked at me with concern. "Let's take a minute—"

"Just because you own this place doesn't mean you get to regulate what I'm doing," I spit out, irritated he was trying to control me.

He smirked. "I regulate everything I own, Olive. If you're standing foot in my investment, I control what you do."

I glanced around the resort. Everything about the HEAT property wreaked of opulence and elegance. Suited men moved around the reception, flowing with the crowd, all very aware of the man I stood with. The bartender listened to him without

hesitation, no matter that I was a wedding guest who wanted a drink. Dimitri controlled it all. And it made me want to wreck it.

Rufford had controlled me. He'd manipulated and molded me just the way he wanted me. I'd sent that man hundreds of pictures in the lingerie he'd bought, risked my education to be with him, and now he had the audacity to leave me like I hadn't done a thing for him. "You all think you have control of everything, don't you?" I ground out before I waved at the bartender again and leaned over the bar. He came this time, and I purred, "Give me a shot of Fireball, please."

The man didn't make eye contact with Dimitri and poured the shot fast before he slid it my way. I downed it as I stared at him.

Then, I pulled my phone from my purse and scrolled through my texts to make a point. I clicked the one I wanted to show Dimitri and turned my screen. "Can you believe I sent him this last night because he begged for it?"

It was a picture I'd taken of myself bent at the waist in my torn nylons, looking over my shoulder.

I wasn't at all embarrassed to show Dimitri. He'd seen me and Kee get ready before, and I had to show someone how screwed up it was that Rufford had been able to control me so easily, that I'd been so naïve to believe he loved me. Yet, Dimitri's eyes widened in shock.

"What the fuck, Olive?" He swiped my phone from my grasp, and I thought he'd turn it off right away, but he stared as if he couldn't believe it. I saw how his knuckles turned whiter and whiter from his tight grip.

"Erm ... Can I have my phone back?"

"Fuck," he growled before shoving it back toward me. "I'd

tell you to delete it—”

“But what for?” I shrugged. “Won’t do me any good considering I sent it to him. He has it.”

“Jesus Christ.” He was shaking his head in disgust. “Don’t you understand that you risked your whole degree by doing that?”

“It was fun at the time!” I defended myself. “I ... well, I thought I was in love. Plus, he called to tell me this whole cute role-playing thing about how I was a bad student and if I sent him something to show how hard I was trying—”

“Is that request in messages?”

I blew a raspberry. “No.” I sounded so dumb now. “He called.”

And I’d felt like we were having so much fun too. Now, I stared at my text to him and wondered how many other students he’d gotten to do stupid shit by saying those things to.

“Of course his ass did.”

“He said he was teaching me a lesson, Dimitri. But maybe he needs to be taught one.”