

The background of the cover is a romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing. The man, on the right, has dark hair and a beard, and is wearing a black t-shirt. He is holding the woman's face gently. The woman, on the left, has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a black top. They are set against a dark, starry night sky with falling snowflakes. The overall mood is intimate and festive.

ENTANGLED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ARIA WYATT

ENTANGLED

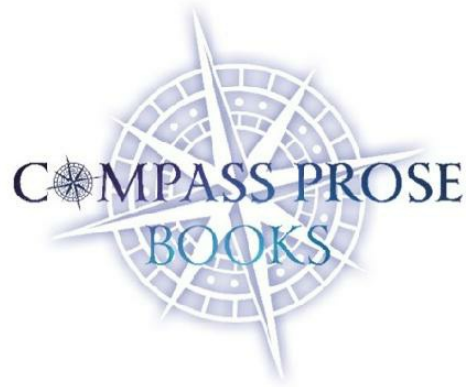
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Entangled

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This book is for the good girls who want their hair pulled, ass slapped, and someone to rail them up against a wall like a hurricane rattles a screen door.

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About the Author

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CONTENT WARNING

Entangled contains several topics that may be upsetting to readers.

Before reading, please review the following list carefully.

Feel free to reach out to me via email with any questions that arise.

Aria@AriaWyatt.com

- Divorce
- Explicit sex scenes & language
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- Prior death of a parent

PLAYLIST FOR ENTANGLED

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PROLOGUE

ONCE UPON A TIME, long ago, in a land far away... Well, actually it wasn't that far away, although Mistletoe Creek, Tennessee, often seems more off the beaten path where it lies nestled against the Smoky Mountain foothills. And it really wasn't so long ago. A few short months ago, the following conversation was overheard between Fern Myers, Fawn Carter, and Merry Andrews during their monthly meeting. When later asked, all three women would deny the conversation ever occurred.

"It's your deal, Fern," Merry says as she glances at the window when a colorful leaf drifts off the oak tree just outside.

Fern scoffs and stretches her fingers before picking the well-worn deck up off the shiny table.

"I *always* deal, Merry."

"More like always cheat," Fawn mumbles.

"Excuse me?" Fern adjusts her bifocals on the edge of her nose.

"I find it highly suspect that every time you deal, you also seem to win."

"If you want to deal..."

"I don't. But I do want you to play fair."

"Play fair? Just because I'm lucky doesn't mean I don't—"

"Ladies!" Merry jumps in before their argument can escalate.

It wouldn't be the first time a confrontation between the two of them had been stopped before it went beyond just words.

"I really don't feel like getting kicked out of here again by Mayor Anderson. We just got invited back. And personally, I didn't care for power walking all summer in the heat."

While the mansion of the original founder of Mistletoe Creek had been

turned into a combination of public gathering spaces and city offices, the last time they'd flipped the table during a card game, Mayor Anderson had been left with no other option—he had banned all three septuagenarians for the entire summer.

“I did offer for us to play Yahtzee instead,” Fawn says.

“We could always actually learn bridge instead of just telling everyone that's what we play,” Merry adds.

“We've been playing Texas Hold 'Em for thirty years. Yahtzee is for when I babysit my grandkids. And if we told everyone we were playing poker instead of bridge, we'd have the entire town trying to join in our games.” Fern levels a look at both of the other women until they nod.

The room is silent except for the crackle of cards as they swoosh across the table along with sighs and murmurs as each woman considers her cards.

“It's too quiet.” Merry drops her cards face down.

“What do you mean?” Fern asks.

“It's been ages since we've had a wedding. Or any good gossip.”

“We just went to Dawn and Jack Phillips's wedding two weekends ago. Raise ten.” Fawn tosses a blue chip onto the small pile and the other two follow suit.

“It was a beautiful wedding.” Merry sighs, a dreamy smile playing on her lips. “Even if Fawn fell asleep during the ceremony.”

“You take that back, Merry Andrews! Or I'll tell Dawn that you didn't like the light pink of her wedding dress,” Fawn fires back.

Merry's eyes narrow across the table. “You wouldn't.”

Fawn crosses her arms. “Try me.”

“Fine. You win. I take it back.” Merry's voice is nothing more than a mumble.

Fern sighs and glances between the two of them.

“I can't believe Dawn is all grown-up and married now,” Fern says, trying to redirect the conversation. “I still remember when I used to babysit her.”

“Such a good girl.”

“I'm just glad that she and Jack finally found each other.” Merry checks her bet and turns to Fawn.

“They wouldn't have if it wasn't for us,” Fawn reminds the other two.

Both other women nod in agreement.

“I thought that was never going to happen no matter how many times we

kept signing Dawn up to volunteer with Jack at Parks and Wildlife.” Merry rolls her eyes.

Fawn shrugs. “They finally stopped fighting it.”

“It was a beautiful wedding,” Fern says.

“I already said that.” Merry stares at Fawn.

“Who cares? It’s still true.”

“We need more weddings.” Fawn checks her bet and Fern deals the last card.

“No one is close to dating, let alone marriage.” Fern studies her cards in her hands before lifting her shrewd gaze to the five cards on the table.

“Neither were Dawn and Jack last year and look at them now. On their honeymoon.” Merry clasps her hands together and the cards in her hand crinkle.

It wouldn’t be the first deck to be lost to their lack of attention. And it definitely wouldn’t be the last.

“So what are we going to do about it?” Fawn asks.

“Same thing we always do,” Fern responds. “Let’s see, there’s Pierce and Hudson. Either of whom would be a catch.”

“Don’t forget Robyn or Elle. But not for either of those boys.” Fawn taps her lip as she adds to the list.

“No, all four of them are ready for something special. Something spectacular. It’s...” Fern’s voice fades as her attention shifts back to her cards.

“It’s matchmaking time,” Merry says and gasps when Fawn pushes in all her chips.

“All in, ladies. Who’s next?”

HENRY FLYNN

Mood Music: “Anywhere Away From Here” by Rag ‘n’ Bone Man and P!nk

THERE ISN'T enough coffee in the world to get me through this day. I'm kicking myself for agreeing to work overtime so close to the holidays. Sure, the money is great, but my back hurts just looking at the mountains of packages stacked in the warehouse.

Before I can even punch in, my boss marches over with his clipboard. “Oh good. You're here. Do you want the good news or the bad news?”

“Morning to you too,” I mumble, jamming my code into the time clock's electronic pin pad. I stifle a yawn and pivot to face him. “Gimme the bad news, I guess.”

“Tony's in the hospital.”

My stomach bottoms out. “What happened? Is he all right?”

“He had a massive heart attack. They're doing bypass surgery today.”

“Holy shit.” I just had a beer with my middle-aged coworker on Monday night, and he seemed fine then.

“Right. The doctors are hopeful, but he's going to be out for a few months either way.” Joe presses his lips into a grim line. “Christmas is right around the corner, and since Eddie retired, now we're down two drivers. Packages don't deliver themselves, so I'm gonna need you to cover Tony's route for the foreseeable future.”

“Sure, but who's going to do mine?”

“You are.”

I blink a few times. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

“You heard me. I’m counting on you, Hank.”

This fucking guy.

I clench my jaw. “It’s Henry.”

I’ve worked at Ryder Parcel Services for a year and a half. I break my back for this man, and he can’t even remember my name. I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve corrected him. I swear, he does it just to bust my balls.

“Henry, Harry, Howard. Whatever the hell your name is.” He hands me a sheet of paper. “This is Tony’s route. You should probably familiarize yourself before you head out.”

I scan the page, frowning at the number of stops and mileage I’m expected to cover. “His territory is on the opposite side of town. You realize I’ll be out delivering until midnight?”

He shrugs. “The job needs to get done.”

Easy for him to say. He doesn’t have to drive all over the fucking county in a snowstorm. While Tennessee isn’t known for the brutal winters I experienced in New York, Mistletoe Creek’s proximity to the Smoky Mountains means we usually get moderate accumulations.

“What about all the road closures? How am I supposed—”

“Take a detour.” He points to an address on the list. “Be careful when you head up the mountain to Frederic Punzel’s place. It’s steep as hell, and there aren’t any guardrails.”

“Wonderful.” The guy’s a billionaire. Can’t he afford a few safety measures?

“Most of the deliveries that go to the Punzel estate are for his daughter. She orders a lot of high-ticket stuff, so don’t leave *anything* without a signature. I don’t need their family lawyer crawling up my ass again.”

“Got it.” If he hadn’t already pissed me off, I’d ask what happened the first time. Not that I really care. Come to think of it, I haven’t cared about much of anything in over two years.

Joe taps his watch. “You’d better get moving.”

“What was the good news?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You asked if I wanted the good news or the bad news.”

“Oh, right. Well, other than Tony still being alive,” he points across the

warehouse, “there’re donuts in the breakroom.”

IT TOOK me about forty-five minutes to load my truck and map out today’s deliveries. I plan to hit most of Tony’s stops first, since they’re on the outskirts of town. This way, if the roads get too messy, I can do some of my own route on foot. Good thing I bought new boots last week.

Shielding my eyes from the bite of the wind, I scope out the mountain looming in the distance. The weather is only going to get worse. My truck doesn’t have snow tires, and the brakes aren’t what they should be. The last thing I need is to plummet into a mountain ravine and freeze to death. According to Tony’s trip logs, he usually delivers to the Punzel estate in the late afternoon. I’m making it my first stop instead.

Twenty minutes later, my phone buzzes in the cupholder as I make the meandering ascent, cursing Joe the whole time. I consider ignoring it, but I can’t. It’s my sister. She’ll keep calling until I answer the damn thing. I never got around to pairing my ancient dumbphone with the truck’s Bluetooth, so I tap the icon on the screen and switch to speaker.

“Yeah?”

“That’s a helluva way to greet your favorite sister,” Dahlia says with her usual exuberance.

“You’re my only sister.” Eight years my junior, she’s the sunshine to my darkness.

“That’s why you should be even nicer to me.”

I can’t help but smirk. “What’s up, Dahl?”

“Just calling to chat.”

“I’m working right now. Can we talk later?” I turn the windshield wipers up to full speed. They aren’t doing shit because Joe should’ve replaced them months ago. Come to think of it, the truck needs a new battery too. I’m keeping a list of necessary repairs. “We’re getting a snowstorm here, and I have a ton of deliveries.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Please be careful.”

“I will. I’ll call—”

“Wait! Before you hang up, I need you to tell me if you’re coming home for Christmas. I’m off today, and I planned to do some shopping.”

I release a heavy sigh. “I don’t think so. I’m not feeling it this year.”

“You said that last year, Henry. And the year before. You can’t let what happened ruin your holidays for the rest of eternity.”

Oh, but I can.

The familiar pang of sadness settles in the hollow where my heart once was. Every carol, wreath, and lit tree reminds me of my loss. Since it was my stupid idea to start over in a Christmas-themed town, I’m the only one to blame for the irony that punches me in the gut day after day. Yes, I went where the job was—or where I *thought* it would be—but that fizzled out two months after I arrived. Which begs the question: why am I still here?

I’m beginning to wonder if maybe I like the pain.

“You’d feel differently if someone handed *you* divorce papers on fucking Christmas Eve.” I clench the steering wheel like it will turn my failed marriage around, but I know better. It was over long before Chelsea made it official. Even though I gave it my all, the counseling we did during our separation was only for show. She’d already made up her mind.

“I’m sure I’d hate Christmas as much as you do.” Her sigh fills the cab. “Look, I didn’t call to piss you off. I just wanted to convince you to be around family instead of being sad.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, even though I’ve done all the thinking I plan to. I have no intention of flying to New York. The last thing I need is a run-in with my ex-wife.

“OK, bye.” She hangs up before I can respond.

Guilt squeezes my chest. I know how much Dahlia loves the holiday season. Even though I miss her, I’d hate to put a damper on her mood just because I can’t get over a woman who never truly loved me. Our wedding vows run through my head like they always do when I let myself walk down memory lane. *Through good times and bad*, my ass. Those words were nothing but empty promises.

A huge iron gate up ahead jolts me out of my pity party. I slam on the brakes, and the truck grinds to a stop. I must have missed the signs informing me this is a dead end. Thanks to the snowbanks, there’s no place to park other than in the middle of the road, but at least I don’t have to worry about blocking the street. I turn off the engine and peer through the trees at the Punzel estate. Although estate is the wrong word to describe it—the place is a literal castle.

Grumbling to myself, I hop out of the truck with my work tablet and the

tiny brown package addressed to R.A. Punzel. I trudge toward the gate, which, to my relief, is slightly ajar. Hopefully, my luck continues for the rest of my stops. With my newly expanded workload, I don't have time to wait around for people to let me in.

Slipping through the opening, I survey the residence for the most appropriate entrance. The darkened windows flanking the front door aren't too welcoming. Neither are the massive gargoyles guarding the porch steps. Sweeping my head from side to side, I notice *all* the windows are dark.

Maybe no one is home.

Good. That crosses one stop off my list. Joe's warning about the Punzel family lawyer drifts through my mind again. Since I don't want to ruffle any billionaire feathers, I need to make an actual attempt to deliver, as in, knock on a door.

While no tire tracks mar the pristine snow beyond the gate, fresh snowflakes blanket the old set of footprints leading to the turret rising from the west side of the stone fortress. A soft glow emanates from the tower's upper windows. Whoever's up there needs to sign for this damn package.

I silently follow the path toward my destination and arrive at a heavy wooden door. There's a note affixed to the knob that reads:

Tony,

I'm upstairs working in my studio. Let yourself in and give me a holler. I'll come right down. I hope you brought your appetite because I made your favorite muffins this morning! I invested in a single cup coffee brewer too. This way you can have a warm drink while we visit.

<3 <3 <3 R

I FROWN at the feminine handwriting. Tony is a married man, and he's been up here having muffins and coffee with a rich lady who signs her notes with hearts? Talk about inappropriate.

I tap on the door. No answer. Glancing at the note once more, I sigh. No, I'm not Tony, but the woman is clearly expecting Ryder Parcel Services today. Eager to get this delivery over with, I gently twist the knob and push the door open.

"Hello? This is RPS. You have a delivery," I call, stepping into a darkened kitchen. Warm apple cinnamon greets my nose, making my stomach growl. I skipped breakfast. I could use a snack for the road. "Hello?"

No one answers, but loud music vibrates the ceiling. There's no way she can hear me over all that bass. While I don't know what kind of work this woman does, if she's anything like Dahlia when she's in her art studio, she's completely immersed in her task. I spot a staircase across the room and make my way over.

I cup my hands around my mouth. "RPS here." When she doesn't respond to my shout, I heave a disgruntled sigh and climb the steps. "I don't have time for this shit."

Of course, the stupid staircase is one of those winding fairy tale ones that wraps around the tower. And it's narrow as fuck. It's a good thing I'm not trying to deliver a television. The music grows louder as I climb. A female voice croons something about a lioness, and I wonder if I'm about to interrupt a feminist meeting.

I pause on a small landing for what appears to be a closet. Or maybe a bathroom. Who the hell knows? Judging by the weirdness of this residence, it could even be a sex dungeon. The hairs on the back of my neck rise as I glance at the landing above me.

I shouldn't be here.

I grip the handrail and debate my next move. Six more steps and I'll reach the noisy room. Light spills onto the stairs from the open doorway. A shadow flits past the entrance. Intrigue hijacks the part of my brain telling me this is a bad idea. I've made it this far, so why stop now? I've got a job to do, after all.

"RPS," I call once more, hoping she'll hear me this time.

Nope. Growling, I haul myself the rest of the way up and stop in the doorway. I open my mouth to speak, but the words die on my lips. My heart stops. I grip the doorjamb for dear life.

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

All I can do is stare at the dancing woman in the gold cat mask. She's practically naked, save for the cheetah print garter belt around her waist, scrap of fabric that barely qualifies as a thong, fishnets, and gold-sequined pasties covering her nipples. Long blond waves cascade down to her ass. Even without her face visible, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her focus is riveted to the tripod and full-length mirror across the room as she sways to the music, one hand moving between her legs.

Holy fuck, she's filming herself.

While. Using. A. Vibrator.

Heat arrows down my spine. My balls tighten. My cock twitches in my pants, and the involuntary groan leaving my chest startles even me.

Suddenly, she catches sight of my reflection and whirls around. We lock gazes. Terror widens her bright green eyes. I open my mouth to tell her I'm not a threat, but I'm still too dumbfounded to form words. She releases an earsplitting shriek and flings her arm in my direction.

I grunt when something slams into the center of my chest. Before I can see what hit me, she rushes across the room, ready to plow into me.

"I'm sorry, I—" Scrambling backward with my hands held up in surrender, I lose my footing. "Fuck!" I topple down a half-dozen steps like a giant, leggy tumbleweed.

Then everything goes black.

ROWAN-ANASTASIA PUNZEL

Mood Music: “Lioness” by Becca Shae

IS HE DEAD?

Adrenaline zings through me as I grab the metal baseball bat I keep hidden behind my dresser. I cautiously approach my intruder, who’s lying on his back on the landing outside my studio door. My breath catches when I’m close enough to get a good look at him.

Wow.

The man is gorgeous. Burglars have no business being this attractive.

Which means there’s definitely something wrong with me. I should be afraid, angry he invaded my privacy. Not enticed by a criminal who saw me nearly naked. Of course, my clouded judgment probably has something to do with the fact that the only men I’ve seen in fifteen years are my father and the guy who delivers my packages, but that’s another story.

My gaze slides from his snow boots, up his long legs encased in black pants, coming to rest on his forest green jacket. The name Flynn is embroidered beneath the familiar logo for Ryder Parcel Services.

Shit. I killed the delivery man.

I expected Tony later this afternoon. This dude certainly isn’t the middle-aged gentleman I befriended six years ago.

“Sir, are you dead?” Holding my breath, I descend the few steps he’d fallen and squat beside him, relieved to see the slow rise and fall of his broad

chest. Too bad the confirmation of his breathing does nothing to drown out my brain's anxious hum. If anything, the buzzing grows louder. "Who are you, and where's Tony?" I place the bat on the step above me and tap the heavily muscled arm strewn across his face. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

He groans and shuffles his legs, drawing my attention to the sparkly gold object wedged beneath his thighs.

Oh my God.

It's none other than my vibrator, Thor. The makeshift weapon I chucked across the room when I caught him lurking in the doorway.

And the damn thing is still on.

So much for adrenaline causing the rumble in my head. Nope. That's the power of two C batteries and the son of Odin, vibrating on the wooden staircase.

Mortification heats my skin when I remember I'm still wearing my work costume. Although "wearing" is a generous description for the scrap of fabric and sequined pasties I've got on. Thankfully, my mask conceals most of my face. Not that hiding my identity matters at this point because the guy already has my real name and address. One thing is for damn sure, I need to grab Thor and get dressed before this Flynn dude wakes up. Praying his fall caused at least short-term amnesia, I reach for the buzzing tip peeking out from under his thigh and tug. It doesn't budge.

Shit.

Pivoting to straddle his calves, I slide my hands between his legs and locate Thor's thick base. I tighten my grip on the suction cup, wrapping my fingers around the gilded silicone testicles, then yank on the toy with more force than necessary.

At the exact moment Mr. Delivery Man decides to regain consciousness.

In a blur of movement, he rolls to the side, sending me flying backward. I fall flat on my ass.

He scrambles into a kneeling position. Gripping the handrail, he stares at me, his gorgeous face twisted in a mask of disbelief. "Why the fuck are you groping me?"

I sit up. "I most certainly was *not* groping you." Shocked by his audacity to seem annoyed, I gesture with Thor like it's a magic wand or a sword. Hell, I already threw it with devastating effects, so maybe I should rename the damn thing after his hammer. "You were the one who broke in."

"I didn't break in. The door was unlocked, and there was a note giving

permission to enter the premises.”

“That note was for Tony!” I wave Thor wildly, conducting my grand orchestra of unseen vibrators where the ones with the clit ticklers sit first chair. Someone had better call Beethoven and his buddies because I’m on a roll now. “You had no right to barge into my home and spy on me.”

“I wasn’t fucking spying!” He throws his hands in the air. “You have a goddamn delivery. I shouted—multiple times—but you couldn’t hear me over your music.”

“I wasn’t expecting you this early. Tony comes in the afternoon—”

“Well, I’m not Tony,” he barks, climbing to a stand.

“No kidding. Where is he, anyway?”

“Tony had a heart attack. I’ve taken over his route.”

I clutch Thor against my chest. “Oh my God. Is he all right?”

“Yeah. He’ll be fine. Not sure if or when he’s coming back. Like I said, you’re stuck with me now.”

Tony is the sweetest man ever. The thought of his life in danger makes me want to weep. This asshole’s callous tone has me ready to throw Thor again.

“Well, *he* wouldn’t have—”

“Look, lady, I’m not here to interrupt your mating dance. I just need you to sign for this package.” He points to the small brown parcel and his tablet that landed near the open door.

“How nice of you to throw my stuff on the ground.” I scramble to my knees and stand. “That’s no way to treat someone’s delivery. I should call RPS to complain.”

His mouth drops open. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

I prop my free hand on my hip and point with Thor. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

He sweeps his dark gaze over me like a physical touch. “No, Ms. Punzel, there’s absolutely nothing funny about the way you look.”

Heat wars with embarrassment as I wrap my arms around myself in an attempt to cover my breasts. “You’re an asshole.”

“Yes. I am. Now, please sign for your package.” He marches up to the landing and retrieves his tablet and my delivery. “I need to get back on the road.”

I follow him up the stairs. “But it’s a blizzard.”

Spinning to face me, he motions to the window. “I’m from New York.

This is not a blizzard.” He thrusts the tablet in my direction, looking everywhere but at me. “Sign in the box.”

I snatch the package out of his hand. “First, I need to make sure nothing’s broken.”

“If it is, you’re the one at fault.”

I give him a squinty glare. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He points to Thor, then gestures to the wet spot on his chest. “You assaulted me with your glittery boyfriend *and* contaminated my uniform. Then, you made me fall down the stairs. I may have a head injury.”

“I’ll give you a head injury.”

He takes a step closer. “Are you threatening me, Ms. Punzel?”

Steam comes out of my ears as I poke the center of his chest with a still-vibrating Thor, too infuriated for my embarrassment to fully register. “Maybe I am. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

He closes the distance between us, and the intensity of his gaze takes my breath away. “I’ve been a prisoner of war, and I’ve got the fucking scars to prove it. You. Don’t. Scare. Me.” He holds up the tablet. “Now, sign your goddamn name.”

Too stunned to argue, I grab the stylus and scrawl my signature. A prisoner of war? When? Where? What happened? Is he a veteran? I have so many questions, but none of them are my business to ask. The shadow clouding his eyes and his rigid stance tell me he’s not lying, dousing what’s left of my fury. I can’t even imagine the horrors he endured.

I hand over the tablet. “Here.”

“Good day, Ms. Punzel.” He pockets the device and turns to leave.

“Wait.”

“What now?” Heaving a sigh, he looks over his shoulder at me. Annoyance creases his brow, and for some reason it makes him even sexier.

None of it makes sense. He’s a dick. I shouldn’t find him so hot or care about his history. But something about the broody asshole revs my engine. I take a moment to really look at him, taking in the rugged planes of his stubbled jaw, his deep brown eyes, and the laugh lines etched into his skin. He’s truly a beautiful male specimen.

And it’s been a *long* time since I’ve been this close to an attractive man.

He rakes a hand through his hair and clenches his jaw. “I need to hit the road. What do you want?”

“Grab a muffin on your way out.”

HENRY

Mood Music: "From Eden" by Hozier

"APPLE CINNAMON," I say, lifting the bottle of beer to my lips. "And it was fucking delicious."

My friend and neighbor, Austin Pines, dramatically strums the guitar he carries around like an appendage. "She did all that huffin' and puffin' while tryin' to snuff him. Yeah, yeah." Ever the crooner, his soulful voice fills the cabin. "Then she gave him a muffin. Yeah, yeah. He says he don't want her..." He meets my gaze with amusement in his baby blue eyes. "But my man, he's just bluffin'."

"Shut up."

"Aw, c'mon, Henry. You love my music." And so does the rest of the world. Austin is a multi-platinum pop star who sings the panties off millions of women, but he's the most down-to-earth guy I've ever met.

"Yeah. But that doesn't mean I like being called out on my shit."

He laughs. "Sounds like a *you* problem, my friend."

"Pretty sure ninety percent of my issues are."

"Good thing we love you anyway."

When I bought my secluded cabin in the woods two years ago, the realtor told me the building about a mile away from mine was abandoned. That was merely a front to protect Austin's privacy and ward off stalker fans and the paparazzi. The place's "faux dilapidated" exterior also masks the fact that it's

someone's part-time residence.

So far, no one has found him out here, so his decoy measures seem to be working. I can't imagine a celebrity lifestyle. I'd hate to have everyone's noses in my business. Austin handles the fame well. Despite his fortune, he doesn't let the attention go to his head.

I'll never forget the day we met. My solitary move-in attempt started out rough. Raw from my divorce and too sad to give a fuck about anything, I nearly broke my back, trying to lug my furniture inside. Less than an hour into my efforts, Austin showed up—with beer and honey bourbon ribs—to offer his help. We instantly hit it off and have been friends ever since.

He sips his drink. "Besides, what's life without all the bullshit?"

"Hell if I know."

We fall into companionable silence for a few moments. That's one of the things I love most about our friendship—I don't need to think of shit to say or put up a front—we can just *be*. I lost touch with my friends when I joined the military. It was ten times worse after I got home. None of them want anything to do with me now, so I stopped trying. I'm a loner. I don't need friends. Yet Austin makes human connection feel effortless.

He officially lives with his actress fiancée in Memphis, so I don't see him as often as I'd like, but we always hang out when he's in the area. Lately, he only retreats to his secret mountain hideaway when he needs the time and space to write music. While his place isn't much bigger than mine, it's equipped with a recording studio and small apartment.

Austin wandered over tonight with chicken wings and beer when he saw how late I pulled into my driveway. Naturally, I had to share my day's insanity with him. I don't think I've ever seen the guy laugh so hard.

"I still can't believe she threw a vibrator at you."

"You and me both, dude." I left out the part about how her intoxicating scent clung to me, and I spent most of the day with a semi. He doesn't need to know I nearly pulled my truck over to rub one out.

He chuckles, fiddling with his guitar pick. "Better yet, I wonder what her boyfriend thought when you interrupted their digital get-down."

I stiffen and take a long pull of my beer, unnerved by the jealousy coursing through me. Some lucky bastard has front row seats to her sexy performances. I'd give my left nut to take his place.

Austin elbows me. "Maybe if you'd actually try dating again, you'd find someone."

“I have nothing to offer.”

“I call bullshit.”

“I’m a shell of who I used to be. Chelsea called me a downer. I mean, things were fine until after my deployment.”

Austin sets down his guitar. “You went through some crazy shit. How could she expect sunshine and rainbows after all that? And it’s not like you didn’t go to therapy.”

“Therapy didn’t make the nightmares stop. The flashbacks still paralyze me.” PTSD is a cruel bitch. It’s bad enough to endure a traumatic event the first time. When your mind forces you to keep reliving it? That’s torture. My scalp prickles as I rub the scar on my stomach. “I’ll probably always be fucked up.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “You’re not fucked up, man. You’re tryin’ to heal. It’s not your fault your wife had no compassion.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I stare across the room at the shadow box containing my Purple Heart medal, hating that my past darkened the mood. He didn’t come over here to spend his free time wallowing with me. “So, how’s the music going?”

“You’re changing the subject, but I’ll let it slide this time.” He motions to his guitar. “We got a few songs recorded when I was in New York, but we had to cut it short.”

“How come?”

“Jake’s best friend lost his wife to breast cancer. They’ve been buddies since elementary school, so he wanted to be there for Jesse through the aftermath.”

Jake Bennett, the King of Ballads, is one of Austin’s closest friends in the entertainment industry. They’re currently collaborating on a new album which will be a fusion of their music styles.

“Damn. Cancer’s a bitch.”

He shakes his head. “Yeah. Jesse’s not coping well. He’s staying with Jake for now because he’s afraid to be alone. He and Hannah were high school sweethearts. The whole thing’s a mess. It’s really fuckin’ sad.”

I know that fear of solitude. I dealt with it when I came home from overseas, every time Chelsea went out with her friends and left me alone to think.

“Won’t it be hard for you and Jake to get studio time once the baby comes?” I ask, ready for another subject change.

“Probably.” He grins and rubs his hands together with glee. “But that’s OK. I’m excited to be a daddy.”

I can’t help but smile with him. “You’ll be great. How’s Kate feeling?” While I’ve never met her, Austin speaks about her all the time, so I feel like I know the woman. “Everything going well?”

His face falls, and he releases a heavy sigh. “Physically, yes. Emotionally, not so much.”

“What’s going on?” Austin is never anything but jovial. His sudden change in demeanor worries me.

“She’s got perinatal depression. It’s been real hard, man. I can’t do *anything* right. She cries all the time, and I don’t know how to help her.”

“Just be there for her. Sometimes all you can do is listen.” I point out the window toward his cabin. “Since she’s having all that trouble, is she cool with you staying here right now?”

Austin rubs the back of his neck. “Not really, but I needed a little mental health break myself. I’m not trying to be selfish, but I can’t be there for her if I’m fallin’ apart too, you know?”

“What’s happening with you?”

“Just residual shit from Alaska.”

This past August, Austin, Jake, and their actor friend, Wes Emerson, went on a guys’ trip to a remote lodge in the Far North. After an excursion went awry, they were lost in the Alaskan wilderness for three weeks. They almost didn’t make it out alive. “I thought I was fine, but I guess I’m havin’ a hard time coping. It’s weird being back in the real world after everything we went through. I’ve been anxious as fuck, and I don’t wanna drag Katie down any further. I’ll head back to Memphis in a couple days once I get my shit together.”

“Good call, my friend.” If he’s smart, he’ll put his family first. PTSD kept me from doing that and caused me to lose my wife. Although something tells me Chelsea wasn’t in it for the long haul to begin with.

My phone rings on the coffee table. I lean forward and glance at the screen. It’s Dahlia. I was supposed to call her. I should’ve done it on my way home because I really don’t have the energy to talk right now.

“Do you need to grab that?” Austin asks.

“I probably should.” Retrieving the device, I silence the ringer.

“I’m gonna head home and give Katie a call before bed.” He rises and pats my shoulder. “Get some sleep, man.”

“I will. You too. Thanks for the beer and food.”

“Anytime.” He gives me a wave and heads out the door.

I reluctantly answer my little sister’s call. “Hello?”

“If I make lasagna instead of turkey, will you change your mind?”

“What?” I gulp the rest of my beer and set the bottle by the other empties, hoping the liquid patience reaches my bloodstream quickly. Dahlia often speaks in riddles and is a professional topic hopper. It’s not uncommon for me to have no idea where a conversation is headed.

“I’m talking about Christmas, dummy.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I already told you I’m not doing Christmas.”

“No, you said you’d *think* about it.”

“Dahl, if you had any idea what kind of day I had...” I stretch out on my couch, my limbs using the opportunity to remind me of their exhaustion.

“What happened? Flat tire? Lost packages? Please don’t tell me you crashed the company truck?”

“Well, no. It was nothing like that.” I yawn and rub my eyes. While the last thing I feel like doing is recounting the day’s insanity, I know my sister. She’s liable to hop a plane to check on me if I don’t serve up some details. “Have you ever heard of the investment company, Punzel Enterprises?”

She snorts. “Yeah, because I’m a stockbroker over here.”

I roll my eyes at her sarcasm. “Art teachers can invest their money too, you know.”

“Ugh. Don’t go there. Anyway, you were saying? Punzel Enterprises. Continue.”

“I met the heiress.”

“And?”

“She assaulted me with a sex toy.”

There are a few beats of silence. “Get the fuck out. Seriously?”

“Yup.” I launch into my tale, unable to keep from smiling at the sound of Dahlia’s laughter.

When my sister laughs, it’s a full body experience, complete with snorts, tears, hand claps, leg kicks, etc. Her laugh is often more hilarious than the original source of what’s funny. It’s next to impossible to be depressed around Dahlia. Her infectious sense of humor is one of the things I love most about her personality.

“Anyway, I’m exhausted,” I announce, once I’ve shared all sister-

appropriate portions of my story. “I need some sleep before I gotta do it all again tomorrow.”

“OK, go to bed. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Sleep tight, Buzz.” She makes several exaggerated bee sounds and cackles. “Don’t let the butt plugs bite.”

“Looks like another busy day ahead of you, Hank.” Joe saunters across the warehouse with his clipboard and hands me a list of addresses. “Some new. Mostly repeats.”

I give him a thumbs-up and stuff the page into my pocket. I’m too tired to correct him. I’m lucky if I got three hours of sleep after yesterday’s shenanigans. And those hours were far from restful. After passing out on my couch, I tossed and turned until my aching back and racing mind forced me to get up.

For once, it wasn’t all nightmares. If having my cock in my hand during my shower was any indication, my subconscious had more important things to worry about than my usual barrage of trauma. Guilt slinks down my spine, remembering how good it felt to come. It’s been ages since I last had sex. That was one of the first things that went south in my marriage after I left the Marines. It was really fucking hard to get hard when the dark memories gripped me.

Funny, I had no trouble this morning.

“Are you listening, Hank?” Joe’s voice cuts into my naughty daydream.

“I’m sorry, what?” I clear my throat and shift position.

“I asked how you made out at the Punzel place. The daughter give you any trouble?”

I stiffen, wondering if she called to complain. He doesn’t look like he’s about to fire me, so I slowly shake my head. “Uh, no. She was fine.”

“Good. The guy who previously had Tony’s route lost a package of rubies. We’re talking fifty thousand dollars in gemstones. He claimed he delivered them, but I did some investigating, and it turns out he never even went to her place. He lied and forged her signature.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Oh, and he was drinking on the job too. I fired him, obviously, but she threw quite the fit. Anyway, that’s old news.” Joe claps my shoulder. “Figured I’d give you the head’s up because you’re going there again today.”

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Drumming Song” by Florence + The Machine

DID I MISS HIM?

I click on the tracking number for the twenty-seventh time today. According to Ryder Parcel Services, my package is out for delivery, which is exactly what their website said when I first checked at six-thirty this morning. I couldn't care less about what's inside the box.

The disgruntled—too gorgeous for his own good—veteran who's going to bring it to me? That is a totally different story. One I shouldn't even attempt to read, but here I am, flipping pages like I have a clue about men.

I got up early and did my hair and makeup. I even put on some cute clothes in anticipation of his arrival. I figured he'd show up around the same time as yesterday, but it's heading for seven o'clock in the evening, and there's still no sign of the broody driver.

I canceled my work calls, kept the music off, and turned my phone's ringer all the way up in case he needed to reach me about the delivery. Or so I keep telling myself. The truth is, I embarrassed myself enough for a lifetime yesterday and have no desire for a repeat occurrence. Which is highly possible, given the nature of my cam girl side hustle.

One thing is for damn sure, the silence is making me stir crazy. My apartment—what I prefer to call my wing of my father's estate—is spotless and smells amazing. Probably has something to do with the cornbread

muffins I baked and pot of chili simmering on the stove. You know, just in case.

Eugene, my Maine Coon, sits on his cat tower across the room, silently judging me. Paws tucked; the massive white beast flicks the tip of his tail like he's shaking a finger at me for being foolish.

"I get it. I'm pathetic. Now, get off your high horse and come show me some affection." Eugene squints his citrine-colored eyes but doesn't budge. "Fine. Be that way."

My phone's deafening ring makes me jump. Eugene dives off his perch and escapes upstairs, his claws scraping the hardwood with his frantic retreat. I snatch the device and unlock the screen. It's Esme, my boss at The River, the New York City water-themed kink spa where I work remotely as a cam girl.

"Hello?"

"Rowan, baby, is everything all right?"

I tilt my head to the side. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I was out of the office yesterday, so I didn't get my messages until this evening. There were several from Mr. Maximus, expressing his concern for your safety. He said you screamed bloody murder, then disappeared off-screen and never came back. What happened?"

Oh shit.

Access to River Myst, The River's elite cyber network, is only awarded to vetted members of the club's BDSM realm, Glacier. Mr. Maximus, which may or may not be his real name, is one of my regular viewers. When I logged on for my performance, he requested a private show.

"Well, um, there was a bit of an incident during my morning broadcast." I chew my lip, embarrassed to confess my fuck-up.

Cam girl rule number one: be cognizant of your surroundings. As in, don't leave your door unlocked—with a freaking welcome note on the knob—when you're dancing for a River Myst client. Especially since confidentiality is a big part of keeping the network secure. No one outside of Glacier is supposed to know the cyber realm exists. Not even The River employees assigned to other realms. Which means I'm in deep shit.

"What kind of incident?" Esme probes.

"Someone, uh, walked in on me."

"Can you please be more specific, so I can provide the necessary details to the security team?"

“He was a delivery guy.”

“Why didn’t you call the club?” Annoyance replaces her voice’s usual sultriness, making my insides shrivel.

I’ll be crushed if she fires me. Even though I don’t need my job at The River, I cling to it like a life raft. I don’t dance for the money. I do it for my mental health. Dancing is how I combat loneliness. My River Myst broadcasts are the only human interaction I get, outside of my father, his aide, and whomever happens to deliver my packages.

“He didn’t see anything. Just me in my costume.”

“As we went over during your orientation, it’s crucial that you report *anything* with the potential to compromise Myst. If I’m not available, reach out to Darius or Indira.”

Darius King and Indira Kalpana are two of Esme’s silent partners. Darius is head of The River’s security team. Indira handles the club’s technology and cybersecurity. Myst is her pet project.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Good. Now that we’ve got that settled, is there anything you need from me?” Warmth has trickled back into her tone. “I can order different costumes if you’d like.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I have quite a few. I can always—” A series of thunderous knocks echo through my kitchen. *He’s here.* My insides flutter with excitement, shoving aside the shame from moments earlier. “Esme, I need to let you go. I’ve got company.” I don’t dare tell her he’s the same man as yesterday.

“All right, baby. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“You too.” I hang up and abandon my phone on the counter. “Coming,” I call, making my way across the kitchen on shaky legs.

He pounds the door again, harder this time. “RPS. You have a package.”

I yank it open to find my grumpy delivery man standing on my apartment’s threshold with a cardboard box tucked under his arm and a scowl on his sexy face.

Good God, he’s even hotter today.

I prop my hands on my hips. “I *said* I was coming. You don’t need to bang down my door.”

He points to the hinges with his free hand. “Pretty sure it’s still hanging.”

“What is your problem,” I glance at the name on his jacket, “Flynn?”

“It would be nice if someone plowed you.”

You can plow me anytime.

“I’m sure it would be,” I murmur, unable to stop myself from staring, even as heat floods my face. “But some of us don’t have that luxury.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but his words—and my response—finally register. He snaps his jaw shut. Blinking a few times, he clears his throat. “I meant the road. Snow removal.”

“I know what you meant.”

“I shouldn’t have to make deliveries in these conditions.” He points to the glistening snow-covered path. “It’s inconsiderate.”

“It’s winter. Snow happens sometimes. Get over it.”

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have to drive all over the county with a truck full of other people’s shit.”

“Were you forced to take this job?” He doesn’t answer. “That’s what I thought.” I motion for him to enter the kitchen. “C’mon, you’re letting the cold in.”

“Actually, I’m letting the heat out. Basic thermodynamics.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever, Mr. Fahrenheit. Now, can I please have my box, or would you rather keep it?”

“Are you offering?” he mutters, stepping into the doorway when a particularly strong gust of wind blasts him. His presence sucks all the oxygen from my kitchen.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He thrusts the package toward me. “Here.”

The box is so heavy, I nearly drop it the second it’s in my hands. “Holy shit.” I stagger the few feet to my counter and slide it onto the granite top.

What the hell did I order that weighs so much?

When you don’t leave the house and have literally everything from groceries to paper goods delivered, it’s easy to forget what you’ve ordered.

“A little warning would’ve been nice. I nearly broke my back.”

“If you’re looking for sympathy, you won’t find it from me.” He holds out his tablet. “Sign here.”

“Why are you such an asshole?”

“Any number of reasons. Depends on the day. Sign please.” He nudges my arm with the device. “I’ve got places to be.”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m not signing anything until you show some fucking manners.”

His dark gaze meets mine. “I am *trying* to do a job here, Ms. Punzel.”

“Right. And as a paying customer, I don’t like your attitude.”

“You don’t need to like me.”

“Are you always this grumpy?” He narrows his eyes instead of answering. “Ah, I thought so. That’s unfortunate.” I brush past him and close the door, then usher him deeper into the kitchen, positioning myself between him and the exit he’s so eager to use. “What’s the matter? I already know you’re pissed off, but what else is going on? Are you tired? Hungry? Sad? Talk to me. I’m a great listener.”

His deep brown eyes bore into mine for what feels like an eternity, and what I see inside them cracks me wide open. There’s pain. Anger. Fear. And bone-deep loneliness. Maybe we’re not so different after all. Yet, swirling around in all those turbulent emotions, I glimpse the tiniest spark of hope.

“All of the above,” he mumbles after a mile-long stretch of silence.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“You’re my last stop, Ms. Punzel.” He rubs the back of his neck and releases a heavy sigh, setting the tablet on my counter. “It’s been a long week. There’s no end in sight now that Tony’s out. All I want to do is go home and rot on my couch with a beer, so I’d appreciate if you’d *please* sign for your package and let me leave.” He gives the signature line an expectant tap.

My heart clenches, seeing the weary sadness in his gaze. “Did you like the muffin?”

His eyes soften ever so slightly. “Yes. Thank you. It was gone by the time I reached the bottom of the mountain.”

“My mother’s recipe,” I announce, warmed by his praise.

“She must be a good cook.”

“Was. She died fifteen years ago. I still use her recipes daily as a way to keep her memory alive.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s fine. I’m good.” I shrug and force a smile. In reality, it will never be fine. I will never be good, but I haven’t cried in six months. Not for a lack of sadness though. There simply aren’t any tears left after I cried enough to fill all seven oceans. But he doesn’t need to know all that. “Today, I made cornbread muffins to go with a batch of chili. Have dinner with me.”

His eyes dart to the pot on my stove. “Thank you, but I should get going.”

“You just said you were hungry.” His stomach growls in agreement—loud enough that he can’t pretend I didn’t hear it—so I seize the opportunity

to use my powers of persuasion. “I’ll have you know I make the best chili in Tennessee.”

His lips twitch at the corners. “Bold statement.”

“Well, it’s true. According to my father, that is.” My statement earns me a real smile and God does it make him even more breathtaking. “Dad’s the best food critic out there.”

“And he’s not biased?”

“Nope. He’s the most impartial guy on the planet. You’ve got to be when you build an empire dealing with other people’s money. Anyway, he taught me not to waste food, and there’s no way I can eat all that.” I point to the stove with a smile. “So, given the principles by which I was raised, it only makes sense for you to join me for dinner, Flynn.”

He meets my gaze. “My name’s Henry.”

“Oh.” I touch the embroidery on his jacket. “Then this is false advertising.”

Henry actually chuckles, and the deep rumble does something to my insides. “Not exactly. Flynn is my last name.”

“Thank you for enlightening me, Henry Flynn.” I peer up at him as the air in the room rises a few degrees with our proximity. “Since our first meeting was...um...a bit unconventional, I didn’t have the chance to introduce myself properly. I’m Rowan-Anastasia, but everyone calls me Rowan.”

“Nice to meet you, Rowan. Listen, I should really get going—”

“There’s homemade banana pudding for dessert.” I gesture to his tablet. “And you can’t leave because I haven’t signed for my package yet.”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot.” He reaches for the device and wakes the screen before holding it out to me.

“Nope. I’m still not gonna sign.”

“Seriously?”

“Serious as a heart attack.” Remembering what happened to Tony, I cringe. “Shit. That was way too soon. Forget I said that.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and offer a silent prayer for Tony’s speedy recovery. “Sorry. Sometimes I vomit words out before thinking them over.”

He shrugs. “It happens.”

“Anyway, to answer your question, yes, I’m serious about not signing. *But...* I will gladly change my mind if you stay for dinner.” I bat my eyelashes for good measure.

“Are you trying to hold me hostage? Because this feels like a hostage

situation.” His smirk tells me he knows I’m not the type to slice and dice him, then sell his body parts.

“Yes, it most definitely is. I mean, it only seems right after yesterday’s home invasion. Tit for tat, you know?”

His rich laughter fills my kitchen. “You’re a piece of work.”

“Been told that before.”

Henry eyes me. “Listen, I really appreciate the offer—and your chili smells amazing—but I don’t think your boyfriend would appreciate you having dinner with me.”

“Good thing I don’t have a boyfriend.” I pinch his cheek then point to the sink. “Now, wash your hands, and go sit down like a good boy.”

HENRY

Mood Music: “Echo” by Incubus

THIS WOMAN IS out of her mind—no joke, she’s certifiable—and so fucking sexy, I might actually explode.

Rowan swirls her spoon around in her bowl of chili. “Oh! Another one. Come here, you little jerk. Gotcha!” She removes the onion and places it on her napkin with the others. She’s got a pile of them now.

“If you don’t like onions, why’d you put them in?” I smear some butter onto my third cornbread muffin.

“Because they’re in the recipe,” she explains, chasing down another onion.

“So, change it.” Seems like an obvious solution, but I’m no chef. My cooking skills have always been rooted in survival. I’ve never tasted food this delicious.

Rowan sets down her spoon and stares at me like I have six heads. “Don’t you understand?”

“Uh, clearly, I don’t.”

“I can’t change it. I don’t change *any* of Mom’s recipes. This food is her legacy. It would be like erasing her existence.” Grief floods her big, green eyes but doesn’t spill over.

Jesus.

Now I feel like an asshole for pointing it out. “Sorry. When you put it that

way...”

“You think I’m strange.” It’s a statement, not a question, and fuck if I know how I’m supposed to reply.

Is she an odd duck? Absofuckinglutely. Does that bother me? Not really. My sister can be a little weird at times, so I’m used to quirky young women. Rowan takes it to a new level though. She intrigues me more with each passing minute.

Like the rogue onions hiding in her bowl, she’s got layers. Yet as she peels each one down, revealing more of herself to me, she only confuses me more. On paper, she’s a billionaire heiress who lives in a mountaintop castle. That’s not the woman I’m sharing a meal with. No, this Rowan is equal parts awkward and self-assured. Sweet but demanding.

With her long, golden hair, piercing eyes, and melodic voice, she’s the siren who haunted my dreams last night. And most of today’s waking thoughts.

I purposely made her my last stop in case she decided to catapult me with another sex toy. My head is still throbbing from yesterday’s fall. If I were smart, I would’ve gone to a hospital to get checked out, but the macho in me took over. I’ve survived much worse than a concussion.

Nope. Don’t go there right now.

I beat back the dark memories trying to claw their way to the surface and keep my focus riveted on Rowan. Who is this girl who dances naked and bakes like a goddamn angel? How does she *not* have a boyfriend? Better yet, who the hell was she dancing for? Rowan-Anastasia Punzel is a mystery I’m dying to solve. Even though I have no business trying.

Bottom line, she’s a customer. Not only is she too young for me, but she’s so far out of my league, I might as well be a different species.

“What I think doesn’t matter. I’m just an old, jaded ex-Marine with enough baggage to sink an aircraft carrier.”

“Is that what you’ve told yourself, or has someone led you to believe that?”

Damn, she’s intuitive.

“Both.”

She nods. “Are you married?”

“Not anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Me too.” I sip my sweet tea, hoping she’ll change the subject.

“What happened?” When I hesitate, she reaches across the table and touches my arm. “It’s OK. You don’t have to tell me.”

Then why do I suddenly want to?

“Divorce was finalized two years ago, but we separated about a year before that.” I stare at the cat figurines on a nearby shelf. “She said I was too moody.”

“No offense, but...”

My gaze snaps to her face. “I wasn’t always an asshole. That was her complaint—I wasn’t the same man she’d married. And you know what?” I set down my glass and lean forward in my seat. “She was absolutely right.”

“When did you become a...curmudgeon?”

A half-hearted chuckle leaves my lips. “Around the time I was deployed.”

“Thank you for your service,” she murmurs, compassion shining from her beautiful green gaze.

I nod and sip my drink. “You’re welcome.”

“You said you were a prisoner of war. What happened?”

My muscles tense with her question. Even after all this time, my fight or flight instincts haven’t gone away. If anything, they’re stronger. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t want to talk about that. Suffice it to say, the experience fucked me up big time.”

“Maybe you should consider therapy.” She releases a heavy sigh and slumps in her chair. “Although I’m one to talk. I should’ve been in counseling for the past fifteen years.”

“I’ve done therapy. Didn’t help.”

She searches my face. “I’m sure there was *some* improvement?”

“Tell that to the flashbacks and nightmares.”

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that,” she whispers.

“Thanks.” I clear my throat. “What happened to your mom?”

“Car accident.” She stares into her bowl like it’s a portal to another dimension as grief rolls off her in waves. “Dad was involved too, but he survived.”

“I’m sorry for your family’s loss.”

“Thank you. It’s been challenging. My dad’s a paraplegic, so I take care of him most days.” She meets my gaze once more. “He has a lovely home health aide who’s here a few times a week. He’s actually on vacation with her now. Greta is so good to him, and he adores her. She takes him out for all his errands and doctor appointments.”

“You don’t drive him?”

“No. I don’t drive at all. I haven’t left the property in fifteen years.”

What? I gape at her. “Seriously?”

She nods sadly. “Yeah. That’s why I get so many deliveries.”

“So, you’ve been locked in this tower for all that time?”

“No one locked me up. I’m free to come and go as I please. I just choose not to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” The desolate look in her eyes tells me there’s a damn good reason she hasn’t left the premises in a decade and a half.

“How do you make that work?”

She tilts her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you get bored?” *Or lonely?*

Rowan laughs. “I made friends with boredom ten years ago.”

“How do you occupy your time?” I can’t fathom being stuck in one place for the rest of eternity.

“I make a daily schedule for myself. I learned a long time ago that a lack of structure impacts my mental health, so I cram my days with activity. This way, I don’t have too much free time.”

“But how?”

She narrows her eyes. “You writing a book?”

“No. I’m genuinely curious how you make it work.” I gesture to her fridge. “Since you don’t leave the house for grocery shopping and that kind of stuff, I’m assuming you have everything delivered.”

“Yup. You’re going to be seeing a lot of me.”

I’ve already seen a lot of you, Princess.

I shift in my chair and clear my throat, hoping to derail the lust train barreling toward me. “OK, so, what about doctor appointments?”

“I’m never around anyone, so I don’t get sick.”

“Surely you have an annual physical though?” Even I remember to make that shit a priority.

“Of course. The doctor comes here.”

“What about hair and nails? You know, the stuff other women do.”

She pulls her long ponytail in front of her shoulder. “As you can see, I haven’t had a haircut in a while.” Peeking at the ends, she adds, “But I give myself regular trims, so it doesn’t get ratty. I don’t even bother with my nails

because I wreck them working in my studio.”

“Not that it’s any of my business, but do you even need to work?”

“No. I don’t.” She releases a heavy sigh. “My father gives me a ridiculous amount of money each month as a stipend, and I’m free to do whatever I want with it. Since I hate feeling like a spoiled rich princess, I give most of my money away to charity. I use what’s left for food and work materials.”

“What do you do for work?”

Rowan’s eyes light up. “I started a shop on Etsy a few years ago. I make jewelry, clothes, artwork, home decor, and an assortment of accessories. I’ve found that being creative helps my sanity. Some days I’m in the mood to paint. Other days I sit at my sewing machine for hours. Jewelry is my favorite though. I love making pretty things for people to wear.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Earrings, necklaces, tiaras, you name it. Sometimes I use plain gold or silver, or fancy beads, but I frequently get custom orders for gemstone jewelry. It’s not uncommon for me to receive a shipment of rubies or emeralds alongside my shampoo and eggs.”

“Wow. That’s actually pretty cool.”

Rowan sips her drink and nods. “Since I don’t leave the house, I miss out on most experiences other women get to have. It makes me feel valued—and a teensy bit normal—when someone wears one of my creations out in the world. Last week, I had a bride email me pictures of her in her wedding gown, wearing the custom necklace I made. Things like that make me happy.”

This woman is so much more complex than I gave her credit for.

“What’s your business called?” I still need to order a Christmas gift for Dahlia.

She grins. “RA-Punzel’s Tower Creations.”

“Clever.”

“Yeah, the irony isn’t lost on me.”

“So, the dancing...is that for fun?” The question leaves my lips before I can stop it.

Her cheeks flush a beautiful pink. “Yes and no.”

“Sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“No, you’re fine. Dancing keeps me active. I enjoy moving my body to music and wearing sexy things, so I guess you can call it fun.” She shrugs. “But it’s really another unnecessary stream of income.”

“Someone pays you to dance?” *How much, and where do I sign up to watch?* “You’re like a cam girl?”

“Yes.” She squares her shoulders and looks me dead in the eyes. “But I don’t do it for the money.”

“Then, why?” I wonder if her billionaire father is aware of her *unnecessary income stream*. I’m sure the finance mogul would *love* knowing his daughter takes off her clothes for money. That’s likely why she wore a mask, but now that I know she doesn’t have a boyfriend, I’m even more curious who was on the receiving end of yesterday’s performance. “If you don’t need the money, why do it?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Henry.”

“I’m sorry. Don’t feel obligated to answer.” *Please fucking tell me more.*

After a few moments of hesitation, she says, “I dance because it’s my passion. When my grief makes it hard to breathe, dancing is the air I crave. When I feel forgotten and so lonely I can barely function, my clients remind me I’m not alone. When I feel worthless, their praises prove that’s not the case. Dancing connects me to the outside world.” She makes a sweeping gesture with her arm. “Being here, sequestered in my tower, is a self-inflicted punishment.”

“Punishment for what?” What could’ve possibly happened to make her feel like she needed to shut herself away from the world?

“Doesn’t matter. Bottom line, I miss human interaction. Attention. Conversations.”

An invisible band tightens around my chest. “Don’t you have friends?”

“Not anymore. My hermit lifestyle didn’t appeal to them—because they don’t understand me—so they kept their distance. At this point, we’ve drifted so far apart, I don’t have the energy to bother swimming.”

“Jesus.” I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t think I’ve ever related to a statement more. My friends distanced themselves when I came home from overseas. I don’t blame them, but still. It’s a shitty feeling, knowing you’re disposable.”

“I get it.” She peers across the table into my eyes. “For what it’s worth, I think your friends were wrong.”

“Yours too.” My voice comes out more gravelly than I’ve ever heard it, and I’m not sure what’s going on in my chest, but I do know one thing: Rowan-Anastasia Punzel is so much more than a quirky heiress who lives alone in a tower. She’s broken and beautiful, a gorgeous mystery I’m

desperate to solve. Yet it seems the more I learn about her, the less I know.

“I really appreciate you having dinner with me,” she says, tucking a strand of golden hair behind her ear. “Even though I kinda manipulated you into it.”

I chuckle and wipe my mouth with my napkin. “I’m glad you did. Thank you for feeding me.” *I want you.* “I’m sorry I was a dick earlier.”

“Apology accepted.” She smiles and my pulse stutters for a few beats. “You’re way less of an asshole than I originally thought.”

I bark out a laugh. “Uh, thanks?”

“Thank *you* for dropping the jerk schtick. I was getting ready to slap you.”

I’d let her do anything she wanted to me. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I would’ve deserved it.”

“Not true, but we’ll have to agree to disagree.” Mischief flashes in her gaze. “Although it was kinda fun to push your buttons.” There is no mistaking the desire written on her features when she adds, “I may need to try it again.”

Oh, sweet fuck. My cock twitches, reminding me I’m screwed. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted a woman so badly.

“Rowan, I—” A sharp pain radiates from my Achilles tendon up the back of my calf. I jerk my leg upward. My knee slams the table, knocking over our drinks. I yelp as I scramble backward and fall off my chair.

The second my ass hits the floor, a satanic growl unlike anything I’ve ever heard fills the kitchen.

“What the—”

A creature rockets from beneath the table in a blur of teeth and claws. Needles prick my skin.

“Fuck!” Pain travels toward my head. Twisting to my side, I shield my face. The snarling animal continues its assault, hellbent on destroying me.

“Eugene! Stop!” Rowan’s shrieks pierce my skull.

Her screams do nothing to halt the attack. I jerk onto my stomach, then cover my head. My arms and shoulders fall victim to the scratching and biting, but protecting my face is my only goal.

Then, as suddenly as it started, everything stops. Nails scrape across the kitchen floor with the beast’s retreat.

Now I’m soaking wet and covered in ice cubes.

Rowan stands over me with an empty pitcher. “Are you OK?”

“Do I look like I’m fucking OK?”

“No.” She touches my shoulder. “I’m so sorry. My cat—”

“Cat?” Rolling over, I rise onto my knees. Ice cubes hit the floor. My skin burns and tingles beneath the tea-saturated clothes. I fling my arm toward the sopping wet animal, still hissing and snarling from its position in the corner. “*That* was not a cat. Unless you have a pet lion.”

I make deliveries for a living. I’ve encountered plenty of vicious dogs. I’ve dealt with hundreds of cats. The thing that attacked me was no feline. The fucker is bigger than my sister’s beagle.

“Eugene is a Maine Coon. He usually doesn’t—”

“Rip people to shreds?” Shoving the wet hair out of my face, I meet the animal’s yellow glare with a scowl of my own. Now that I’m finally getting a good look at him, there’s no denying he’s magnificent.

No joke, he’s got to be over thirty pounds and close to four feet long.

“I’m sorry. He didn’t mean to hurt you. He was protecting me.” She points to where Eugene is busy licking his paws. “He’s not used to seeing anyone other than my dad, his aide, and Tony.”

“That’s funny. Tony never mentioned an attack cat.”

“Eugene has never attacked anyone else,” she says sheepishly. “I’m so sorry, Henry.”

“It’s fine.” I climb to my feet and survey the damage. Blood seeps through my white thermal from the wounds on my forearms. Rivulets of sticky sweet tea slide down my neck beneath my collar.

“Oh my God, you’re bleeding.”

“No shit,” I grumble, giving the tufted-eared asshole *both* of my middle fingers, like the bastard cares that I hate him. “Courtesy of Knife Feet over there.”

“We need to clean you up. Cat scratches are not something to mess with—you can get an infection in your bloodstream and die.”

“Perfect. I had sepsis on my bingo card for this year.”

“I’m serious, Henry,” she says with a sternness that’s too cute to be intimidating.

“So am I.” Tapping my chin, I add, “As you so eloquently described earlier, I’m as serious as a heart attack.”

Rowan gives me an eye roll. “Don’t be a dick.”

“Not possible. It’s beyond my control.”

She pokes me in the center of my chest. “Shut up and take off your

clothes.”

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Favorite Kind of High” by Kelly Clarkson

ARE ALL MEN THIS STUBBORN?

“C’mon. Chop-chop. We don’t have all night.” I snap my fingers in front of Henry’s face. His dark gaze burns into me, but he doesn’t budge. “Are you dense? I *said* take off your clothes.”

“I heard you, Princess.”

“Excuse me?” I prop my hands on my hips. “I’m trying to help you—because I’d prefer you not die—and you’re insulting me?”

“Wasn’t an insult.”

“Really? Then what would you call it?”

“Most people call it a nickname.” He smirks, and even covered in cat hair, sweet tea, and blood, I want to climb up his body.

“Oh. I’ve never really had a nickname.”

Henry widens his eyes. “You’re joking.”

“Nope. I’m a recluse, remember? And my dad is too proper to call me anything but Rowan-Anastasia.” I shake my head to clear thoughts of my pathetic life and touch his shirt’s hemline. “Are you capable of undressing yourself, or do you need my help?”

“Rowan, I’m fine. I’ll clean up when I get home.”

Please don’t leave.

“Or you can go shower while I wash your clothes, so you don’t have to

ride home like that.”

“I’ve been on worse rides.”

“Look, I feel shitty my cat hurt you. Could you at least let me clean the scratches?” I touch his shoulder. “I get that you have big plans for your weird, morbid bingo game, but *I* don’t want to be responsible for you dying from sepsis. Plus, your family would be sad, and I’d hate to ruin all those lives. So, stop being stubborn, and take off your shirt.” *Let me heal you.* “Please let me see your skin.”

“Fine.” Henry lifts the damp thermal up over his head and tosses it onto the counter, then holds out his arms. “Be my guest.”

Mother of God, he’s gorgeous.

I sweep my gaze over his broad shoulders, thick biceps, and corded forearms, noticing the bleeding gouges Eugene left behind. I’m going to need a lot of Band-Aids. My journey brings me inland to his sculpted pecs and an abdomen so chiseled it might as well be granite. No, scratch that—I’ve worked with granite in my studio—this man’s body is far more beautiful. My breath catches at the sight of the jagged scar running from the left side of his ribcage to the opposite hip.

Meeting his gaze, I brush my fingertips along the mark. “What happened here?”

He clamps his hand on my wrist, stilling me. “Not your cat, so don’t worry about it.”

I’ve been a prisoner of war, and I’ve got the fucking scars to prove it.

“I’m sorry someone hurt you,” I whisper.

Henry tightens his grip instead of answering.

Towering over me, he’s the picture of strength and power. A brave Marine. But his eyes tell a different story. Henry Flynn is a lost, broken soul who aches for more than life has given him. My resolve to find the man inside and put him back together grows stronger each moment.

“Take off your pants.”

“No.” A humorless laugh leaves his lips. “Drawing the line there, Princess.”

“Eugene got your legs too, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but I’m more than capable of dealing with scratches I can reach.” He holds his arms out in front of him, turning them to get a better look at the undersides. “I can clean most of these on my own.” He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “Those are a different story.”

I slowly circle him, awed by the magnificence that is his back. “You have a lot of muscles.” And scratches.

“Thanks. The Marines will do that to a guy. Plus, working for RPS keeps me fit. I lift hundreds of boxes each day.”

“Yeah.” I pause in front of him and peer up into his eyes, too stupefied to focus on anything other than my desire. I want him to lift *me* every day. Maybe toss me onto some boxes and have his way with me. The naughty visuals make me shiver.

He lifts an eyebrow. “I’m the one standing here half naked, and *you’re* cold?”

“Yes. No. I mean, a little bit. Not really though.” A nervous chuckle leaves my lips as I point to the hallway that leads to my downstairs bathroom. “Go shower. Toss your clothes in the hall, and I’ll wash them for you. Hopefully, I can get the blood off your thermal.”

He smirks. “While I appreciate the offer, what am I supposed to wear afterward?”

Nothing.

My mouth goes dry with visuals of his big, broad body fully naked. His top half is all muscles and hard lines. I can only imagine what lies beneath his belt. My lower belly heats and flutters as my heart races with the thought of touching him. I’ve never felt like this before. Arousal doesn’t begin to describe what’s happening inside me.

“I have clothes,” I blurt, pointing to the ceiling. “Closets full of them.”

Henry sweeps his gaze from my eyes to my feet, then back up. “I hate to break it to you, but your clothes won’t fit me.”

“I have guy clothes. I’ve sewn a bunch for my shop.” I touch his massive bicep. “They may be a little snug, but for short-term wear, you should be fine.”

He nods. “How about those bandages?”

“Right. Of course. You go get naked, and I’ll grab you.” I shake my head to restart my short-circuiting brain. “I mean, grab my first-aid stuff.”

The heat in his gaze damn near incinerates me. “You planning to take advantage of me, Princess?”

“No.” Yes. “Of course not. Sorry I’m jumbling my words. I’m just a little shaken from seeing blood.” I attempt a comforting smile and open my mouth to speak once more, but when the intensity of his stare fully hijacks my brain, what I planned to say and what leaves my lips are two entirely different

things. “Although I wouldn’t mind taking advantage of you.”

HENRY

Mood Music: "Paradise" by MEDUZA and Dermot Kennedy

SHE'S GOING to be the death of me.

"Rowan." Her name comes out on a low growl as I ball my fists at my sides to keep from touching her. She thinks she's flirting, but I'm two seconds from fucking her on the kitchen table. It's been so long since I've been with a woman, I'd probably break her in half.

"Yes?" She stares up at me with those piercing green eyes that can see inside my soul.

"You're tempting the wrong man."

She sweeps her arm around the room. "Do you see another one in here?" Her shoulders rise and fall with each rapid breath as she steps closer to me. "Because I don't."

"We're walking a dangerous line, Princess. I can't afford to cross it." I clench my jaw. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm gonna shower, take care of the cuts your shithead cat gave me, then go home. *You* are going to remember what a major asshole I am and shove those other thoughts out of your pretty head."

"What if I don't want to remember?"

"You don't have a choice." I stalk to the bathroom and slam the door, sliding the lock behind me.

It doesn't matter how badly I want her. I have no business touching a

woman whose monthly income is more than I've made in a lifetime. At nearly forty, I'm too old, too fucked-up, and far too volatile for someone who hasn't left the house in over a decade. I don't know what kind of trauma her past holds, but all it would take is witnessing one flashback, one tortured nightmare, to scar her for life. Chelsea couldn't handle it, and we'd been together since high school. The last thing I want to do is cause another woman stress. Rowan deserves better than that. I can't go there.

Because I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that once I got a taste of her, it would never be enough.

I turn the water on full blast. Hot water stings the scratches covering my skin. I scrub until I'm raw and bleeding, desperate to cleanse my body and mind from everything that happened tonight.

Except I see Rowan's face every time I blink. Those big, beautiful eyes, so full of emotion. Her full, pink lips I want to kiss until they're swollen. That gorgeous hair I want wrapped around my wrist while I fuck her from behind.

I groan and lean against the shower wall, my dick fully hard now. What would it feel like to sink deep inside her, forget who I am and chase the high we both crave? Closing my eyes, I grip my cock and explore the fantasy. Each rough stroke makes me want her more. I imagine her writhing beneath me, crying out my name. Clawing my back and bucking her hips to meet my thrusts. It doesn't take me long to lose control. I come hard and fast, clenching my jaw to keep from moaning.

My release buckles my legs, making me stagger to the side. I brace myself on the wall. Once I'm finally spent, I adjust the water temperature to cool down my overheated skin.

I wait for my breathing to return to normal before turning off the shower. Most of the steam has already dissipated. Reaching from behind the curtain, I snag the dark purple towel hanging on a nearby bar. Now that my head is clear enough to focus on my surroundings, I notice the entire bathroom is done in shades of purple. My art teacher sister would know all the technical names like lavender, lilac, and plum. They're all purple to me.

I towel off with efficiency and open the medicine cabinet in search of something to disinfect my scratches. It's empty. Not even a tube of toothpaste. My dirty clothes lying on the floor remind me of how I retreated to the bathroom before Rowan had the chance to give me any first-aid stuff. Or clothes. I pick up my wet shirt, hating the thought of putting it back on.

Yeah, nope. Not happening.

I need to borrow something to wear for the ride home. After wrapping a towel tightly around my hips, I open the door a crack. Silence and cool air greet me. Shuddering with the sudden chill, I exit the bathroom and wander down the hall. There's no sign of Rowan or that furry fucker, Eugene.

"Rowan?" I pad back into the kitchen to find it spotless. You'd never know there was tea, ice cubes, and tufts of cat hair all over the floor twenty minutes ago. "Hello? Can I please have the ointment and stuff?"

Footsteps creak overhead, then someone stomps down the stairs. Moments later, Rowan reenters the kitchen wearing a flannel nightgown and cat slippers. She marches over with a scowl on her pretty face. Now that she's close enough, I can make out the pattern on her pajamas—tabby cats kissing under the mistletoe. I wonder if she realizes how fucking cute she is.

"What's wrong?" I ask, even though I'm well aware I caused the tension radiating off her in waves.

"Here." She thrusts a tube of ointment, bottle of peroxide, bag of cotton balls, and a box of Band-Aids at me, then tosses some clothes onto the counter.

"Thanks." I take the first aid stuff and point to what looks like folded-up sweatpants and a t-shirt. "So, I'll wash these when—"

"Keep the clothes. I don't need them back." She spins on her heel and heads toward the staircase without another word.

"Where are you going?"

"Getting out of your way."

"Why?"

"So I don't interrupt your *major assholery*," she says over her shoulder.

Now I feel like a dick for snapping at her earlier. It's clear I hurt her feelings. The problem is, I don't know how to fix it.

I hold up the box of Band-Aids, even though she can't see them. "Aren't you going to help me?"

She whirls around, fire flashing in her emerald gaze. And fuck, does she look like a goddess with her cape of long, golden hair. "You don't want my help."

"What makes you think that?"

"Your temper tantrum made it crystal clear." She points to the purple cat clock on the wall with its tail moving from side to side. "Besides, I have a client waiting."

Oh, hell no.

Jealousy floods my veins. “A client? As in, someone you dance for?”

“What does it matter to you?”

I clench my jaw. “Just answer the question.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “You, first.”

“Because I just...” I open and close my mouth a few times, trying to formulate my response. What can I possibly say? She isn’t mine. I have no right to be jealous. Yet the idea of her disrobing for another man—or men—makes my blood boil.

“You just, what?” Rowan slowly approaches, her gaze locked on my face. When I don’t answer, she snatches the tube of ointment from my hand. “Turn around.”

Still unable to pull myself together, I follow her order without question. Neither of us speaks as she cleans and bandages the scratches I can’t reach. The feel of her fingertips on my skin gives me goosebumps.

“Maybe if you dried off better, you wouldn’t be so cold.”

“I’m dry.”

She moves to stand in front of me and points to the droplets of water on my chest. “*Sure, you are.*”

We stare into each other’s eyes for a few beats, the air between us charged with desire. I wonder if she can sense how badly I want her. Does she know I jerked off in the shower while imagining her naked? If she does, she’s playing it coy. Or maybe my earlier rejection muted her response to me.

I step closer, warmed by her body heat. What would happen if I dropped the towel I’m wearing? Would she touch me? Slide those delicate fingers up and down my cock?

I clear my throat to keep from begging her to put her hands on me. “You never answered my question.”

“Because I don’t recall hearing an answer to mine.” She arches a perfect eyebrow. “Unless I missed it?”

“I asked first.”

“You’re an overgrown toddler, Henry Flynn,” she says with an exasperated sigh.

“Heard that before.”

She narrows her eyes. “You want my answer first? Fine. Yes, I’m going to dance for a client.”

Everything inside me tightens like a coiled spring. “Why?”

“Because I’d rather spend my time on someone who *wants* my company. Even if it’s only virtually. So, if you don’t mind, I need to go change.” She steps around me and heads for the staircase.

Wait. Don’t go. I want your company.

The pleas circle my mind, but I don’t voice them. The fact remains, she’s the heir to Frederic Punzel’s fortune, and I’m a nobody who delivers packages.

She hesitates at the bottom of the stairs like she’s waiting for me to stop her, but the words lodge themselves in my throat. I know better than to start something I have no business finishing.

Rowan glances over her shoulder with a defeated sigh. “Have a good night, Henry. Please lock the door on your way out.”

“Night,” I grumble, studying the tube of ointment I’m holding like it can end world hunger. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You’re welcome.” Her retreating footsteps make my chest hurt, but I don’t dare stop her. It’s better this way. No sense aching for something I can’t have.

I snatch the clothes and first-aid shit, then return to the bathroom. After angrily cleaning the scratches on my arms and sides, I put on the too-snug clothes Rowan let me borrow. The stupid T-shirt has “Book Boyfriend” emblazoned across the chest. Is that what women want? Fictional men? If so, I’m fucked.

My work pants were thick enough that they kept Knife Feet from doing too much damage below the belt. He only broke the skin in one spot. My arms, however, are a shitshow, courtesy of the defensive pose I used to protect my face. Once finished, I gather my dirty clothes and leave the bathroom.

The kitchen is vacant again. Music drifts from overhead, and I clench my jaw, wishing I were the lucky bastard watching Rowan dance. Who am I kidding? Luck has never favored me. My military career would still be intact if I hadn’t been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the dark memories and step into my boots. I can’t go down that road. The last thing I need is to make my shitty mood worse. I slide my jacket on, tugging the zipper to my throat. Even through the thick door I can hear the howling wind. I’m sure the roads are an icy fucking mess.

Now that the adrenaline has worn off, I’m exhausted. I need to get home

and go the fuck to bed.

Opening the door, I step into the elements with a curse. It snowed a few inches since I arrived, which will make the drive home even shittier. I trudge across the property and slip through the front gate, then make the trek to where I parked halfway down the mountain.

I finally reach my stupid truck after falling on my ass twice. Now I'm cold, wet, sexually frustrated, and pissed off. Sliding into the frigid cab, I shove my keys into the ignition and turn.

Nothing happens.

“What the fuck?” I try again, but the engine doesn't even click. I give it a few more attempts, then bang my forehead on the steering wheel. “You've gotta be fucking kidding me.”

The battery is dead. No, deader than dead. Why? Because I'm the world's biggest jackass.

I scarfed down a sandwich at lunchtime. As usual, I didn't take any breaks all afternoon into the evening. When I arrived at Rowan's, I checked the mirror to make sure I had no lettuce in my teeth before heading to her door. Since the tree cover made it too dark to see, I flicked on the interior light. Apparently, I forgot to turn the goddamn thing off.

I shove my hand into my jacket pocket for my phone. It's not in there. “Son of a bitch.” I reach beneath my seat to feel around for it. Nothing.

Now I'm sitting in a dark, disabled—and cold as fuck—vehicle with no phone. I can't walk back to town. It's too far.

Which leaves me only one logical option.

ROWAN

Mood Music: “River” by Bishop Briggs

“WELL, Thor, it looks like it’s you and me tonight.” I pull my beloved golden vibrator from the antique cabinet that holds my toys and twist the base to check its battery status. Strong vibrations pulse through my hand. “At least one of us is ready,” I mutter, carrying the god of thunder across the room. Releasing a weary sigh, I toss it onto the pile with the rest of tonight’s props.

Mr. Maximus logged in earlier to request a private show. Even though the last thing I feel like doing right now is dancing, since Henry so rudely interrupted our session yesterday morning, I figure I owe Mr. Maximus some of my time.

My computer pings with a notification on Myst. I log in with my screen name and scan my inbox, clicking on the newest message.

Mr. Maximus: Ready when you are.

Lady Lionessa, my secret Myst persona, pays homage to my inner cat lady. I always wear my trademark gold cat mask, paired with something cheetah, leopard, or tiger print. I’ve made most of my own costumes, but I ordered the mask from a specialty shop online. The beauty of wearing a mask—aside from the anonymity it offers—is that I don’t need to worry about my makeup. Which is great because I already washed off what I applied this morning in anticipation of Henry’s arrival. I click on the dialog box and type my reply.

Lady Lionessa: Give me a few more minutes please.

Mr. Maximus: Take your time. I'm just happy to know you're all right.

I grimace, remembering how annoyed Esme sounded on the phone after learning I compromised the network. I wish Mr. Maximus hadn't left her those messages. At the same time, it's nice to feel like someone cares about my wellbeing.

Lady Lionessa: I'm so sorry about that. I forgot I had a friend coming over, and they arrived earlier than we'd discussed.

It's not a total lie. I did expect my friend—Tony, that is. His sexy replacement threw me for a loop. The thought of Henry makes me want to punch something. Or cry.

Rejection hurts more than I imagined it would. Although maybe I wouldn't feel so bothered by the way we left things if I hadn't been sequestered in my home for the past fifteen years. Despite how quickly it ended, it felt so wonderful to have company. Someone to talk to and share a meal with. To divulge secrets. Henry is the only person who knows I dance. For a split second, I could've sworn I saw jealousy written on his features. But I must have been mistaken.

I quickly weave my hair into a braid and secure it with an elastic, then slip into the tiger print bodysuit I've chosen. I'm keeping it simple tonight because I don't have the energy to deal with pasties or nipple tassels.

I scroll through my Spotify playlists in search of mood music. Mr. Maximus likes when I dance to hypnotic beats with a heavy bass rhythm, so I select the playlist that starts with "Remain Nameless" by Florence + The Machine. The lyrics feel appropriate for my mood.

Cranking the volume, I tilt the screen and prepare my cameras. Now that my technology is ready to go, I dim the overhead light. When setting up for a performance it's important to "create the vibe" as Esme always says. Tonight's vibe is sadness. I flick the switch that controls the colorful spotlights I ordered and slide the setting to blue. After a few deep breaths, I restart the song using the remote on my dresser.

Closing my eyes, I start to move. Then switch to a live stream.

"You with me, Mr. Maximus?" I say to the empty room.

"I'm here." His smooth, cultured voice filters through the nearby speaker. "You look beautiful tonight." I've never seen the man—and have no clue who he is—but he sounds hot as fuck. I always imagine him as a lonely CEO,

or a powerful monarch, but he could be hideous and a hundred and ten years old for all I know. I'd rather indulge in the fantasy of him being a very important, obscenely gorgeous man.

"Thank you." I slowly move my hips to the music. "This song work for you?"

"It's more subdued than usual, but I like it."

Subdued. That's the perfect word for what I'm feeling.

I allow my emotions to flow through my limbs, turning and swaying, making sure to show him everything he wants to see. He's paying for this, after all. I'd hate to disappoint him. Again.

The song changes to Hozier's "Movement," and I lose myself in the singer's hypnotic voice.

"Touch yourself," Mr. Maximus commands. "It's been too long since I've heard your moans."

I wonder if he's in bed. Naked with his cock in his hand. The thought exhilarates me, making me trail my fingertips down my throat. "Like this?"

"Give me more."

A weird drum echoes in the background. I don't remember hearing it the last time I played this song. Then, as quickly as it came, it stops.

I slide my bodysuit's straps down over my shoulders in a slow tease, knowing it drives him crazy when I make him wait.

"That's it, sugar. Take it all off for me." Mr. Maximus's roughened voice tells me he's getting excited.

There goes the drum again. *What the hell?*

"Do you hear that?" I ask, motioning to the computer. "The song's doing something strange."

"Then switch songs."

"Good idea." I skip to the next track, "River" by Bishop Briggs. Since *Myst* is The River's network, I add this song to every playlist, even though there's no affiliation whatsoever.

"Better?" he asks.

"Much better." I resume my dance.

And it *is* an improvement over the last song. Even though the drums still sound a little off kilter. I glide around the room, gyrating my hips every time I get close to the camera.

"Yeah, just like that, sugar. Show me everything."

THWACK.

I shriek when something hits my window.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I think a bird flew into my window.” I head over, bracing myself for blood and guts. The last time this happened, my dad had to ask our gardener to put the creature out of its misery. I hope the poor thing died quickly instead of suffering.

THWACK.

I yelp when another one hits the glass. “Stupid animals need to watch where they’re flying. It’s not like this house is small.”

When I finally reach the window, I don’t find bird entrails. I frown at the clumps of snow sliding down the panes.

THWACK number three.

What the fuck is going on?

Wiping the fog, I peer through the glass and spot a dark figure standing on the front path. These aren’t suicidal birds hitting my window. Some asshole is throwing snowballs.

And something tells me I know *exactly* who that asshole might be.

“Mr. Maximus, I’m so sorry, but I need to check on these poor birds.” I disconnect the feed before he can respond.

Unlatching the window, I shove it upward and gasp when the frigid air hits me. “What the hell is your problem?”

“Maybe if you’d answer the fucking door, I wouldn’t have to pelt your window with snowballs,” Henry shouts, waving his arms wildly.

“Oh,” I say, when realization dawns. It wasn’t a rogue drum after all. “What do you want?”

“I need your help.”

“Why should I help you?” I fire back, my heart still racing from being startled.

“Because my truck won’t start, and I can’t find my phone.”

Both are very good reasons, but I feel like being petty. Not only did he shut me down earlier, but he interrupted my dance *again*. Mr. Maximus is probably furious. I’m sure he’s already on the phone with Esme. While I don’t know his identity, my boss has made it clear he’s a *very* powerful man. And I’ve crossed him twice.

“How is that my problem?”

“It’s fucking freezing out here, Rowan. Please let me in.”

Guilt tickles my spine with the desperation in his tone. Yes, he hurt my

feelings and pissed me off, but I'm not a mean person.

"I'll be right down." I close the window and relatch it, then slip the nightgown on over my bodysuit. Abandoning my mask on the dresser, I hurry downstairs and pull the door open.

"Thanks." Henry steps inside and stomps snow off his boots. With his flushed cheeks and the snowflakes melting in his dark hair, he looks like the angel of Christmas sex.

"What's wrong with your truck?"

"Battery's dead." He scans the kitchen. "Have you seen my phone? I thought maybe it fell out of my pocket when Knife Feet jumped me."

"No. I would've given it to you if I found it when I cleaned up."

"Fuck," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck.

I point to the phone on my wall. We've had a landline forever, and my father has no plans to get rid of it. "You can use mine."

"Thanks." He crosses the room and lifts the receiver, frowning as he dials. "How the hell did we remember all those numbers before cell phones became a thing?"

I shrug. "Address books?"

"Yeah, maybe. Hopefully, I got this right." Relief floods his face after a moment. "Austin, hey. It's Henry. Thank fuck you answered." He glances at me. "Yeah, I'm borrowing a friend's phone." A smirk curves his lips, and his ears turn a little red. "Yes, that one. Listen, man, I know it's late, but I really need your help. The battery on my truck shit the bed, I can't find my cell, and I'm stranded on the mountain. Is there any way you can come jump start me?" He nods. "Whenever works for you."

"Excuse me," I say, waving to get his attention. "Sorry to interrupt, but I have an idea."

"What's up?"

"Why don't you crash on my couch for the night and have your friend come in the morning? It's never a good idea to venture up our road in the dark. I've heard it's treacherous on a good day. And with all the ice..."

He covers the receiver with his hand. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I wouldn't offer if I did."

"Thank you." He addresses his friend, "Austin, I can wait until morning if that's better for you." He nods. "Perfect. Give me a time, and I'll be ready. Better yet, call me at this number when you're on your way. I appreciate it, man. I owe you one. Later." He hangs up and leans against the counter.

I tilt my head to the side. “Thought you didn’t have any friends?”

“Austin is one of the few. Probably the only one who’d even consider helping me out right now. He’s a great guy. We’re neighbors.”

“Where do you live?”

“In a secluded cabin in the woods.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Look who’s talking.”

“I guess that’s fair,” I say, moving closer to him. “You want some tea or cocoa?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks.”

Nodding, I point to his legs. “Why are your pants wet?”

“Slippery out there. Fell on my ass a few times.”

“You look really cold.”

“Good assessment, Princess.”

“Then let’s warm you up, shall we?”

Henry’s dark gaze burns into me. “What did you have in mind?”

HENRY

Mood Music: “Desire” by Calvin Harris and Sam Smith

ROWAN CLOSES the distance between us. “Well, I’ve got more dry clothes and plenty of blankets.”

Dry clothes and blankets. Right.

I tamp down the lust-fueled thoughts taking over my mind and focus on the practical solution she offered. “That works. Thank you.”

She points to the ceiling. “There’s a spare bed in my studio you’re welcome to use.”

“Should I be concerned about Knife Feet murdering me in my sleep?”

“No. I’ll make sure he’s confined to the laundry room. I’ll grab more clothes and a new toothbrush for you.” She tilts her head to the side. “Is there anything else you need from me?”

Your naked body. “I’m good. Thanks.”

She smiles and pats my arm. “Sleep well, Henry.”

“You too.”

“Oh, I’m not going to bed yet—I’ve got work to do. My client wasn’t too thrilled with the interruption. Don’t worry, I’ll keep the music down.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “No.”

“Excuse me?” She peers up at my face, and the look in her eyes tells me she knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Don’t call him back tonight.”

“But I have to. Mr. Maximus is a very important man.”

“Who the fuck is Mr. Maximus?” It sounds like a porn star’s stage name. She rolls her eyes. “Are you dense? He’s my client.”

I clench my jaw. “Right. But who *is* he?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I want to know.” *So I can kick his ass.* Who am I kidding? I’ve got no claim to her, and even if I did, it’s not in my nature to be one of those hotheaded dickwads who likes to start fights.

Rowan purses her pretty pink lips. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know. He’s a mystery. No one has any idea who he is. Except for Esme, I’m sure. Well, I’m not *actually* sure, but it would make sense if she did.” Her big green eyes meet mine. “She’s my boss.”

“Where do you work?”

“That’s classified. If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

I step closer to her, our bodies inches apart now. “Answer the question.”

Her eyes widen with my growled command. She hesitates for a moment, then whispers, “I work for The River.”

“What the hell is that? The Fish and Wildlife Commission?”

“No. The River is a water-themed pleasure spa—aka kink club—based in New York City. I’ve never been there, obviously, but I work remotely as a River Myst cam girl.”

“River Myst?”

“Oh my God. What’s wrong with me?” She grips the front of my shirt, her eyes widening into saucers. “No one is supposed to know anything about the cyber network. Most of the people who work there don’t even know it exists. Esme will kill me if I compromise Myst’s security. I’m so dead.” She releases me and spears her fingers into her hair. “Oh fuck. I’m so screwed. What if—”

I press my finger to her lips. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Thank you.” She nearly collapses with relief, bracing herself with a warm hand on my chest. “You’re a lifesaver. I don’t know what I’d do without that job.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep my mouth shut.” Then, because I’m the biggest asshole who ever lived, I add, “As long as you tell your *client* to fuck off.” *You’re mine tonight.*

“I can’t. He’s—”

“Then I guess *I* can’t make any guarantees...”

“What?” Fire flashes in her gaze with my lackadaisical shrug. “You’re seriously manipulating me?”

“That’s right, Princess.” I tap the tip of her nose. “I learned from the best.”

ROWAN

Mood Music: "Lioness" by Ashley Reed

I'M GOING to kill him.

How dare he threaten my job? If word gets out about Myst, Esme will fire me. Then she'll sue me for all I'm worth. The last thing I want to do is bring all sorts of negative media attention onto my father's company.

I jam my finger into the center of his chest. "You're a bastard."

"Don't forget asshole," he adds with a cocky smirk I want to slap off his face. "Wouldn't wanna leave that one out."

"I should toss *you* out in the snow and let you freeze to death."

"Go for it," he challenges, crossing his massive arms over his chest. "I've lived through worse."

The reminder of his history takes some of the wind out of my sails. Just a tiny breeze though. I'm still furious enough to blow down this tower.

I draw a few calming breaths. Now that I'm stuck with him for the night, I need to find my patience. Fast. "What do you want from me?"

His dark gaze burns into mine. "You go first."

"Really? We're doing that again? For the record, I asked first this time." When he doesn't respond, I heave an exasperated sigh. "Why is everything about you so obnoxious?"

There's no conviction in my words and he knows it. My armor weakens every minute I stand here with his focus riveted on me. That's what it's all

about. The one thing I've been missing. Attention. I may be one of the richest women in America, but I don't have shit.

I wave my hand back and forth in front of his face. "Hello? I asked you a question."

"Asshole and obnoxious go together like peas and carrots."

"I hate peas."

A slow grin curves his full lips. "How come? One too many under your mattress?"

I roll my eyes. "Enough with the princess comments."

Henry chuckles. "But you make it so easy."

Snatching my braid, I pull it in front of my shoulder and hold up the end. "Go ahead. Add in some Rapunzel jabs. You know you want to. 'Let down your golden hair, so I can climb into your tower and annoy the ever-loving shit out of you.'"

"Princess, if you want your hair pulled, just say the word."

A lightning bolt of desire fries what's left of my sanity. How is it possible this infuriating man knows one of my wildest fantasies? Is he in my head? Does he know how deeply I crave a man's touch? Fifteen years is a long time to go without physical connection.

Especially when you've never even been kissed.

"What word would I have to say?" The question tumbles out of my mouth before I can stop it, and I gasp when my words register in my head. Maybe it's my years of celibacy that dismantled my filter, or maybe I never had one to begin with. One thing is for damn sure, this man has an uncanny ability to make me voice my desires.

Which begs the question: is it sexual bravado, or do I actually have the nerve to act on them?

HENRY

Mood Music: "Movement" by Hozier

IF DESIRE COULD BE BOTTLED and sold, I'd make a fortune. It rolls off Rowan in waves, each one more powerful than the last. And so help me God, I'm ready to drown in that wide emerald gaze pinned to mine. Sink so deep inside her I forget to come up for air.

She smiles as if embracing her hot-as-fuck question. "What word does a girl have to say around here to get her hair pulled? Is there a checklist or something?"

I blink a few times. *She's fucking serious.*

"Answer me, Henry." She impatiently taps her foot. "I don't have the energy for guessing games."

"I'm looking for a green light, Princess. Tell me what you want from me."

I've never wanted a woman this badly. I'm rock hard. So turned on, I'm incandescent. All she needs to do is flip my switch.

"Make me feel something." Lust dilates her pupils as she clutches the front of my ridiculous shirt. "Put your hands on me. Pull my hair and slap my ass." She tightens her grip, digging her nails into my chest. "I want you to fuck me, Henry. Rail me against the wall like a hurricane rattles a screen door. Is that bright enough for you?"

Switch. Flipped.

I grab her around the waist and haul her body to my chest. Plush curves meet hard muscles, pouring gasoline on the fire raging inside me. My control hangs by a thread. It's been far too long since I last touched a woman. I stare into her eyes, giving her a fraction of a second to change her mind. When she doesn't, I seize her lips.

Rowan melts into me as I devour her mouth. Teeth clicking, tongues tangling, I kiss her deeper, harder, than I've ever kissed anyone.

She gives it right back, her tongue rubbing mine like a cat in heat. I spear one hand into the hair by the nape of her neck, loosening her braid until I've got a fistful of silky gold. *Pull my hair and slap my ass.* I tug the strands, angling her head the way I want it. She rewards me with a needy whimper.

In reality, I'm the one in need. I'd forgotten how good it feels to want and be wanted. Touch and be touched. For far too long I've neglected the hot-blooded man inside, allowing my trauma to freeze him. Not anymore. Flames lick my spine as I kiss Rowan with a desperation that is years in the making. Her soft moans fan those embers into an inferno of lust, ache, and need.

Releasing everything I've smothered beneath my pain.

I trail my free hand down her back, lingering just above the swell of her ass. I've never spanked a woman. Never really had the desire to. Right now? I want to toss this one over my knee and make her ass pink.

I swat the plump cheeks like she requested. Her moan reverberates to my dick.

So I do it again. And once more.

Rowan digs her nails into my skin and pulls me closer. Then she grinds her hips against my hard cock, and I detonate.

Growling, I back her against a nearby wall without breaking our kiss. I lean my full weight into her, expecting her to push me away. Instead, she rakes her nails down my back alongside the cat scratches she bandaged. Then she snags my lower lip between her teeth just hard enough to hurt. And fuck, the bite of pain turns me on even more.

I break the kiss and drag my tongue down her neck. "Careful, Princess." I nip her shoulder. "I bite back."

"I can handle you."

I kiss my way up her throat and bring my lips to her ear. "You might get more than you bargained for."

She digs her nails into my ass cheeks. "Prove it."

The beast inside me roars and pounds his chest. Princess Rowan likes it

rough. And I'm gonna give it to her.

ROWAN

Mood Music: "Worship" by Ari Abdul

OUR MOUTHS COLLIDE ONCE MORE. Henry grabs my ass and squeezes, grinding his hips. I moan when he angles my body to rub against his hard cock again.

"You like that?" he asks between kisses.

"Yes."

"Good." He slides his grip to my breasts, cupping them through my nightgown, then rubs circles on my nipples. "How about this?"

My knees buckle. "Oh, God, yes. Don't stop."

"Why do you still have clothes on?" He shoves the flannel material up over my hips without waiting for my reply, then suddenly freezes. He pulls back to stare at my face. Disbelief colors his deep brown eyes. "Are you seriously wearing a onesie under this?"

"It's called a bodysuit, dummy."

His gaze travels down my tiger print torso, lingering between my legs. "Call it whatever the fuck you like. I want it off."

"So, take it off me."

"Say less." He lifts my arms over my head and unceremoniously yanks on the sleeves of my nightgown like he's trying to strip a mannequin.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Undressing you, Princess. Get with the program."

The thought of him removing my warm flannel in the drafty kitchen makes me shiver. Good thing he doesn't need to completely strip me to get what he wants.

"You really are dense." I grab one of his wrists and guide his hand to the row of snaps between my legs. "They're here for a reason."

I've listened to dozens of men orgasm on Myst. Maybe even hundreds. The feral growl that leaves Henry's chest is the hottest sound I've ever heard.

Instead of unsnapping me, he drops to his knees.

Clamping his hands on my thighs, he shoves my legs apart and buries his face between them. His breath heats the damp satin covering my pussy, and I gasp as the reality of what's happening finally hits me. I just had my first kiss, and he's already got his mouth places that have only ever seen my touch. I consider giving him a heads up but decide against it.

There's no way in hell I'm slowing him down.

Desperate to feel him closer, I spear my fingers into his thick, black hair and tug the strands. He tightens his hold on me and groans.

I've never felt like this. Equal parts vulnerable and powerful. To actually see a man—in the flesh—so wildly turned on by me, is a high I never imagined feeling. Before I can catch my breath, he uses his teeth to rip open the snaps.

Then he puts his mouth on me. All it takes is one swipe of his tongue.

Now he owns me.

Tightening his grip on my thighs, he licks me up and down in a slow tease. I have a collection of toys that simulate what he's doing. They don't compare. I'm discovering it feels a hell of a lot more intense when someone else pleasures you.

He flicks his tongue over my clit, licking and sucking with the enthusiasm of someone determined to savor every last drop of caramel in their ice cream bowl. It's too much. Too good. I squeeze his face between my thighs.

"Not happening, Princess." Henry lifts one of my legs and drapes it over his shoulder, spreading me wide open again. "This pussy is mine now. Mine to lick. Mine to fuck. Don't you dare close your legs."

My knees wobble with his possessive tone. "But I'm gonna fall."

"Won't let you." He peers from beneath a fringe of sinfully long lashes as he slides a finger inside me. Then another. He rubs places only Thor has ever touched, stroking and tantalizing me like he was born for the task.

Maybe this is my loneliness talking, but my silicone god of thunder

doesn't compare. Not even in all his golden, vibrating glory. None of my toys come close to what Henry is doing.

His tongue makes featherlight circles on my clit as he resumes his tease, much slower now. As soon as I get close to orgasming, he pulls back and kisses my inner thighs instead.

"Henry." I tug his hair, desperate to soothe the ache inside. "Please don't stop."

Increasing the pressure, he drags his tongue over my clit again but keeps his movements agonizingly slow. His eyes never leave my face as he licks and kisses like he's got all the time in the world. The leisurely pace is driving me insane. My orgasm hovers in the periphery, just out of reach. Right now, I'll do just about anything if he lets me come.

"I need..."

"Tell me." He curves his finger, massaging my G-spot in rhythm with his mouth.

"Oh, fuck. That feels so good," I whimper, bucking my hips. The bastard slows down even more, so I dig my nails into his scalp. "Please don't stop."

A devilish gleam lights his eyes. "I like it when you beg."

HENRY

Mood Music: “Lips on You” by Maroon 5

I’M AN ASSHOLE—THERE’S no questioning that—but so help me God, I’m loving the power shift. Hearing the moans and needy whimpers leaving Rowan’s lips is driving me insane in the best of ways. With her addictive sweetness, the way she’s clenching around my fingers, and the feel of her hands on me, there is nowhere I’d rather be than on my knees in front of her.

I could spend the rest of my life watching this woman unravel.

“Henry, please...” She bucks her hips, thrusting her pussy against my face. “I’m so close.”

Sealing my mouth over her, I gently suck her clit while teasing her with the tip of my tongue. I haven’t gone down on a woman since Chelsea, and that was years ago, so I wasn’t sure I’d remember how. Turns out eating pussy is like riding a bike. It’s satisfying to know I’ve still got it.

Rowan moans and tightens her hold on my hair. I take that as my signal to increase the pressure. She digs her heel into my back while her other leg buckles, but I hold her steady. Seeing her like this, pinned to the wall and spread open for me, is a fucking gift.

And it’s been a long fucking time since I unwrapped any presents.

“Henry,” she says on a gasp, grinding her sweet pussy on my face. “Oh, fuck.” She clenches around my fingers as I ramp up the intensity.

Then she detonates.

She claws my head and bucks her hips, wailing my name like a naughty prayer. No joke, the woman is even more gorgeous when she comes. Her body pulses and spasms as I carry her through one orgasm right into another.

Then one more.

Nothing compares to this woman. Her taste. Her scent. How she calls out my name. I have never wanted anyone the way I crave her.

Rowan grabs my face to get my attention. “Fuck me.”

It suddenly dawns on me that I don’t have a condom. I got tested after my divorce because I thought Chelsea cheated. She didn’t. I was just a shitty husband. While I’m not worried about getting something from a woman who hasn’t left the house in fifteen years, I have no idea where Rowan stands on birth control.

“Got any condoms?”

She snorts, removing her leg from over my shoulder. “Yeah, six cases of them in my closet. You know, for all those gentleman callers I don’t get.”

“I’m serious.”

“No, Henry, I don’t have any condoms.” Her eyes meet mine as she steadies herself. “But if you need a green light, I’m on the pill, and I trust you.”

Greener words have never been spoken.

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Not Afraid Anymore” by Halsey

THE FERAL GLEAM in Henry’s eyes tells me he’s about to fuck my legs out from under me. I’m more than ready for that to happen. Like, yesterday.

Everything about him screams barely leashed. Forget leashes—I want to cut the animal inside him loose. I want him wild and untamed. I need to see him lose control.

With me.

When he rises to his full height and cages me in with his arms, I melt into a pool of lust. Nothing compares to the desire coursing through my body. All the clit ticklers in the world can’t compete with what his tongue just did. Now I’m ready to feel him inside me.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask, breathless.

“Are you sure you want this?” As he looms over me, his steady gaze is at odds with the gravel in his voice. “I need to hear you say it.”

“What part of ‘rail me like a hurricane rattles a screen door’ did you not understand?”

A low chuckle rumbles from his chest. “Oh, I understood you the first time, Princess. I just wanted to hear it again.”

I stand on my tiptoes and brush my lips over his mouth. “I’ll say it as many times as you want, as long as you fuck me.”

“Christ, Rowan. You’re killing me.” Henry shoves his borrowed

sweatpants down, freeing his cock. He closes the distance between us, and his rock-hard length presses into my belly. He's long. And *much* thicker than Thor.

"Wow," I whisper, meeting his gaze again. "You're impressive."

"Now you're giving me an ego." Snatching my wrist, he drags my hand up and down his shaft. He groans when I tighten my grip and continue to stroke him. "That feels so good. No one has touched me in a *long* fucking time."

"Same." More like never.

"How about we change that?"

"Yes, please." I weave my arms around his neck and slide my fingertips into his hair.

"Good answer." His lips meet mine in a scorching kiss as he lifts me by the thighs. "Wrap your legs around me." I do as I'm told, and Henry presses me against the wall like the hero in all my sexy fantasies. He reaches between us to line himself up. "Hold on tight, Princess." Kissing me once more, he slowly presses inside me.

Before I have the chance to acclimate to the mix of pleasure and pain, he slams his hips forward and fills me to the hilt.

"Oh, fuck," I cry out, digging my nails into the back of his neck as he moves. The intensity of each thrust takes my breath away until I can only gasp his name. "Henry."

Stilling his hips, he pulls back to look at my face. "You OK?"

"It's just...I need you to slow down a little."

"Thought you wanted a hurricane?"

"I do, but...this is my first time. I guess I'm not quite ready for that yet."

"Wait." Henry's eyes widen as he pulls out. "You're a virgin?"

"Yes. Well, I *was* five minutes ago, anyway."

"Seriously?"

I cock my head to the side. "Did you miss the part about how I haven't left the house in fifteen years?"

"No," he murmurs, clearly stunned out of the ability to give anything more than one-word responses.

"Well, that doesn't allow for much of a sex life. I mean, I've used toys—as you know—but I've never had *actual* sex before."

He blinks a few times before finally clearing his throat. "Rowan, that's the kind of thing you should tell a guy beforehand."

My heart sinks. “I didn’t wanna make it weird.” Which is exactly what I did by overestimating my ability to handle him. My bravado killed the perfect moment. He must think I’m pathetic now. I drop my gaze in shame.

“Hey. It doesn’t have to be weird.” He tilts my chin up and stares into my eyes. There’s no judgment in his, only concern. “But it does change things a little.”

“I don’t want it to change things.”

“Oh, but it does.” Brushing his thumb over my bottom lip, he adds, “Because now I need to make this extra memorable.”

“It’s already mem—”

“Going forward, you’ll compare every dick to mine, so I’m gonna make damn sure you don’t forget me. Let me show you how it feels to fuck a real man instead of a toy.” With his pants down around his ankles, he shuffle-carries me across the room, then settles on one of the kitchen chairs. The nightgown is still bunched around my waist. “Ride me, Princess.”

Being this close, face to face with my arms and legs wrapped around him and his hands tangled in my hair, feels like home. The comfort I’ve never experienced but spent years aching for. In Henry’s arms I’m not a weird, lonely recluse; I’m accepted. Maybe even cared for.

He kisses my neck and shoulders while I ease down onto his cock. Tightening his arms around me, he whispers, “That’s it. Take your time and do what feels good.”

I roll my hips, riding him in a slow grind. It doesn’t hurt anymore, even though he fills me more deeply than I could’ve imagined. But it’s the way his eyes lock with mine, like he can see into my soul, that unravels me.

It’s comforting to feel another person’s warmth and hear their breaths. To be held. That’s the thing about vibrators—they don’t hug you back. This is what I’ve been missing during all my years of solitude. Intimacy. Connection. I blink back the tears threatening to fill my eyes. Now isn’t the time for crying. I don’t want to waste a single second of this closeness.

Reaching between us, Henry massages my clit, making my hips jerk. “You like that?”

“Yes.” I gasp and cling to him.

He slides his other hand to my ass and gives it a squeeze before pulling me deeper into his lap. He rolls his hips, lazily rocking them to meet my downward thrusts. “You feel so good, Rowan.” His moans reignite me as he digs his fingertips into my ass cheeks and picks up his pace. “So fucking

good.”

“I want more. I’m ready for the hurricane.”

HENRY

Mood Music: “Blow” by Ed Sheeran, Chris Stapleton, & Bruno Mars

SHE’S NOT ready for a hurricane.

I kiss Rowan slow and deep before pulling back to meet her gaze. “How about a compromise?”

“What do you mean?” Her legs tremble on either side of me from the way I’m rubbing her clit.

I can tell she’s getting close, and I can’t wait to watch her fall apart again.

“Let’s start with a tropical storm.” I rise, lifting her with me, and pivot to face the kitchen table. “We can work our way up to a hurricane.” Without pulling out, I set her on the edge and stand between her legs. “Lie back for me.”

She follows my order and drags her nightgown and bodysuit up to show more skin.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” Gripping behind her thighs, I thrust at a leisurely pace. She’s wet, but tight. As much as I want to fuck her into next week, I need to control myself. She’s not ready for that.

Yet.

I still can’t believe she didn’t tell me she was a virgin. I would never have slammed into her so hard. I hope I didn’t hurt her. I focus on her face, watching for any signs of discomfort.

The sheer bliss transforming her features tells me she’s fine now, but I

need verbal confirmation.

“Rowan, look at me.” Her eyes meet mine. “Is this too much?”

“Not enough,” she says on a moan, wrapping her legs tighter around me. “Please go harder.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” She taps my hand that’s still massaging her clit. “I’m so fucking close.”

Desperate to watch her fall apart again, I double down on my efforts, thrusting in rhythm with my thumb. “Let go, Princess.”

A few more seconds and she spasms around me, wailing my name. I could make this woman come all fucking night. Her body’s grip on my cock is enough to drive me insane.

She grabs my ass and pulls me closer. “Give me more.”

Sweet fuck, she’s going to kill me.

“I’ll give you anything you want.” Pulling out briefly, I kick the sweatpants the rest of the way off, then climb onto the table. I brace my weight on my forearms and hover over her for a moment, taking everything in. Memorizing her. She’s gorgeous lying here beneath me, her big, green eyes pinned to mine. I don’t know if we’ll do this again, so I sure as fuck want to savor every moment.

Rowan has other plans though.

“What are you waiting for? Fuck me.”

Groaning, I slide back into her warm, tight body and start to move. Her moans echo through the kitchen. She tightens her legs around me and grips my ass to pull me deeper.

Sex never felt like this before. I lose myself to the sensations, each thrust making me a little more unhinged. A little more desperate. My control slips further, every time she moans my name.

I move faster. Each pounding thrust brings more ecstasy until I can’t fucking take any more. “Come for me,” I say on a low growl. “Because I can’t hold on much longer.”

Rowan clenches around me and bucks her hips, meeting me thrust for thrust, until she finally explodes. Her pussy’s spasms send me over the edge.

“Oh, fuck, Rowan. I’m coming, Princess.” I slam into her as my orgasm rockets through me. I come long and hard, pulsing and jerking inside her until I’ve given everything I’ve got. Then I collapse on top of her.

Her legs are still locked around me, as she strokes her fingertips up and

down my back with a tenderness I don't deserve but crave more of.

"You OK?" I whisper, praying I didn't take things too far for her first time.

"I think I like hurricane season."

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Cosmic Love” by Florence + The Machine

PUSSY AFTERSHOCKS ARE like sex souvenirs. Little pulsing remnants of an orgasm. Or in my case, multiple mind-blowing orgasms. I love how they ripple through me as echoes of the pleasure I experienced. I could get used to this whole “sex with a real man” thing.

Henry is still inside me, and I haven’t stopped stroking his back, even after several minutes. I’m savoring his warm weight on top of me, his heavy breathing, and my racing heart. It’s a pleasant contrast to the cold emptiness I’m used to. I could stay here all night.

He kisses my forehead. “You sure you’re OK?”

“Yes. More than.”

“Good.” He pulls out and hops off the table, then jumps into the sweatpants like he’s suddenly worried about me seeing his dick. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I sit up. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom,” he says, without turning to face me. He returns after a few moments with a wet washcloth and gently presses it between my thighs.

The warmth soothes me almost as much as his thoughtful gesture. “Thank you.”

He nods. “Make sure you pee. It’s important for women to do that after sex.”

I give him a thumbs-up. “Thanks for the health lesson.”

“I’m full of lessons,” he mutters, leaning against the table. “Most of them are about stuff no one should have to learn.” Shuddering, he clears his throat. “Anyway, I’m curious about something. Why are you on birth control if that was your first time?”

Heat rises into my cheeks. “Irregular cycle. Got tired of having my period twice a month. I’ve been on the pill for years.”

“Makes sense. How old are you, by the way?”

“Why do you ask?” I raise an eyebrow. “Now is a little late to make sure I’m above the legal age for consent, don’t you think?”

Panic flares in his eyes for a split second before he shakes his head. “I’m not worried about that. I know you’re over eighteen. Just answer the question.”

“Twenty-seven. You?”

“Forty next month.” Rubbing his jaw, he eyes me curiously. “So, there really wasn’t anyone else?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I want to know.”

I roll my eyes at his toddler-like response. “I expected an answer like that.”

He smirks. “Then why’d you ask?”

“Morbid curiosity, maybe?” I shrug. “Like I said, I haven’t left the property in fifteen years. Doesn’t make for much of a sex life.”

“Right. But what about before that?”

I cock my head to the side. “How many kids do you know that are having sex at twelve years old?”

“You’d be surprised. My sister’s a teacher. She’s told me all kinds of crazy shit. They start young, nowadays.”

“Well, I can assure you, I wasn’t one of those early bloomer kids. I played Barbies until I was fifteen.” I poke him in the center of his chest. “Aside from you, Thor was the only—” I clamp my mouth shut when I realize what I said.

“Who the hell is Thor?”

“The Norse god of thunder. Obviously.”

“Are we talking about an imaginary friend here? Or are you one of those people who fucks spirits?”

I heave an exasperated sigh. “You met Thor the other day. You know, my

sparkly boyfriend?”

He barks out a laugh. “You named your vibrator?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. It’s probably the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.” His smile widens. “Do you name all your toys?”

“Only my favorites. I named my clit tickler Apollo, and I have a pleasure wand that I call Loki. Mythology is one of my many interests. Any other questions?”

“Yeah.” Henry moves to stand between my legs and grips the edge of the table on either side of me. “How did I measure up?”

“There’s no comparison.” When my brain registers the hurt written in his features, I cup his cheeks. “As in, I’d keep them locked in a drawer forever if I could have you instead.”

He stares into my eyes for an eternity before speaking, and the sadness in his gaze takes my breath away. “Forever’s don’t happen for me.”

“You can’t say that—”

“Oh, but I can. History doesn’t lie.” He straightens, and my hands drop into my lap. “Your studio is that door on the landing, right?”

I blink a few times, confused. “Yeah, why?”

“I’m going to bed.”

I hop down from the table. “You don’t have to sleep in my studio. I have a queen-sized bed. There’s no need for the prim and proper gentleman act. We’ve already had sex, for crying out loud.”

“I sleep alone, Rowan.” His tone makes it crystal clear there’s no room for discussion.

My heart sinks. He was my first kiss, and I just lost my fucking virginity to him, all in the span of one night. Here I thought maybe I could fall asleep in his arms. Apparently not.

I wrap myself in a hug. “Wow. OK. Sleep well, I guess.”

“You too.” He crosses the room and climbs the stairs without even a backward glance.

I blink back the tears threatening to fall. Anger, hurt, and humiliation battle for the upper hand. So much for the connection I thought I felt.

After hearing my studio door close, I trudge upstairs with heavy limbs and step into the shower. I let my emotions spill over once behind the safety of the glass. My tears fall freely as I lean against the cool tile, until I’m too

exhausted to keep rehashing things in my mind.

I wash myself on autopilot, then dry off and put on jammies. After brushing my teeth, I check on Eugene in the laundry room. He's sound asleep in a basket full of clean clothes. Great. Now I'll have cat hair all over everything. Not that it matters—no one sees me, anyway. Sadness grips me again as I silently close the door and pad into my bedroom.

With a heavy sigh, I climb into bed and hug my spare pillow. It's too bad pillows, like vibrators, don't hug you back. Maybe then I could forget about how much nicer it would have been to curl up with Henry instead. Who am I kidding? He got what he wanted, now I'm dismissed.

After all the day's insanity, sleep comes blissfully fast.

A LOUD CRASH jolts me awake. Shouts and more commotion follow. I bolt out of bed and snatch my baseball bat. The noise is coming from downstairs. Either someone broke in, or Eugene got out of the laundry room and attacked Henry again.

Taking the steps two at a time, I rush down to my studio and fling the door open. An anguished moan reaches my ears. Something hits the floor and shatters.

I feel around for the switch on the wall and flick on the light, then freeze. There's no home invasion, and the cat is still safely locked up. Henry, on the other hand, looks like a cornered raccoon. He's tangled in the sheets, on the floor between the bed and accent table I use as a nightstand. The table lies broken on its side, and the lamp and all the trinkets I keep on top are also in pieces. Little sharp bits litter the floor, making me wish I had my slippers.

I cautiously move deeper into the studio. "Henry, are you all right?"

He doesn't answer. His eyes dart wildly around the room. The sheen of sweat glistens on his skin. His chest heaves with his breaths, and every muscle is tensed for battle, but it's the desolate fear in his gaze that breaks my heart. I can't begin to imagine what kind of nightmare triggered such a violent response. This must be why he sleeps alone. He wasn't pushing me away to be a dick, he was protecting me.

"Henry," I repeat, approaching him in what I hope is a non-threatening way. "What can I do to help you?"

“Get out.”

HENRY

Mood Music: "Need the Sun to Break" by James Bay

"NOT HAPPENING." Rowan stands at the foot of the bed with her hands on her hips. "I own the place. Now, tell me what you need. Water? Food? Different clothes?"

What do I need?

I need my past to stop torturing me. I need a peaceful night's sleep. I need a shitload more therapy and probably some meds. A river of alcohol to drown in. Nothing that she can provide me. Right now, I'll settle for her not seeing me this way.

"I need you to leave."

"Like I said, I'm not going anywhere." She sits on the edge of the bed. "Do you want a hug?"

"No."

"Why not? Hugs always make me feel better. Probably because I never get them, so it feels like a treat when they happen."

I fling my arm toward the broken table and glass shit. "A hug won't fix this."

"I'm not worried about any of that stuff. I can always order some wood glue and a different lamp, then annoy you when you deliver it." She smiles and crawls up the bed toward the pillow. Scooting to the edge, she adds, "I'm making an executive decision."

“Rowan, I’m not in the moo—”

My words die on my lips when she slides off the bed. Straddling my lap, she wraps her arms around me and pulls my head into her chest.

“I’m sorry your past haunts you.” She kisses my forehead and pulls me closer, gently running her fingers through my hair. “I’d take it away if I could. I have no idea what you went through, but I know how it feels to fall apart. You are not alone.”

Her words crack something deep inside me. The validation I didn’t know I needed makes my eyes blur. I blink back the welling emotion, but a tear escapes to spite me. I was never a crier until my wife filed for divorce and abandoned the fucked-up shell of a man I’d become. The way Rowan is holding me, like she truly cares about my pain, is something Chelsea never gave me.

This must be what compassion feels like.

“Thank you,” I whisper, returning her embrace. I close my eyes and breathe in her scent as she massages away the tension in my neck and shoulders.

“No need to thank me. Trust me, hugging you is no hardship.”

With her arms and legs locked around me, we fit together like two pieces of the same puzzle. Not just any pieces though, but the final two needed to complete the picture. I don’t think I’ve ever felt whole—not even before my deployment—but here I am, wrapped in the arms of an angel who has no idea how deeply her kindness moves me. How is it that a woman I met yesterday has the power to put me back together? Rowan is the magic that turns a sparse, weathered evergreen into a Christmas tree. She’s the light and beauty to my darkness, and I can’t get enough of her.

“How come you don’t have a tree?” I ask, remembering the lack of decorations in her home.

She leans back to meet my gaze. “We have six, but they’re in my dad’s part of the house.”

“Six trees?”

“Yes. Dad loves Christmas, and it makes him happy to see the pretty lights and ornaments. He doesn’t get to partake in the town’s festivities anymore, so we put trees in the rooms he spends the most time in. Greta and I put them up right after Halloween. We usually leave them up until the beginning of February.”

I nod. “Nice. How come you don’t have one in your space though?”

“I learned early on that Eugene and Christmas trees don’t mix. He thinks he can climb them, and you’ve seen how huge he is. I got tired of all the broken ornaments.”

“Makes sense.”

“I thought he was in here attacking you. That’s why I came running.”

“Nope. That was all me.” Shame washes over me again. “Sorry for breaking your stuff.”

“It’s fine.” She rubs circles on my upper back. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Do I? Not really. Yet something about being tangled in her arms makes me want to divulge all my secrets.

“It’s a recurring nightmare. I rarely have a night without it.”

Her eyes soften. “From when you were a prisoner?”

“Yeah.” After a few moments of silence, I add, “I don’t think I’ll ever truly be free.”

“How can I help?”

“You’re already doing it, Princess.”

Rowan brushes the hair back from my face. “I want to do more. Let me help you heal. If that means talking about it, I’ll listen. If you don’t want to discuss it, that’s fine too.”

Chelsea never wanted to hear about my final days in active duty. *Keep the past in the past* was her motto. The therapists I saw at the VA helped, but they got paid. It was their job to listen to me. It’s hard to believe this sweet young woman wants me to weigh her down with my trauma.

“It’s a lot of dark, heavy shit, Rowan. I don’t want to lay all that on you.”

“Maybe talking about it will make things a little brighter and lighter.”

“Doubtful, but I appreciate the offer.”

“Talk to me, Henry. Let me carry some of your burden.”

I’m not sure if it’s the sincerity in her eyes, or the way she’s holding me, but I suddenly want to give her a glimpse into my mind. Maybe she’ll run away screaming. Maybe she won’t. Either way, it forces me to unpack some trauma. Hopefully, I can leave those pieces of me behind.

“I was what the Marines called a scout sniper. Things have changed recently, and there has been some platoon restructuring, but that’s another story. Anyway, I mainly did reconnaissance.”

“And shot some bad guys?”

“Yeah.” I don’t elaborate because she doesn’t need to know just how

many bad guys I've shot. I wish I could forget the number, but my days as a sniper still haunt me. "I was trailing a group of militants and feeding information to my commander. We had our sights set on one guy in particular. He'd masterminded several IED attacks that cost us good men. Anyway, I was closing in on his hideout when a kid wandered into the hot zone. He was maybe five or six, and I have no clue where he came from."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Right. I knew the area was rigged with explosives, and my battalion was formulating a plan of attack. The last thing I wanted was to see this little boy caught in the crossfire. I called him over to me—literally lured him with a melted candy bar like a fucking predator—and moved him to a more secure location. Once I was sure he was safe, I got back to my mission."

Rowan gnaws her lower lip. "Please tell me he *stayed* safe."

"He did. Or at least I think he did." I shrug, hoping the latter is true. "I didn't have time to worry about him."

"Why not?"

"I was...intercepted by hostiles." My insides seize up, but I draw a steadying breath. I've told my story before. Not often, but the words have left my lips. I can do it again. I think. "Ambushed is a better word for it. There were five of them. I didn't have time to react."

"Couldn't you fight back?"

There's the million-dollar question. I have always thought of myself as strong, so it kills me to admit I was powerless that day. Even though they got the upper hand by playing dirty.

"Maybe if they hadn't shot a paralytic into my neck."

"Wait." She clutches my shoulders, her beautiful face twisted into a mask of horror. "They *drugged* you?"

"Yep. Can't fight back if you can't move."

"Why didn't they just kill you?"

Most days I wish they had. I've spent years wishing I'd suffered a quick death instead of the shit I endured. I'd take a hundred bullets before reliving that nightmare. Except, thanks to PTSD, I get to revisit my darkest days on a nightly basis.

"Henry?" she whispers after silence stretches between us.

"I was more valuable to them alive because I had something they wanted."

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Surrounded” by Chantal Kreviazuk

THE HAUNTED LOOK in Henry’s eyes is a punch to my gut. I feel like a horrible person for making him tell me what happened to him. I should’ve left it alone, but I had to let my curiosity get the better of me.

I touch his cheek. “You don’t have to tell me the rest.”

“But I need you to understand why I am the way I am.”

“Not if it stresses you out, I don’t.”

He gestures to the broken furniture. “*That* was me stressed out. I’m fine now.” His deep brown eyes meet my gaze once more. “Anyway, I woke up in a dark room, tied to a chair. They knew I was a scout—which meant I had the intel they wanted. They beat the shit out of me, trying to get me to talk. When that didn’t work, they resorted to more gruesome measures. I’ll spare you the details, but their leader was handy with a knife. I went through two days of hell. Then they left me for dead. My battalion eventually located me, and I woke up in a hospital bed at Walter Reed in Maryland.”

Tears blur my eyes as I hug him tighter. “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“You know what the worst part is?” He doesn’t wait for my response. “I wake up with sleep paralysis and literally can’t fucking move. The waking hallucinations are so goddamn vivid I can’t rationalize my way out. Suddenly I’m right back in that sweltering room at the mercy of those monsters.”

My heart breaks for him. I can't fathom his fear and pain, and I'll do anything to make him forget. Several minutes pass while we hold each other in silence. I keep stroking his back and running my fingers through his hair, desperate to soothe him. Slowly, he relaxes and leans into my touch.

Then it suddenly dawns on me that he has to work in a few hours. It's already two o'clock. He's going to be exhausted.

"Come upstairs with me. You need some sleep. I'll deal with the mess in the morning."

He shakes his head. "Nope. Not happening. I'm staying down here. You've seen what I'm capable of. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm not worried about that."

A humorless laugh leaves his lips. "Well, *I* am."

"Don't worry. If you start throwing punches, I'll get Thor."

Henry lifts an eyebrow. "How's your vibrator gonna protect you?"

"It won't. But it could be kinda fun to have a buzzing boxing match. You never know, I might kick your ass with my good vibrations."

That earns me a genuine laugh. "You're too much." He tightens his arms around me and runs his hands through my hair. "Thanks for forcing your hug on me."

I'll hug you anytime you want. "You're welcome. Now, come up to bed. I'll try not to accost you." I shimmy in his lap and flash him a wink.

"Don't try too hard," he murmurs, peering into my eyes. "I might enjoy being accosted by you." With his pupils blown wide open, there's no mistaking the lust in his gaze. Or the hardening cock I'm straddling.

"Is that an invitation?" I roll my hips in a slow tease.

"Fuck yeah, it is," he hisses as I grind against him. He slides his hands to my ass and pulls me deeper into his lap. "Ride me again, Princess."

I reach between us and rub him through his pants. "I'll do whatever you want if you come to bed with me. *And* stay there until morning."

"Rowan," he groans, squeezing my ass. "I need you."

I kiss his neck and bring my lips to his ear, gently nibbling his lobe. "You can have me, in any position, for as many times as you want, but only if you agree to my terms."

"Fine. You win." He bunches my nightgown up around my waist and yanks my panties aside, then shoves his waistband down to free himself. "Now, negotiate your pretty pussy onto my dick before I lose my fucking mind."

HENRY

Mood music: "Power Over Me" by Dermot Kennedy

THIS MUST BE what heaven feels like.

I close my eyes as Rowan eases down onto me. Her breath catches, and she clings to my shoulders. I groan into her neck, kissing and sucking every inch of skin I can reach. Raw from everything that happened tonight, I can't get her close enough.

Moaning, she takes all of me in, but I need more. Desperation floods my veins. In less than forty-eight hours, Rowan has woven herself into my soul. I need to be just as deep inside her.

I clutch her hips, thrusting my cock to meet her downward strokes. But it's still not enough.

"Henry, you feel so good." She digs her nails into my back and lifts her head, exposing more of her throat to me.

I kiss her neck and shoulders. Her collarbone. Her jawline. Then I palm the back of her head and pull her lips to mine. Fusing our mouths together, I kiss her with everything I've got. With everything I am. I don't know where this is headed, but I never want it to stop.

Rowan runs her fingers through my hair, the gentle touch at odds with the passion in her kiss. I've never felt this wanted. This secure. With her I'm not just damaged goods. I'm intact.

We both groan when she circles her hips. Her movement becomes faster

and more erratic, drawing me closer to the edge. I'm not sure how much longer I'll last, so I reach between us to rub her clit. Her inner muscles squeeze me, and she's so fucking hot and wet, I'm ready to lose it.

"I'm so close," she whimpers, bouncing on my cock.

"Me too, baby." I increase the pressure, massaging her in circles. "Let go for me."

Moaning, she clenches around me and digs her nails into my scalp. "Oh, fuck. I'm coming. *Henry.*"

The way she wails my name sends me over the edge. I slam my hips upward, again and again, until I fucking explode. The guttural groan that comes from me sounds more animal than man. That's what I am with her—feral. Hungry. Alive. A beast who wants to claim her as mine and *only* mine. The orgasm rockets through me in pulsing waves. I spill my soul into her as the realization that she *is* mine settles in my bones. Finally spent, I collapse against her.

"Wow. That was intense," she says on a gasp.

"Did I hurt you?" I mumble into her neck.

"No. Not at all." She wraps her arms around me and rests her head on my shoulder while I gently stroke her back.

We stay like that—locked together—until our breathing returns to normal.

Rowan straightens, and I lift my head to meet her gaze. Her eyes focus on mine. "Maybe sometime we can actually be naked for sex."

"Tell me when."

She flutters her eyelashes. "Anytime works for me."

"Am I turning you into a sex fiend, Princess?"

"Yes and no. I mean, I've always had a healthy libido—obviously—how else would I be able to work for The River? Anyway, it's great to finally use it. In the flesh, that is."

My muscles tense as visions of her dancing for other men float through my mind. She's mine, but who am I to claim her? I'm nothing more than an old, fucked-up, asshole with more baggage than the RPS warehouse. She can have any man she wants.

What if this is just sex for her? *Am I the only one who feels something?* The pain of that thought burns me. I clench my jaw, forcing a calm I don't feel.

She notices, of course.

“What’s wrong?” She tilts her head to the side, studying me.

“Nothing.”

“I call bullshit.”

I grip her shoulders and lift her off me, setting her back on the bed. “Call it whatever you want, Princess. It’s time to sleep.” I tuck my cock back into my pants and climb to my feet. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, you’re actually coming with?” she asks, like she’s genuinely shocked.

“We made a bargain, didn’t we?”

She narrows her eyes. “Yeah, but you’re pushing me away like you did last time, so I kinda figured you were gonna renege on your end.”

“I didn’t push you away.”

“Again, my bullshit meter is at capacity.” Rowan stands and fixes her nightgown. “You definitely did, and you’re doing it again.” She props her hands on her hips. “Gotta tell you, it feels really shitty to be on the receiving end when you go all cold and distant after sex.”

“I didn’t go co—”

“It’s fine. Let’s drop it. I’ll see you upstairs.” She spins on her heel and heads for the door.

My legs eat the distance between us in two long strides. I snag her around the waist and haul her up against me, her back to my chest. “Let me make myself abundantly clear,” I growl at her ear as she gasps and clutches my forearm that’s wrapped around her. “Cold is the last thing I feel when I’m around you.”

She cranes her neck to look back at me. “If that’s the case, why are you so moody then? Aren’t most guys on cloud nine after sex?”

“I’m not most guys.”

“No kidding. You’re—”

“Am I distant? Yeah. I’ll give you that, but I swear it’s not you.” I release her and grip her shoulders, spinning her to face me once more. “Maybe I can’t find the fucking words to say what I wanna say. Maybe I don’t know how to handle what I’m feeling. Maybe I have no business wanting the things I want. Did you ever stop to think that there’s more going on beneath the surface?”

“No. I guess I didn’t.” Her throat moves on a swallow as she stares up at me with so much need in her gaze, my chest tightens. “What do you want, Henry?”

You. I want you in my arms forever.

“I’m still figuring that out.” I drag my hand over my face and release a harsh exhale. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

“It’s OK,” she whispers. Squaring her shoulders, she lifts her chin and nods to the door. “Let’s get some sleep.”

I follow her upstairs in silence, pausing at the edge of her bed while she disappears into the bathroom. While she freshens up, I study the artwork hanging on her purple walls. I knew she liked cats, but I guess I didn’t realize just how much. There’s a framed painting of Knife Feet dressed in a three-piece suit, complete with a fucking top hat. It’s utterly ridiculous that she commissioned a portrait of her asshole cat wearing clothes, yet somehow, it’s a little cute. The quirky oddity is so very Rowan.

I look up when she reenters the room—dressed in a T-shirt and panties instead of the flannel nightgown she had on. “You good?”

“Yes.” She flops onto her bed. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Shrugging, I point to the mattress. “Are you sure—”

“Shut up and get in.” She slides between the sheets and moves over to make room for me. I settle beside her, and she pulls the covers up to our chins, releasing a blissful sigh. “This is nice. I’ve never slept with anyone before. Like, *actual* sleep, not sex.”

“I know what you meant.”

She rolls onto her side and drapes her arm and leg over me. I slide my arm around her and pull her closer. She fits perfectly by my side. I never want to leave her.

“No one has ever held me in my sleep,” she murmurs, snuggling into me.

“No one has ever punched you in your sleep either, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I say it as a joke, but the very real possibility of hurting her turns my stomach.

“I’m not afraid of you.” She slips her hand beneath my shirt’s hemline and strokes my abdomen and chest like she’s petting a lion. “Actually, you know what I think?”

“Hmm?” Even though it isn’t sexual right now, her touch steals my ability to form words. Especially when she lightly traces her fingertips over my scar.

“I think your biggest fear is yourself.”

“Because I know the shit inside my head.”

“True.” She flattens her palm on my chest, directly over my heart. “But I

think I'm starting to figure out what's happening in here."

SOMETHING CHIMES IN THE DISTANCE. It doesn't sound like the other birds chirping in the nearby trees as I paddle the boat across the lake. Leaves rustle in the gentle breeze, and I'm warm. Comfortable. Relaxed. The chime cuts through the tranquil silence again.

"Stupid phone," a woman says.

I look from side to side, but there's no one there. I must be dreaming. Except, there's no pain. There's no fire. No guns and knives. No fear. Only peace.

The chime happens a third time, making my eyelids flutter. I blink myself awake as a feminine arm reaches across me to snatch the ringing phone from the nightstand. Rowan. I'm not in a boat on a lake, I'm tangled in her satin sheets.

"Hello?" Her groggy voice reaches my ears. "Yes, he's right here. May I tell him who's calling?" It's silent for a moment. Then she shrieks.

I bolt upright and clutch my chest. "You just scared the shit out of me, woman."

"Holy fuckballs! Are you kidding me?" she screeches into the phone before grabbing my face. "Henry, you didn't tell me you're friends with *the* Austin Pines! Oh my God, this is crazy!"

I usually forget he's famous. To me, he's just a regular dude. Her reaction tells me I vastly underestimated his appeal. She's clearly a "Piner." That's the cutesy term his superfans call themselves. She has probably been in his fan club since day one.

"Uh, yeah. He's a good guy." I clear my throat. "Can I have the phone please?"

"Can I please, please, *please* meet him when he comes to jump your truck?" she whisper-shouts, handing over the phone with stars in her eyes.

"I'll, uh, see what I can do." She claps and bounces in place as I turn my attention to Austin. "Hey, man."

His low chuckle rumbles through the phone. "Mornin', sleepyhead."

"Huh?" I glance at the clock on Rowan's nightstand. It's after eight. I'm usually in the warehouse by seven-thirty. "Holy fuck."

I'm going to be late. Joe will be fuming, but with all the shit he's been piling on my shoulders, I'm not overly concerned with him. My late arrival, however, means I'll likely be out delivering until ten o'clock. It's my own fault for not specifying a time with Austin beforehand.

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah, actually." Even after the nightmare, it was the best sleep I've had in years. Probably has something to do with the giddy woman beside me.

"Glad to hear it, man. Listen, I'm ready to head up there to help you, but you never gave me the address."

"Shit. Sorry." I rattle it off, then end the call.

"Well?" Rowan holds up both hands with her fingers crossed.

"I'll ask him when he gets here."

"But what if he says no?" She pouts, batting her eyelashes like I'm the ticket to Piner heaven.

"He won't." I stand and stretch, then head to the bathroom to shower. Thankfully, my uniform is clean and dry since she washed it after the Knife Feet fiasco. I glance over my shoulder at her. "Mind making some coffee, Princess?"

"I don't drink coffee. I bought one of those single-cup brewers so I can make it for Tony, but it turns out I forgot to get the pods."

"Fuck me," I say on a groan.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's fine, I'm just exhausted. I'll stop on my way to work."

"I wish you could spend the day with me instead."

"You and me both, Princess."

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Sirens” by Fleurie

HENRY PEERS out the window toward the front gate. “He’s here.”

My insides flutter with giddy excitement at the prospect of meeting my childhood celebrity crush. I can’t believe Henry is friends with Austin Pines.

While I was enamored with Austin for years, and his music got me through some difficult times, my feelings have changed as I’ve matured. I no longer imagine myself as Mrs. Austin Pines—those were my teen years—instead, I admire the hell out of him like a normal, grown-ass adult woman. I’m not going to act like an idiot fan girl. I’m fucking sophisticated. I think.

Besides, now that I’ve met Henry, he’s the star of all my fantasies.

I step into my snow boots and pull my coat on. Next comes my hat and mittens. “I’m ready,” I say, once I’ve wrapped my scarf around my neck.

The corners of Henry’s lips twitch into a smirk. “You do realize you’re gonna be outside for all of five minutes, right?”

“Your point?”

He gestures to my outerwear. “It’s overkill, Princess.”

“I don’t like being cold.” I step past him and pull the door open. “You coming?”

“Yeah.”

I struggle to keep stride with him as we make our way down the unshoveled path. “Jesus. Do you have to walk so fast?”

He chuckles. “This is my normal pace.”

“Sorry, not all of us are six feet tall.”

“I’m six-five, if you wanna be specific.” He waves to the black SUV idling outside the gate. “He was nice enough to pick me up here, so I didn’t have to wait in my cold-ass truck.”

The driver’s door opens, and out hops the one and only Austin. He’s even better looking in real life. I stifle a squeal and hustle after Henry to meet my teenage idol.

I collide with his back when he stops short. He glances over his shoulder at me. “Do I need to worry about you getting all stalkerish?”

“Of course not.” I catch the fleeting look of jealousy in his eyes, so I seize the opportunity to push his buttons. “Why do you ask? Is there something wrong, Sir Grumpypants?”

“No. Just making sure you don’t maul him. And I’m not grumpy,” he mumbles.

Austin walks around the front of his car. “Hey there. How y’all doin’?”

“He’s in a mood, but I’m wonderful, thank you.”

Austin grins and holds out his hand to me. “You must be Rowan.”

“I am.” I shake his hand a bit too enthusiastically—he’s Austin-fucking-Pines after all—then flush with embarrassment. “Sorry. I’ve been a fan since middle school.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry about. It’s a pleasure to meet you, darlin’.”

“Your music helped me during a really shitty time in my life.”

His warm smile reaches his eyes. “I’m so happy to hear that. Thank you for listening.” He nods toward Henry. “So, why’s he in a mood?”

“I’m not.” Henry crosses his arms over his chest and glowers.

“He’s tired. And I didn’t have any coffee to give him.” And he may or may not be slightly jealous.

“Sounds about right.” Austin chuckles and claps Henry on his shoulder. “What do you say, man? How about we get that truck started, so you can drag your sorry ass to work?”

“Good plan,” Henry grumbles, his scowl even deeper than before.

Austin glances between us. “I’ll give you two a minute alone. It was nice meetin’ you, Rowan.”

“You, too.” I wait until he’s out of earshot and poke Henry in the center of his chest. “No, seriously, what’s your problem?”

“Don’t have one.”

I roll my eyes. “If you’re jealous, just say so.”

“Maybe I am.” He shrugs, but his clenched jaw is far from the lackadaisical act he’s trying to pull off. “Doesn’t change anything.”

“Does this?” I grip his face and pull him in for a scorching kiss. Teeth clicking, tongues tangling, I give him everything I’ve got. We’re both panting when I finally pull back. “Better now?”

“Yeah.” His gaze darts to the growing bulge below his belt before meeting mine again. “Much better.”

“Good. Will I see you tonight?” *Please say yes.*

He grimaces. “Unless you’re having something delivered, probably not. I’m already running late, and I’m sure I’ll be out until midnight. I also need to get a new phone at some point because I have no fucking clue what happened to mine.”

Disappointment slumps my shoulders. “Oh, OK. That makes sense. Well, I hope your day goes smoothly.”

“Thanks.” He tilts my chin up. “Don’t worry, Princess. I’ll be back.”

Damn right you will. “Drive safely.” I stand on my tiptoes to kiss him again.

This time he deepens the kiss and tightens his arms around me in a bone-crushing hug. As much as I hate the thought of him leaving, I feel much better about where we stand. Exactly where that is? I don’t know. But I do know this: I’d spend an eternity in his arms.

EUGENE SNIFFS MY PILLOWS, growling and hissing when he catches Henry’s scent.

“You know what? Get over it.” I wave my finger at him. “I’m still angry with you. We don’t attack nice men who have dinner with Mommy. It’s not cool. Totally uncalled for. In fact, you’re not getting any catnip for a week, mister.”

Unfazed, he squints and settles on my pillow like he’s claiming me.

“Good thing you’re cute.”

I cross the room and plop into my desk chair, then log on to my computer. It’s too late to order something for delivery today, but I’m going to make damn sure Henry shows up on my doorstep tomorrow. I bring up my grocery

app and add coffee to my cart. Does he like French roast or Columbian? Since I have no clue about his coffee preferences, I order both. And a light roast too.

My laptop pings with a notification on Myst, so I sign-in to the network and check my new messages. There's one from Mr. Maximus. My stomach hits the floor when I remember how I ended our session last night. It's crazy how much can happen in less than twenty-four hours. I take a deep breath and open the message.

Mr. Maximus: How are the birds?

What birds? Shit. He's talking about the non-existent kamikaze window birds. I chew my lip and try to formulate a logical response.

Lady Lionessa: They died.

Mr. Maximus: Sorry to hear that. Did you bury them?

No, I gave them a Viking funeral.

Lady Lionessa: Yes. It took a long time because it was freezing out and the snow was deep.

Mr. Maximus: Couldn't you ask someone to help you dig?

Maybe if there was someone to ask.

Lady Lionessa No. I live alone.

Mr. Maximus: What about a neighbor?

"Stop being so fucking logical," I mutter, trying to remember how much I've told him about my personal life.

Lady Lionessa: They weren't home, so I had to deal with it myself.

Mr. Maximus: That sucks. Sorry. You should invest in some bird tape.

Lady Lionessa: I'm sorry, what?

Mr. Maximus: It's translucent reflective tape that you stick on the outside of your windows, so birds know there's a barrier.

Lady Lionessa: I'll get right on that. Thanks for the suggestion.

Mr. Maximus: I have another suggestion.

Lady Lionessa: And that is?

Mr. Maximus: Let's pick up where we left off last night.

Twelve hours ago, I would've jumped at the opportunity to distract myself. Right now? Guilt floods my system with the thought of undressing for him after everything that happened with Henry. While I don't know exactly where we stand, judging by his reaction to my excitement over meeting Austin, I'm sure Henry wouldn't appreciate it.

What does that mean for my Myst side hustle? I'm not dumb enough to quit a job for a guy I just met, but my whole reason for being a cam girl is companionship. If I can get that with Henry, do I still need to strip naked for strangers? No. I don't. But it's still too early to tell if what we share is sustainable, so it's in my best interest to hang on to my position for the time being.

Mr. Maximus: Hello?

Lady Lionessa: Today isn't good for me. I have some appointments.

Mr. Maximus: No problem. You let me know what works for you, and I'll make myself available.

Must be nice to have such a flexible schedule. Although, I don't exactly have bosses breathing down my neck either.

Lady Lionessa: Sounds good. Enjoy your day!

Mr. Maximus: You too. Buy some tape.

I sign out instead of replying. Even though I don't know Mr. Maximus, he seems like a nice man. I feel guilty for lying to him.

Oh, what a tangled web I weave.

HENRY

Mood Music: “Digital Get Down” by *NSYNC

A FLIP PHONE would’ve been acceptable, but I let the guy at the store talk me into the newest smart-whateverthefuck. When he asked if I’d backed up my contacts in their cloud, I laughed. My parents, sister, Austin, and work are the only numbers I need, and I know them by heart.

Too bad I never asked Rowan for her number.

I pace my living room, unsettled by the loneliness that clings to me. I’m used to being lonely, so why does it bother me so much tonight? Because I’ve had a taste of peace. I’d love nothing more than to curl up in bed with Rowan every night.

My new phone rings in my hand, startling me. I glance at the screen. It’s my sister. She’s not who I feel like talking to, but it’s better than being alone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Buzz. How’s it hanging?” Dahlia snorts. “Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t need those visuals, please and thank you.”

“What’s up, Dahl?”

“Just calling to chat. Did you make a decision yet?”

“About?”

“Christmas, dingus. You’ve had plenty of time to mull it over. Mom and Dad decided to book that stupid Caribbean cruise this year, so now I’m gonna be all alone.”

“Guilt trip, much?”

“I’m serious. You’re used to being lonely. Me? Not so much. I need you to spend time with me, so I don’t sink into the depths of Christmas despair.”

“I really don’t feel like flying to New York.”

“Then I’ll come to you.”

“And do what? Talk to the trees while I work?”

“Yup.” She cackles. “Might even hug them. Those Southern sugar maples are pretty damn sexy.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her ridiculousness. “You should see the beech trees.”

“Son of a beech, I’m in. I’ll book my flight. You can pick me up at the airport.”

“Don’t you have school? When does winter break start?”

“Not till the twenty-second, but I’m planning to come to you a few days prior. Probably Monday, the nineteenth. Then I’ll leave sometime between Christmas and New Years.”

I glance at my calendar. “You told me the district is short on subs. How will they cover your classes?”

“That’s a them problem.”

“Don’t jeopardize your job to spend time with my sorry ass.” While the last thing I feel like doing is celebrating Christmas, it’s comforting to know I won’t be alone to wallow in misery this year. Then again, I wonder if Rowan has plans for the holiday. I quickly extinguish the spark of hope that flares to life. I have nothing to offer her.

“Hellooooo?” Dahlia says.

“What?”

“I asked what you want for Christmas.”

“Sorry. Didn’t hear you. I don’t want anything.”

“Bullshit.”

I clench the phone in my hand. “Let me rephrase. You can’t give me what I want.”

AN HOUR CONVERSATION and far too many details later, I climb into bed. I made the mistake of telling Dahlia I slept with Rowan, then had to deal with

her hysterical laughter and vibrator puns. When will I learn to keep my mouth shut?

My phone chimes with a text. It's Dahlia—probably to antagonize me some more.

Dahlia: Hey, Buzz. I have an idea. It's brilliant and you can thank me later.

Henry: I'm listening.

Dahlia: You said Austin called her house this morning before picking you up. Why don't you text him and ask what number he called?

Henry: Fuck. I hadn't thought of that.

Dahlia: That's because they saved the brains in the family for me. You're welcome.

Henry: Thanks, Dahl. Love you.

Dahlia: Love you more. I'll send you my flight info when I book it.

I send a thumbs-up emoji instead of any real response. I guess my holiday plans are settled. In typical Dahlia fashion, she's coming whether I like it or not.

Truth be told, I don't hate the idea.

I tap out a text to Austin. He responds a few minutes later.

Austin: That escalated quickly.

Henry: Shut up and give me the number.

Austin: Only if I get a wedding invitation.

Henry: Won't be making THAT mistake again.

Austin: Never say never, my friend.

He texts me the number and I save it in my phone.

Henry: Thanks.

With a deep breath, I dial Rowan's number, praying it isn't too late to call her. Especially since I kept her up all night.

"Hello?"

"Evening, Princess."

"Henry!"

Her enthusiastic greeting makes me smile. "That's me."

"How are you? How was your day at work? I take it you got a new phone?"

"Good. Work's shitty, but that's nothing new." I rub my aching lower back. "Yeah, I got another one. Same number thankfully."

"That's great." A rustling noise reaches my ears. "Move it, Eugene. This

is my bed.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No. I was just lying here reading, but he thinks he owns every surface in this house, my pillow included.”

I want to tell her I’m jealous the tufted-eared fucker gets to be in bed with her right now. “How was your day?” I ask instead.

“Lonely and boring.” She sighs, and the sadness in that little gust of air tightens my chest. “But, to borrow your words, that’s nothing new.”

“Thank you again for letting me stay over last night. I’m sorry if I freaked you out.”

“You’re welcome. You didn’t freak me out. I hate that you suffer every night, and I wish I could comfort you all the time.”

Me too, Princess.

“Thanks.” I reach for the water bottle on my nightstand and twist open the cap. “How are you...uh, feeling?” I ask, taking a much-needed swig.

“Are you inquiring about my vagina?”

I choke on my water, coughing violently to clear it from my lungs. I didn’t think she’d see through my veiled question. Although it shouldn’t shock me because she’s nothing if not intuitive. Besides, what the fuck else would I be referring to? Either way, her bluntness threw me for a loop. Looks like she’s full of surprises.

Since last night was her first time—and the gentleman inside me knows I was far from gentle—I want to make sure I didn’t hurt her.

I finally stop sputtering and clear my throat. “Well, I, uh—”

“Because if that’s what you’re asking, I’m wonderful.”

Yes, you fucking are.

My dick twitches as visuals from her kitchen—and studio—taunt me. She felt so perfect in my arms. I’d give anything to hold her again. Kiss her. Fuck her. Hell, she’s even the kind of woman a man could make love to.

“Happy to hear that you’re all right.”

“I’m going to see you tomorrow,” she murmurs.

“Yeah?” I never know my stops until Joe hands over the list each morning.

“I placed a grocery order.”

“What if it doesn’t ship that fast?”

“Oh, it will. I paid for express delivery.”

I smirk at her matter-of-fact tone. “Why would you do a thing like that?”

“Because I’d do just about anything to spend more time with you.”

My chest tightens. Chelsea never wanted to deal with me after I returned from overseas—not that I can blame her—but this sweet, beautiful woman saw the ugliest parts of me and didn’t run away screaming.

“Really?” I need to make sure I heard her correctly. It doesn’t seem possible she’d want to shroud herself in my darkness.

“Yes, really. And just so you know, I’ve ordered a bunch of stuff for next week, so you’ll probably be here every day. I’d apologize for making you drive all the way up here, but I’m not sorry.”

“Princess, if you want me around, just say so. You don’t need to pay shipping for this package.”

She giggles at my pun. “Well played.”

A grin overtakes my face. “I try.”

“Speaking of packages…” There’s a sultry edge to her tone now. “It’s too bad you didn’t come over tonight.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I haven’t stopped thinking about you all day, and it’s gotten me a little, well, excited.”

“Makes two of us.” I glance at the clock, ready to jump into my truck and drive up there. “I could always—”

“But I have an idea you might enjoy.”

“I’m listening.”

“Does your new phone allow video calls?”

Oh, sweet fuck. “Yeah.”

“Good. I’ll call you back in five minutes. While you wait, I recommend you get naked.” She hangs up before I can respond.

My dick stands at full attention. I’m so turned on I could use it to hammer a nail into the wall. Jumping out of bed, I yank my clothes off and throw them across the room. Then I resettle, the cool sheets giving me goosebumps.

As promised, my phone rings exactly five minutes later. I press on the video icon next to Rowan’s name and smile when her face fills the screen.

She returns my smile. “You ready for me?”

“Fuck yeah, I am.”

“I’m going to put on some music to set the mood. Your job right now is to watch. I’ll let you know when it’s time to participate. Think you can handle that?”

I nod because if I speak, I’ll tell her how badly I want to fuck her. Right

now, I need to see what she's got up her sleeve.

She slowly backs away from the camera, giving me the view I've been craving. Dressed in lacy purple panties and a matching bra, with her long, golden hair flowing down to her ass, the woman is a fucking vision.

"You're so goddamn beautiful, Rowan."

"Thank you." She presses a button on the remote she's holding, and music drifts to my ears. "This song is called 'Come Here' by Sabrina Claudio, and I chose it just for you."

"Seriously? You were only gone for five minutes."

"I may or may not have planned our little encounter this afternoon while I was bored and lonely." She winks, sliding her bra straps down her shoulders, then cranks the volume. "Shut up and listen."

The seductive music wraps around me as she reaches behind her back to unhook her bra. I lose my breath when the purple lace drops to the floor. Her breasts are full and round with dusky pink nipples I want to suck on all night. She trails her fingertips down her neck, and I squeeze my new phone in a vise grip.

Rowan is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. It's crazy to think that I was lucky enough to kiss her lips and touch her perfect body. The fact that she let me sink deep inside her? A mathematical impossibility.

"What would you do to me if you were here right now?" She palms her breasts, brushing her thumbs back and forth across her nipples.

"Lick every fucking inch of you."

"I like that idea." She feathers her fingertips down her stomach and grips the waistband of her panties. "What else?"

"I'd fuck you, Princess. Hard and deep." My voice comes out on a low growl.

Rowan slides the panties down over her hips—slow enough to kill me—then lets them fall before stepping out of them. She turns in a circle, swaying her body to the music.

"How hard?" she asks, as she grazes her hand over her pussy.

"Hard enough to make you scream." Desire blurs my vision as she moves closer to the camera, then carries the desktop tripod over to her bed.

"How loud do you think you can make me scream?" She climbs onto her mattress and kneels in the center, then adjusts the tripod, repositioning the camera so it's aimed between her spread legs.

I nearly come at the sight of her slick pussy.

“Loud enough to make you hoarse for days.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

“Say it louder.”

“Yes!” At this point, I no longer recognize my own voice. Pure, animalistic lust floods my veins. Precum leaks from the tip of my cock and my balls ache. I’m strung tight and ready to snap.

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

I clench my jaw. “Touch yourself.”

“How?”

“Use your fingers. Tell me how wet you are.”

“I’m already soaked.” She slips her index finger inside and gently moves it in and out. “I wish you were here, Henry.”

“Me fucking too.” I watch, transfixed as she leisurely finger-fucks herself. “Add another one.”

Rowan immediately complies, gasping when her middle finger joins the party. “Feels so good.”

“That’s it, Princess. Let me see you fuck your hand.”

She moves faster. “Like this?”

“Rub your clit like I did last night.” I fist my bed sheets when her touch makes her moan. “I want you so fucking bad. God, Rowan, you’re killing me.”

“Just getting started.” She slowly withdraws her fingers, tilting the camera so I can see her face. “Now I’m gonna—”

“Wait. Before you do anything else, I need to see you taste yourself.” Eyes widening, she hesitates for a moment, but I’m not letting her off that easily. “C’mon, Princess. Lick those pretty fingers for me.”

She meets my gaze on the screen and sucks each finger into her mouth. I groan low in my chest. I’ve never seen anything so erotic, and I swear, I can almost taste her.

She leans to the side and reaches for something. When her hand comes back into view, she’s holding the glittery gold vibrator she threw at me. “You remember Thor?”

Insanely jealous of the silicone cock that’s about to be inside her, all I can manage is a grunt.

Rowan readjusts the camera so her pussy is all I can see, then slowly slides the vibrator in, moaning as it fills her. “All right, Henry, now you can

participate.”

My hand is wrapped around my cock in under a millisecond, and my first stroke nearly does me in. “Fuck.”

“Don’t come until I say you can.”

“No guarantees.”

She turns off the music. “Well, you’d better try. Your job right now is to focus on me. Listen and watch.” Gripping the toy’s gold balls, she starts to thrust. “OK, now match my rhythm.”

In the room’s sudden silence, I can hear everything from her panting breaths to her moans, to her pussy’s slick wetness coating the vibrator.

“Do it harder,” I growl.

She slams it inside and whimpers. “Oh, God...”

“Don’t fucking stop.” I squeeze my dick, roughly stroking it up and down to mimic her movements. My legs are shaking, I’m clenching every muscle in my body, and I can’t rip my eyes from the screen. Watching the gold length disappear inside her, bottoming out with every thrust, I’m no longer a man. I’m a goddamn animal. “Fuck that pussy, baby. Fuck it hard.”

“Oh, *Henry*.”

My eyelids flutter with the way she says my name. “I’m here, Princess.”

“I’m already close.”

“Me too. Turn it on.”

“I love when you’re bossy.” She twists the base, and a low hum reaches my ears. Her moans get louder.

“Put it on the highest setting.”

“I don’t know if I can handle—”

“Do it.”

She turns it up all the way. “Oh, Henry, fuck!” Hips bucking, thighs trembling, she moans and wails her pleasure. “I’m gonna come.”

Watching her wet pussy spasm around the toy, I stroke my cock like a madman. Because that’s what I am now. Feral and unhinged. She has me so lust-crazed, there’s not an ounce of sanity left. When I finally can’t hold back any longer, I follow her over the edge.

“Rowan, baby, fuck!” The guttural bellow comes from my toes as my dick jerks and spurts. My release hits my stomach, but I don’t give a fuck. The orgasm was otherworldly.

Rowan is a sex goddess.

“That was intense,” she says, gasping.

I grunt because I can't currently form words. Intense doesn't begin to describe it. I've never experienced anything like what we just did. Ever. It blew my mind to feel so connected with someone who wasn't even in the same room. Rowan can share her brand of interactive fantasy with me anytime. I thought she captivated me before. Well, now I'm fucking obsessed.

Her flushed face appears on the phone's screen. "You good?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't usually show my face during calls."

The elation racing through my body grinds to a screeching halt. She doesn't "usually" show her face. Right. I'm a fucking idiot. This was just another performance for her. Part of the routine. I'm not special—I'm just another cock in cyberspace. The pain of the realization makes it hard to breathe. The connection I felt—down to my fucking soul—was fraudulent.

My chest feels hollow, and I need a drink.

"I gotta go." I disconnect the call and toss my phone onto the nightstand.

Maybe if I stare at the ceiling for long enough, I'll be able to hold it together. Now that I'm alone in my silent room, I remember how easy it is to crumble.

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Kiss Me” (guitar version) by Dermot Kennedy

THE PORTRAIT I’m painting is coming together nicely. Good thing, since the other stuff I worked on today was a hot mess. Eugene got into my yarn this morning, and I still haven’t untangled it all. Then I spilled a container of teeny tiny seed beads, which fell into the cracks of my hardwood floor—ten minutes after I cleaned up the broken shit from last night.

Thanks to the chaos, I managed to distract myself from thoughts of Henry. Mostly. Who am I kidding? I’ve been moping all day. I can’t believe he ended our call so abruptly. Here I thought I was doing something special. Even virtually, I felt the connection between us, but I guess I imagined it. I tried to shrug off the hurt but failed miserably. That’s twice now I’ve cried myself to sleep over him.

My phone rings from where I have it propped on my easel. It’s my father.

“Hello?”

“Hello, my darling. How are you?”

Awful. “Great. Enjoying your vacation?”

“Very much so. In fact, that’s why I’m calling. Greta and I have decided to extend our trip by another week. We’ll be back two days before Christmas.”

That means another week of solitude. *Yay, me.*

“Oh, wow. OK. You must really be having fun.”

“We are. Her family is wonderful.” He clears his throat. “Have you gotten out of the house at all?”

“No.”

“You should go spend a day in town. They decorate it so beautifully for the holidays.”

“Dad, we’ve been over this.” Sighing, I run a hand over my face. “I don’t understand why you keep bringing it up.”

“Because I want you to live your life instead of watching it fly past.”

“I *am* living.” Sort of. If my pathetic existence can even be called that.

“There is so much more to life than what you’re experiencing.”

My phone beeps in my ear, signaling another incoming call. “Dad, I have to let you go. I think a customer is calling me.” It’s Esme, but I can’t refer to her as my boss because he doesn’t know about my kink club side hustle. “I love you.”

“Love you too, darling.”

I quickly switch calls. “Hello?”

“Rowan, baby. How are you doing?”

“I’m OK, and you?”

“Fabulous. Listen, I’m doing the payroll, and I noticed you haven’t logged many hours this week. Are you having trouble accessing the network?”

“No. It’s just, uh, I haven’t been feeling well. Super nauseous.”

“Have you gone to the doctor?”

“Not yet.” She doesn’t know I’m a recluse, and I’d like to keep it that way. “She didn’t have any openings this week.”

“Well, make sure they schedule something for you early next week. We need to get you feeling better and back online.”

My stomach does a flip flop at the thought of Myst. The last thing I want to do is perform for someone after Henry left me in the cold.

What happened last night wasn’t a performance. Yes, I made him watch while I did my thing, but it was nothing like what I do for my clients. Not only did he see my face—and have a front row seat to my vagina—but I let down my guard. Completely.

It’s not uncommon for me to fake an orgasm during a session. In fact, I’ve only had two real ones on Myst, and they were with Mr. Maximus. I wanted to give Henry more of me than I’ve given anyone else. Considering we’ve already had sex; I *have* given him all of me.

“Hello?” Esme’s voice cuts into my wallowing.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Your clients miss you, and we want to keep them happy, right?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“You take care of yourself, baby. Get some rest and eat bland foods. Talk to you next week.”

“OK, will do. Bye.” I end the call and slide off my stool onto the floor.

Resting my elbows on my bent knees, I hang my head in a mix of shame and sorrow. I need a distraction, and fast. A quick glance out the window tells me it’s flurrying. I loved the snow as a kid. I remember making snow angels with my friends in the town square. God, I miss having friends.

I beat back the memories before I dissolve into a blubbering mess. Crying didn’t serve me then, and it doesn’t now. I need a better distraction.

The falling snow gives me the perfect idea.

I LEAN against my front door and wipe the sweat off my brow. Who knew shoveling was such hard work? It wasn’t the first time I’ve shoveled in my life—I used to help my dad when I was a kid—but I don’t remember snow being this heavy. Of course, it probably has something to do with the fact that I let it accumulate and ice over for days, but that’s beside the point. Our snow removal guy had a knee replacement, so he’s currently out of commission. Since Dad doesn’t trust strangers on our property, he refuses to call someone else.

After clearing a wide path from the front gate to my door, and shoveling a trail to the main entrance, I’m exhausted. I need a hot shower and a cup of tea.

Propping the shovel outside my door, I stomp off my boots and head inside. The beef stew simmering in my crock pot greets my nose, making my stomach growl. As soon as I get cleaned up, I’ll fix myself a bowl.

I glance at the clock above the sink. It’s almost four. According to the tracking information my grocery app sent me, my delivery is en route. Even though Henry hurt my feelings last night, I’m still excited to see him. Which means I need to get moving in the shower department.

I wonder if he’ll have an explanation for his weird behavior. Or will he

pretend nothing happened? Either way, I have a bowl of stew and homemade brownies with his name on them.

After a much-needed shower, I slip into a comfy, flannel nightgown. This may be my inner recluse talking, but I figure it's late enough in the day for jammies. Now that I think about it, ninety-five percent of my wardrobe could be considered pajamas. I snag a hair tie and weave my hair into a loose braid, then head back downstairs to my kitchen. I feel like a new woman.

Grabbing my phone as I pass it, I peek at the screen to check my notifications. There's one from my grocery app.

Status: delivered.

I tap on the time stamp. My package arrived three minutes ago.

He was here and didn't fucking acknowledge me?

Furious, I shove my feet back into my snow boots and pull my jacket on, then rush outside. Frigid air chills my bare legs as I step around the giant boxes by my door and make a beeline for the front gate.

The RPS truck is still parked out front. The back door is wide open. Henry is hunched over a pile of boxes, separating them into two stacks. He slides one pile toward the front of the truck, then taps on his tablet a few times.

I slip through the gate and march up to the back of the truck. "Really?"

"Oh, hey." He picks up another box and curses under his breath.

"So, that's it? You're just gonna deliver my shit and leave?"

Henry slowly turns to face me, furrowing his brow. "That's literally my job description."

"You couldn't even knock?"

He sets the box he's holding on top of a different stack. "I *did* knock. You didn't answer the door. This delivery didn't need a signature, so I left it on your doorstep. I'm not seeing the problem here."

"You're not seeing the problem?" I grip the truck's filthy bumper. "Well, that's convenient of you."

"What's this about, Rowan?" He crosses his arms over his chest and peers down at me.

"You tell me. You're the one who acted weird last night."

His dark eyes burn into mine. "I wasn't the one acting."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it." He sighs heavily and points to his tablet. "Listen, I still have a bunch of stops to make. I'll see you, uh, whenever I see you."

His dismissal makes me want to punch something.

Instead, I climb into the back of his truck. “I don’t know what your problem is, but the mood swing bullshit is getting old.” I stop directly in front of him. “Did I do something to piss you off?”

“No,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not you. It’s me.”

“Now, *that’s* an original one.” I roll my eyes at his cop-out response. “I must’ve imagined our connection.”

His gaze snaps to mine. “No. You didn’t imagine it.”

“Then what the hell’s your problem?”

“Thank you for shoveling. Makes my job easier.”

“Answer the fucking question, Henry.”

He stares at my face for what feels like an eternity. “I don’t like to share.”

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, and when they do, I want to kick myself for not figuring it out sooner. It all makes sense now. He’s jealous.

“You’re referring to my side job?” In typical Henry fashion, he stays silent, but his conflicted expression tells me I hit the nail on the head. I step closer to him. “What makes you think you’re sharing?”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m not. I want to understand what’s going through your head. Because I *know* you were right there with me last night. Then it was like a switch flipped. Why?” When he doesn’t answer I grip the front of his jacket. “Did you think it was all an act or something?”

“Wasn’t it?” Pain flares in his eyes. “Isn’t that what you do for all the other men?”

Bingo.

“No, Henry. I perform for them. Nothing about last night was a performance. I only do what I do because I’m fucking lonely, and dancing provides the companionship I crave. It makes me feel connected. Now that we’ve gotten to know each other, I don’t want to dance for anyone but you.” I tighten my grip on his jacket. “You’re the only connection I need.”

I watch as realization dawns in his thick head.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he shuffles awkwardly and runs both hands over his face. “Shit,” he mutters, releasing a heavy sigh. “Fucking fuck.”

“Not the response I was looking for, but I’m beginning to get used to that with you.”

His gaze snaps to mine, regret twisting his expression. “I’m sorry for

being an asshole.”

“Which time?” I chirp, still salty over his moodiness.

“All of them.” He clenches his jaw. “I guess my divorce made me more insecure than I realized.”

“You think?”

He touches my cheek. “It’s not your fault. It wasn’t fair of me to project that shit onto you.”

“No, it wasn’t, but I understand why you’d feel insecure. Would it help if I quit?”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” he murmurs, shaking his head. His eyes meet mine once more and the longing in them hits me in the chest. “But I wouldn’t hate it if you did.”

“It’s settled, then. I’ll call Esme on Monday to resign.”

“Rowan, I’m sorry. I—”

I hold up my finger to silence him. “You can make it up to me with a hug.”

“That, I can definitely do.” He wraps his huge arms around me and pulls me close.

I melt into his embrace and rub circles on his lower back, desperate to have him closer. I never knew I was so affection-starved until I met him.

A gust of wind blasts us. Henry turns, shielding me from the cold. “Why’s your hair so wet?”

“Because I just got out of the shower after shoveling. That’s why I didn’t hear the door.”

“Makes sense.”

“Then I saw that you already left—seemingly in an attempt to avoid me—and I ran out here to give you a piece of my mind.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you, Princess.” His gaze lingers on my lips. “But you should go back inside. It’s too cold out here.”

“I have a better idea. Why don’t you come too, and we’ll have an early dinner? I made beef stew.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t. One of the other guys called out sick, so now I’m doing his route, Tony’s route, *and* mine. I still have a bunch of stops left.”

“I’ll pack some for you to eat on your way.”

He shakes his head. “Save it for the next time I’m here. The roads are still shitty. I can’t be driving around one-handed. The last thing I need to do is wreck the stupid truck.”

“OK, fine.” I stand on my tiptoes and press a kiss to his cheek. Then another because I can’t help myself.

Henry holds me even tighter and brushes his lips over my ear. “What are you doing to me, Rowan?”

“Decreasing your grump factor, I hope.”

“Good luck with that.” He laughs, his breath tickling my ear. “We’re heading in the right direction though.”

“There’s another direction I’d like to explore.” I slide my hand to the back of his neck and pull his lips to mine.

I kiss him like I’m starved for his taste. Like nothing exists but this moment, and I’ll die if I don’t feel his lips on mine. Groaning, he deepens the kiss and spears his hands into my damp braid, loosening it.

It’s so incredible to feel wanted. To have someone just as hungry for you as you are for them. It’s a high I don’t ever want to come down from.

Feeling suddenly empowered, I let my fingertips travel to his waistband, then make short work of unbuckling his belt. Desperation fuels the needy ache between my thighs. It’s almost too much to bear.

He breaks the kiss when I pop open the button on his pants. “What are you doing?”

“Figure it out.” I lower his zipper and grip his cock through his boxer briefs.

I love touching this man. He’s so thick and long. Rock hard and ready for me. It’s one thing to see his arousal, but to *feel* his response to me—to my touch—awakens a wantonness I didn’t know I was capable of. I give him a few strokes, slowly rubbing him up and down like I’ve got all the time in the world.

Then I sink to my knees.

His eyes widen. “Rowan.”

“Yes?” I tug his pants and boxers down, so his heavy cock springs free. Smiling up at him, I brush my lips along his length. “You were saying?”

“You don’t have to—”

I lick circles on the tip before taking him into my mouth. I start off slowly, kissing and licking him like a favored treat.

His breath hisses out of him. “Holy shit.”

Knowing he’s too big for my mouth alone, I grip the base of his cock and take him to the back of my throat. His hips jerk, the slew of curses racing from his lips enough to make a sailor blush.

Good. I want to watch him unravel. His eyes lock with mine as I peer up at him from beneath my lashes.

“Oh, fuck, yes.” He groans and braces himself against a stack of boxes.

Tightening my grip, I bob my head like I’ve done this a million times. While I’ve definitely had my share of bananas and popsicles in my mouth—to tease my Myst viewers, of course—this is my first time actually sucking a cock. I don’t really know what I’m doing, but he doesn’t seem to notice I’m a blowjob rookie.

“Feels so good.” Henry cups one side of my face, brushing his thumb over my cheek. The reverent look in his eyes makes me want to please him even more. “Rowan, you’re so beautiful on your knees for me.”

His praise emboldens the wanton creature I’ve become. Eager to ramp up the intensity, I increase my pace and suction, lightly grazing my teeth over him.

That does the trick.

Growling low in his chest, he grabs a fistful of my hair. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

My eyes water with how he’s pulling my hair and hitting the back of my throat. Sliding my free hand up his thigh, I reach around to squeeze his ass. He moans and thrusts his hips.

I suck him harder.

“Look at me.” He yanks my head back, so our gazes meet. “You’re mine, Princess.” My muffled response makes the feral gleam in his eyes burn hotter. “As much as I love seeing you swallow my dick, I want you on all fours.”

Holy fuck.

I release him with a pop. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Say it again.”

“Turn around and drape yourself over those boxes. I’m gonna fuck you like the naughty girl you are.” He waits until I obey him, then kneels behind me. Shoving my nightgown up to my waist, he tugs my panties down. “Lift for me so we can get these off.”

Facedown on top of a large cardboard box, the anticipation burns me up. I lift enough for him to remove my thong, loving the feel of his warm hands traveling down my legs.

I peek over my shoulder, and he flashes me a wicked grin, then stuffs the

scrap of silk in the pocket of his jacket. "This is mine now."

"For what purpose?"

"Don't worry about it." He nudges my legs apart. "Arch your back and spread wide for me."

"I like it when you're bossy. Makes me wanna push your buttons." I widen my knees and stick my ass out, then wiggle my hips. I gasp as his palm connects with my ass. The sting heats my skin, making me want more.

"Keep pushing me, Princess, and you won't sit for days." He slaps my ass again, then lightly brushes his fingertips over the offended cheek. "So pretty," he murmurs, continuing to spank me.

Each strike burns me hotter. Makes me a little crazier. I never thought I'd enjoy pain with my pleasure, but here I am, soaked and aching for him. I'm so turned on, I'm ready to beg.

"You like this?"

"Yes. Now, fuck me already." Moaning, I flex my hips back, desperate to feel him inside me.

A low chuckle rumbles in his chest. "You're a greedy little thing."

"Please, Henry. I want you."

"I'll give you anything you want, Princess." Moving closer, he presses just the head of his cock inside me. His palm lands on my ass again.

"Henry, oh my God." I claw the box in front of me. I'm probably digging my nails into somebody's Christmas package, but I don't care.

Holding on to my hips, he moves in short, teasing strokes, stretching and filling me. It's too much but not enough.

"Spread wider, baby."

I move my knees as far apart as I can, ready to sell my soul to feel him deep inside me.

"So beautiful," he whispers, no doubt admiring my pink ass. "I love being inside you." All I can do is moan as Henry grabs my messy braid and wraps it around his wrist. Digging his fingers into the fleshy part of my hip, he holds me in place for a few more shallow strokes. Then he tugs my head back. "You ready for me?"

"Yes." The word comes out on a whimper as tiny pinpricks of pain bloom on my scalp. It hurts just enough to excite me.

"Good girl." He draws his hips back, then slams into me, deeper than ever before.

"Henry," I wail, clinging to the box.

He leans forward, pressing his chest to my back, and kisses the side of my neck. “Want me to stop?”

“No.”

“Good answer.” He kisses me again, then straightens. “Hold on tight, Princess.”

HENRY

Mood Music: “Closer” by Nine Inch Nails

FERAL. That’s what I’ve become. My mind and body burn with the need to claim Rowan as mine.

My hips slap against her plush ass as I fuck her. Hard. Without a hint of restraint. Releasing her hair, I grip her shoulders to hold her in place. Every thrust unhinges me more.

A gust of wind swirls snowflakes into my truck—chilling my bare ass—but I don’t give a fuck. Not even an avalanche could stop me. I’ve never felt so alive.

She clenches around me, wailing my name as she claws at the floor. I move even faster. Suddenly, the box she’s lying on collapses, pitching her forward. I land on top of her with a grunt. The move forces my chaotic thrusts into a slow grind. Some distant part of my brain recognizes the fact that we’re damaging someone’s shit, but it’s not enough to make me stop.

Rolling my hips, I bury my face in her hair. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Please don’t stop.” Rowan squirms beneath me, panting. “I’m gonna come.”

“Let me hear you, Princess.”

A few more thrusts and she’s there.

She releases a throaty moan, spasming around me as wave after wave of pleasure slams through her. Her body’s grip on my cock and the way she’s

wailing my name send me over the edge.

The animal inside me takes over. Growling, I pound my cock inside her and come hard and fast. Each throbbing pulse releases my pent-up frustration and jealousy. I let go of every minute I spent wishing she were mine. All the angst, the yearning, pours out of me. I moan her name as the pain and fear from my past, retract their claws. The loneliness that clings to me fades. The demons that haunt my memories finally recede into the shadows. And for a moment, all the darkness leaves me.

I don't know shit about shit, but I do know this: I will do whatever it takes to stay in the light.

I fuck her until I'm dizzy. Until my thighs give out and all I can do is lie on top of her gasping. Neither of us move for several beats. The only sounds are the wind, our breathing, and...strange music.

"What the hell is that?" Craning her neck, she peers over her shoulder at me. "Do you hear something?"

"Yeah." It takes a moment for me to realize the muffled tune is coming from inside the box we're lying on. I pull out of her and scramble into a kneel, then tap her on the ass. "Get up."

Rowan slowly presses herself up to her elbows, then rolls to the side and scoots off the box. The music grows louder. Now that we're no longer on top of it, I can make out the words, and I know *exactly* what's in the box.

A mechanical voice sings, "Take me to the river."

I bark out a laugh. "That's fucking ironic."

Rowan eyes me. "What do you think it is?"

"It's one of those motion-sensor, singing fish that old guys like to hang up in their garages. You know, Big Mouth Billy Bass. You've seen them, right?"

Nodding, she giggles. "Not in person, but I know what you mean. I saw it on an episode of *The Office*." She tilts her head to the side. "Why's it ironic?"

"Because it's saying, 'Take me to the river,' and you just told me you're quitting your job at The River." And no sweeter words had ever been spoken.

Her eyes widen. "Do you think it's a sign or something?"

"I hope not." I meet her emerald gaze. "I kinda love the idea of having you all to myself."

She smiles. "Good thing I kinda love the idea of being all yours."

STRETCHING, I release a yawn that comes from my toes as I lean against the counter waiting for the coffee to brew. My machine has an automatic function, so I could technically have it ready when I wake, but I never remember to set the damn thing up at night.

It's Sunday morning. After over a hundred deliveries and wild truck sex, I finally stumbled into my bed at midnight. I'm beyond exhausted. My muscles ache from lifting heavy boxes. And likely from thrusting.

My cock twitches at the memory of Rowan on her knees for me. First, she deep throated me like a porn star, and then she let me bend her over a box and fuck her boneless. It was the most intense sexual encounter of my life, but what resonates even deeper was what happened after. Our exclusivity agreement. *I kinda love the idea of being all yours.*

It's been a long time since I tried my hand at a relationship. After my marriage disintegrated, I told myself I was destined to be alone. I metaphorically stuffed both hands in my pockets. Now that I've had a taste of what it's like to be cared for, I never want to let go of that feeling.

I want to do something to make the holidays special for Rowan. I need to show her how much I appreciate the home-cooked meal she forced on me last night. When I walked her back inside, she fixed me a bowl of beef stew and threatened to barricade the door if I didn't eat something before going out in the cold. Chelsea never did that kind of thing.

The more time I spend with Rowan, the more I realize maybe I wasn't the only one at fault in my failed marriage. Keeping us afloat was supposed to be a joint effort. Instead, I poured energy into a ship that was destined to sink. Rowan is the life raft I never saw coming.

She's bright, beautiful, and bold. Yet there's still so much of her mind I haven't explored. Why doesn't she leave the house? More importantly, how can I coax my sweet recluse out of her haven? She may be the billionaire in this equation, but I want to give this woman the world.

I scroll through the upcoming events listed on the Mistletoe Creek town website. Maybe if I can find something close to home, I can convince Rowan to join me on a date. Most people do the first date thing before they fuck, but the rest of my life is backward, so why shouldn't my courtship skills follow suit?

My work schedule is horrendous, but I'm usually off on Sundays. Next Sunday is a lantern festival at Queen's Orchard. It looks like there's going to be caroling, spiced hot cider made with apples from the orchard, and floating

lanterns. I'm not entirely sure where—or how—they plan to float them, but it sounds like an event Rowan might enjoy. My gaze lands on “horse-drawn carriage rides” and I smile. Sounds pretty fucking romantic to me.

Now all I need to do is convince her I'm worth leaving the house for.

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Finally // Beautiful Stranger” by Halsey

IT HAS BEEN A WHIRLWIND WEEK. Now that the last-minute holiday shoppers have realized they’re down to the wire, my shop is inundated with orders—especially for jewelry.

When I first started Rapunzel’s Tower Creations, I only planned to sell artwork. One day, I randomly listed a few necklaces I’d made and sold out of them right away. I made a few more, and the same thing happened. After the third time, I shifted my business model a smidgen. Even though I still sell paintings, clothing, and other crafts, jewelry remains the most profitable category. More importantly, the long days—and nights—working on beautiful things makes me feel like I have a purpose. If my beadwork, gemstone design, or hammered silver and gold can put a smile on another woman’s face, then I’ve done my part to make the world a little happier.

God knows we all need some holiday cheer.

Poor Henry shows up on my doorstep each day with all the stuff I ordered, then has to immediately reload his truck with outgoing boxes. He doesn’t seem to mind though.

He has stayed over every night since our delivery truck rendezvous. It was my time of the month, so we didn’t have any sex this week, but it was so comforting to fall asleep in his arms. I must have a similar effect on him because he’s only had one mild nightmare since the time in my studio. While

he hasn't fully made peace with his demons, he's making progress.

Last night, he and Eugene came to an understanding. By that, I mean, Eugene sat on the opposite end of the couch we'd curled up on to watch a movie and simply stared menacingly. It was the closest they'd gotten without him growling or hissing. I'll take it. I know they'll never be besties—Henry claims he's not a cat person—so I'll settle for tolerance.

While Esme wasn't thrilled about me quitting Myst, she understood my reasons. She surprised me by saying I'll always have a job there if I change my mind, and that I'm welcome to visit the club if I'm ever in New York City. There's a better chance of pigs flying, but I appreciate her offer. I don't miss dancing now that Henry is in my life. Not only does he fill the void I've had for over fifteen years, but he entertains me.

It's Saturday night. He's off tomorrow, and I can't wait to spend the entire day with him. I'll need that connection to get me through the week. The anniversary of my mother's passing looms ahead of me, darkening what little Christmas joy I've mustered. Tuesday marks sixteen years since we lost her. It will never be easy, but at least I have Henry to lean on this year.

Christmas is next Sunday. Dad and Greta will be home late Thursday night. That should give me enough time to paste on my happy face. While I love that he had the chance to go on vacation, it will be nice not to be alone in the house all day.

My phone rings, and I jump. Snatching it from the desk, I look at the screen. It's Henry.

"Hello?"

"Good evening, Princess." His deep voice makes my tummy flutter. "Do you need anything from town before I head up there?"

I picture everything that's inside my fridge. "No, I think I'm good. Thank you."

"I have a job for you then."

"What kind of job?"

"I'll be there in a half hour. Leave the door unlocked. I want you naked in bed when I get there."

Heat pools in my lower belly. "Is that so?"

"Thirty minutes." He hangs up.

I leap off my stool and rush into the bathroom for a quick shower. I already washed my hair and shaved my legs this morning, but I feel like I need to freshen up. After the world's fastest shower, I lock Eugene in the

laundry room and slide into bed.

I snatch the remote from my nightstand and scroll through my playlists in search of mood music. I have no idea what version of Henry will walk through that door. Will he be slow and gentle? Or will he let the animal inside him loose and fuck me silly again? The paradox gives me the perfect song. While it's an old one, "We Can Make Love" by SoMo is perfect for the occasion. Once the seductive tune is queued up, I pull the covers to my chin and wait.

Henry doesn't keep me waiting for long. The rumble of an engine sends the butterflies in my stomach into a tizzy. A few minutes later, I hear my front door open and close. In the eerie silence I can make out the sound of him stomping snow off his boots. Then the bottom step creaks.

Equal parts giddy and aroused, I wait for him to climb a few more steps, then start the music.

I lose my breath when he appears in the doorway. A wicked gleam lights his eyes as he prowls to the edge of my bed. He doesn't say a word, just slowly unbuttons his shirt. Sliding the material off his shoulders, he removes the red flannel and tosses it onto the floor. His gaze never leaves mine as he unbuckles his belt and slides the length of leather from its loops. Then he folds it in half and yanks it taut. The crack reverberates to my pussy, forcing a gasp to escape me.

I swallow against the jitters tightening my throat. "Are you going to use that on me?"

A diabolical smirk curves his lips. "Do you want me to?"

"I, um, well..." I chew my lower lip as my gaze darts from his face to the belt, then back again. "I'm not sure."

"Relax, Princess. I'm not gonna hit you with it."

My breath rushes out of me in relief. I don't think I could handle that level of intensity. Yet. "Good."

"Thought so." He tilts his head to the side. "When I ask you a question like that, I expect a truthful answer—not the one you think I want to hear."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just be honest." He tosses the belt on the floor by his shirt, then sheds his pants and boxers and crawls up the bed to me. "You gonna share those blankets?"

"Of course." I lift the covers so he can join me beneath them.

"You're warm," he says, settling on top of me. Propping himself on his

elbows, he studies my face. “And beautiful.”

Staring up into his eyes, it occurs to me how incredibly secure he makes me feel. I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, no harm will come to me while cocooned in the safety of his arms. Even all my years sequestered in my home never made me feel truly safe. There was always a hidden danger, some unknown evil lurking outside my walls. How can a man I’ve known for less than a month ease my fear?

“What are you thinking?” he asks, brushing the hair back from my face.

I think I love you. “I think you should kiss me.”

Henry cups my cheek and brings his mouth to mine. He kisses me softly at first. Then his hunger takes over. I part my lips for him. Our tongues slide, teeth click. He tangles his hand in my hair and devours me.

I pour my soul into it, telling him everything I’m not ready to say. This man is the haven I hoped for but never dreamed I’d find.

Between us, his hard cock rests against my belly. This is our first time completely naked together. Without a nightgown or T-shirt in my way, I can soak up his warmth. Needing him closer, I wrap my legs around him.

He groans into the kiss. “I’m trying to take it slow this time.”

“I don’t want slow.” I slide my hand down to grip his cock, guiding him between my legs. “I need you.”

Henry kisses my jaw, my neck, working his way down to my collarbone. His lips trail across my throat until they’re by my left ear. “Whatever you need, Princess.”

I moan when he eases his thick cock inside me, stretching and filling me like only he can. Tightening my arms and legs around him, I pull him closer. Deeper. If I could crawl inside him, I would. His lips meet mine again, each kiss fueling my desperation. I need him harder. Faster.

I just need more.

I slide both hands to his ass and squeeze. He thankfully takes the hint. His thrusts gain force and speed, making me moan. This is what I’ve ached for. Warmth. Security.

“I don’t ever want to lose you,” I whisper into his neck.

“Not going anywhere.” He kisses me slowly without losing his rhythm.

Every stroke makes me crave him more, but it’s the tenderness infused with his passion that does me in. Moaning, I clutch his back and flex my hips to meet him thrust for thrust. My insides coil tighter as the fire he started rages through me. Every part of me—mind, body, and soul—converge in a

river of need. Then he reaches between us to massage my clit.

It only takes a second for me to explode.

“*Henry.*” I arch off the bed as I come, dragging my nails down his back. Pleasure floods my system, and the wails coming out of me don’t sound like me at all.

“I love hearing you come,” he growls into my ear.

“I love you.” The statement leaves my lips before I can stop it.

Henry slams into me a few more times instead of responding. His body suddenly tenses, then he releases a guttural groan and fists the bed sheets. “Oh, fuck, baby. I’m coming.” He drives his cock into me, again and again, giving me all he’s got. Then he collapses on top of me in a heap.

“You’re crushing me.”

“Sorry.” He rolls to his side, pulling me with him, so my head lies on his heaving chest. “Better?”

“Much,” I say with a blissful sigh, snuggling closer.

Henry kisses my forehead and gently runs his fingers through my hair. The act makes my eyelids flutter. He keeps stroking me, his warmth and steady breathing like a wordless lullaby.

As sleep overtakes me, I swear I can hear him whisper, “I feel it too.”

HENRY

Mood Music: "Lose Control" by Teddy Swims

ROWAN WALTZES into the kitchen wearing my shirt and nothing else. Her bare legs conjure images of them wrapped around me last night. How she pulled me closer, deeper, with every thrust.

My dick twitches, and I shift position, forcing my thoughts in another direction. I need to let the woman wake up before I ravage her again. "Morning, Princess."

"Good morning. I can't believe you let me sleep until eleven."

"You obviously needed it." I gesture to the stove. "I made breakfast. Although it's brunch at this point."

She widens her eyes as she plops onto a stool at the island. "You cook?"

I chuckle at the disbelief in her voice. "I'm no Iron Chef, but yeah, I can cook a little. My mother made sure of it because she didn't want me to be one of those helpless idiots who makes his wife do everything. Not that it mattered much to my wife." I clear my throat. "Anyway, I hope you like omelets."

"I love them." She motions to the single cup brewer. "Did you see I bought you coffee pods?"

"Yes. Thank you. I need that shit to function." I fix her a plate and set it in front of her. "You want tea?"

"In a little bit, thanks." She bites into her omelet. "Wow."

“Good?”

“Delicious.” She finishes chewing and peers up at me. “What would you like to do today? We can binge something on Netflix if you want. Or I can give you a tour of the main house.”

“Actually, I have something planned.” I feel the Cheshire cat smile curving my lips. I’ve been plotting her surprise for days.

“Oh? And what might that be?”

I settle on the stool beside hers. “An outing.”

Her gaze darts to the window. “You mean a walk around the property?”

“No, I mean a real outing, Rowan. I want us to go somewhere and experience something new together. Like a date.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“You know I don’t leave the house.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Because I don’t.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“That’s not an answer. Tell me why you imprison yourself here.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m just trying to understand you.” I rub the back of my neck. “It’s frustrating that you’ve seen the darkest parts of me, but you can’t give me a simple explana—”

“Nothing about it is simple,” she snaps.

“OK, then spell it out for me.”

“You’re not hearing me, Henry.” Fire flashes in her eyes. “I *said* I don’t want to talk about it, and you’re trying to bulldoze me.”

“I’m not bulldozing you. I’m trying to have a conversation.”

“Like I said, I don’t want to talk about it.”

My chest deflates with a heavy sigh. “Have you always been this stubborn?”

Her nostrils flare. “Safeguarding my mental health does not equate to stubbornness.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Look, I’m sorry. I don’t wanna fight with you. I just thought we could go and actually *do* something for once.”

“Oh, so you’re already bored with me?” Tears well in her eyes, but she blinks them away. “Sorry I can’t be as interesting as everyone else.”

I run my hand over my face. “Rowan, please don’t cry. Forget I brought it up. I’m sorry I upset you. Netflix is fine. We don’t need to go see the stupid

floating lanterns. I just thought it would be festive.”

She stiffens, all the color draining from her cheeks. “I need you to leave.”

I blink. “Huh?”

“Get out.”

“What’s wrong?” If bewilderment could be bottled and sold, I’d be as rich as her.

“I said, get out.” The ice in her tone sends a chill down my spine. “Now.”

“Let’s talk about this,” I begin, moving in for a hug.

Rowan throws her arm out to block me. “Get. Out.”

I stare at her face as tears slide down her cheeks. I don’t know what the fuck set her off, but she’s dead serious. I can’t handle the thought of her being afraid of me, so I need to get the hell out of here, and fast.

“OK, I’m leaving.” I slowly climb to my feet and back away from her, then snatch my jacket and pull it on. She doesn’t even look at me as I step into my boots. “I’ll, uh, talk to you later, I guess.”

Rowan sits in stony silence with her back to me. No goodbye, no nothing. Her dismissal rips the scabs from my old wounds. I pull the door open and step outside, pausing in hopes she’ll come running.

She doesn’t.

My heart cracks down the center as I trudge through the melting snow to my truck. This is what happens when I let hope in. The darkness returns with a vengeance.

I drive home on autopilot. Austin’s car is in his driveway. It’s weird he’d be here so close to Christmas. Without thinking I park behind him and go to his door. I should leave the poor guy alone, but that would mean *being* alone.

I knock and look into the hidden camera, so he knows it’s me.

He pulls the door open a few moments later. “Hey, man. You OK?”

“Not really. You got a minute?”

“Of course.” He steps aside and holds the door for me, then secures it behind us. “Talk to me.”

“I fucked things up.”

“You mean with Rowan?”

“Yeah.” I plop onto his couch. “She kicked me out.”

“Damn.” He grimaces. “Want a beer?”

“Please.”

“Be right back.” He heads into the kitchen, then returns with two bottles of beer and cracks them open. He hands one to me. “So, were you an asshole

or something?”

“The opposite, actually.” I quickly fill him in on my plan and Rowan’s reaction—well, overreaction—to it.

Like always, Austin listens without judgment, simply nodding now and then.

“You know what I think?” he says, once I finish my story. “I think y’all are movin’ too fast.”

“We’ve already slept together, dude. I didn’t think a date would be such a big deal.”

“Right, but she hasn’t left the house in fifteen years. You two have only known each other for like two weeks. You can’t expect her to change overnight.”

He makes a valid point.

I take a long pull of my beer. “But she won’t even tell me why.”

“She doesn’t owe you an explanation.” Austin eyes me thoughtfully. “Tell me, how many people—outside of the Marines—know what happened to you overseas?”

“Maybe five or six.” My parents, Dahlia, Chelsea, Austin, and now, Rowan.

“When people ask for details, you shut them down, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, why should she be any different? Whatever she went through, and I’m guessing it has plenty to do with her mama’s death, was enough to make her a recluse. She’s not a crusty old guy with nothin’ but his money to talk to. She’s a young, vibrant woman. I’m sure she had a life, friends, before it all went down. For her to shut herself away from the world like that, it had to be really bad. She ain’t ready to talk about it. You gotta respect that.” He pats my shoulder. “It took Katie three years to tell me about her childhood.”

I nod as his words slowly sink in. “But I told her everything.”

“Only because she witnessed you havin’ a nightmare. And you broke a bunch of her shit.”

“Well, yeah.”

Austin sips his beer. “Even so, it was your choice to divulge those details. That’s on you, my friend. Don’t forget, you’re a lot older than her. Maybe you have more experience dealin’ with stuff. Katie’s therapist always said, ‘Healing is a journey. Don’t expect trauma to give you a roadmap.’ Those words really stuck with me. As much as you know somebody, you never truly

know what's goin' on inside their head or how deeply their past affects them."

My chest deflates on a massive sigh. "Well, fuck. When you put it that way, I'm an idiot."

"You're not an idiot. You just made a wrong turn. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Love's a journey too, man. It's hard to get where you're goin' with a broken compass."

Love? Now, that's a word I thought I'd never have anything to do with again. The last time I went down that road it was a dead end. What if Rowan is the detour I've been waiting for? Maybe this time, the iron gate at the top of the mountain is a destination instead of a roadblock.

"A, who said anything about love? And B, how does one fix their compass?"

Austin releases a hearty laugh. "If you didn't love her, you wouldn't have shown up on my doorstep looking like somebody drowned your puppy. Open your eyes, man. Let yourself feel what you're feelin' and learn from your missteps." His gaze meets mine. "And if I knew anything about compasses, I'd be in Memphis right now, instead of sittin' here with your sorry ass."

"I wondered why you were here so close to Christmas."

He rubs his jaw. "I was workin' on a song for Katie and the baby. Can't exactly surprise her if I'm doing it at home. I'm heading back in the morning."

"Good call. She needs you around right now." I clap his shoulder. "Thank you for listening."

"That's what friends are for."

I WENT to bed early last night because I had to be awake at the ass crack of dawn to pick up Dahlia from the airport. Joe wasn't thrilled about me calling out from work, but that's his problem. One of the other guys can pick up the slack. I'm bone tired. I deserve a day off to spend time with my sister, especially since she's one of the few people who still wants to be around me.

Austin's words echoed in my mind all night. I texted Rowan before I went to bed, apologizing for my stupidity, but she didn't respond. I don't know what this means for us going forward. I've never connected with

anyone like I do with her. My chest tightens with the thought of losing that connection.

I hate that I left her in tears. All I wanted was to put a smile on her face. Make her happy. Hold her hand during a romantic carriage ride and watch a lantern or two. I should've known better. Austin was right. I pushed her too hard, too fast. While he threw me for a loop when he mentioned love, maybe he wasn't too far off. My feelings go much deeper than lust. Is it love? I'm not sure. I can only compare it to my relationship with Chelsea, and, well, there's no comparison. But I do know this: It feels like I'm missing a limb without Rowan.

Grimacing, I lift the third suitcase into the back of my personal truck. Dahlia easily packed enough for a month when her trip is only supposed to be a week and a half. If I didn't know any better, I'd think she plans to move in.

"What's the face for?" she chirps.

"Why are your suitcases so heavy? Better yet, why are there *three* of them?"

She squeezes my bicep. "Oh, c'mon, Mr. Tough-as-fuck Marine. You can handle it." She grins up at me. "But to answer your questions, in addition to my clothes, books, your gifts, and my shoes, I had to bring stuff for Christmas dinner."

"You know we have grocery stores in Tennessee, right?"

Dahlia rolls her eyes. "I'm not talking about the food stuff, Buzz. I brought my lasagna pan and a few pie plates and cookie sheets. I'll be shocked if you own more than two bowls and a spoon. I wanted to be prepared."

"I have a full set of dishes, thank you very much. And silverware. Chelsea let me take Grandma's stuff when we split."

"That was big of her."

My sister never liked Chelsea. Not even when we first started dating way back in high school. While Dahlia was only at the start of middle school then, she claims she had a sixth sense about Chelsea, and she *knew* we weren't a good match. I don't buy in to the woo-woo shit, but she was on the money. In fact, she's *always* freakishly accurate with her little predictions, which unnerves me. I try not to think about the weirdness of it all. Thankfully, she spared me the "I-told-you-so" shit when everything fell apart.

I close the hatch and point to the passenger side. "Get in."

"Why are you in a shitty mood?"

“I’m not.”

“Bullshit. I’ll get in the truck, but you’re going to tell me what the hell’s your problem.”

I salute her, march to the driver’s side, and climb in. I was stupid to think she wouldn’t see right through my “everything’s fine” act.

She scrambles into the passenger seat and clicks her seatbelt. “Speak.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Good thing we’ve got a two-hour ride.” She slaps my knee. “Now, tell me what happened with Rowan, and why it’s ripping you apart.”

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Easy on Me” by Adele

I STARE at the unfamiliar auburn-haired man looming in my doorway. “Who the hell are you?”

He furrows his brow and points to the logo on his jacket. “RPS, ma’am. You have a delivery.”

Right. My clay for the pottery projects I have planned.

He takes a few steps back when I lean out the door to look behind him. “Where’s Henry?”

He shrugs. “No idea. The boss told me to cover Flynn’s route.”

I glance at the name on his jacket. Fitzgerald. “And you are?”

“Seamus.” He shifts in place and motions to the box he’s holding. “I need you to sign for this, please.”

“Yes. Of course.” I scrawl my signature on his tablet.

“It’s kinda heavy. Would you like me to set it on the table?”

“Please.” I step aside so he can enter, fighting back tears as he places the box on my kitchen table. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Happy holidays.” Smiling, he gives me a wave and heads back to his truck.

I close the door behind him and slide to the floor, unable to stand beneath the weight of my sadness and disappointment. I waited all day for Henry’s arrival, pacing the kitchen like it would make him show up faster. I need to

apologize for the way I behaved yesterday—he didn't deserve my outburst—but he must want nothing to do with me if he switched routes with a coworker.

Resting my elbows on my bent knees, I let the tears come. It feels like I've done nothing but cry since I sent him away. I ruined what we shared because I don't know how to move beyond my grief. Eugene pads over and weaves through my legs, rubbing his face on my shins.

I stroke his silky fur. "Love you too, buddy."

Maybe I'm destined to become an old cat lady, shut away in my mountaintop tower. The realization that I won't have Eugene forever hits me like a battering ram. What will I do once he passes and I'm truly alone? The tears fall harder as I pull my massive feline into my arms. For once he doesn't shy away from my affection. I wonder if he senses that I'm falling apart.

Hours later, I force myself to take a hot shower and eat the soup I made. No sense in starving. Besides, food still brings me joy.

Grabbing my phone, I settle on my bed and bring up Henry's text message from yesterday afternoon.

Henry: I'm sorry for upsetting you. It was stupid of me to plan something without talking to you about it first. It won't happen again.

Does he mean it won't happen again because he's done with me? Or am I once again overanalyzing things? Either way, he doesn't seem like the type who'd ignore an apology attempt. I need to let him know how sorry I am. It's not his fault I've kept him in the dark.

I dial his number and hold my breath as it rings. Once. Twice. Three times.

He picks up on the fourth ring. "Rowan, hi."

"Hi." I stiffen when a female voice in the background reaches my ears. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No. We just finished making cookies." He laughs. "My sister doesn't like the way I use a cookie cutter and feels the need to give me shit about it."

That's right. I forgot his sister was coming to visit. Maybe he wasn't avoiding me after all.

"I noticed you weren't at work today."

"Yeah, I originally planned to pick up Dahlia after work, but she changed her flight to an earlier one to bypass a storm that's gonna hit New York."

"Makes sense." Feeling guilty for cutting into his family time, I add,

“Well, I won’t keep you—”

“Don’t hang up.” A shuffling noise comes through the line. “Dahl, entertain yourself for a bit, OK?” She says something, and he chuckles. “Don’t eat all of them, or I’ll bring your ass right back to the airport.”

“How long is she staying?” I ask.

“A week and a half to two weeks. Our parents went on a Caribbean cruise for Christmas this year, so she’d be all alone if she stayed home. This way, she can follow me around and criticize how I do everything instead.”

I can’t help but giggle. I’ve always wanted a sibling. How lucky they are to have each other in their parents’ absence.

“OK, I’m in my room now.” He clears his throat. “Listen, I’m really sorry about yesterday.”

“No, I’m sorry for reacting the way I did.”

“I didn’t mean to be so pushy. I just wanted to do something nice for you.”

I squeeze the phone. “I get it. And I appreciate the thought. I realize my coping methods are far from normal.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Princess. I’m sorry I made you feel that way. It was a dick move. Going forward, I’ll try not to be so insensitive.”

“While it’s sweet of you to say that, Henry, I think you deserve an explanation.”

“Only if you’re comfortable sharing it.”

I’ll never be comfortable talking about it, but he needs to know anyway. “Tomorrow is the anniversary of my mom’s death, and if it weren’t for me, she’d still be alive.”

HENRY

Mood Music: “Better Days” by Dermot Kennedy

I HOLD MY BREATH, waiting for Rowan to continue her story. Why does she blame herself for her mother’s passing?

“It was a few days before Christmas, so the town had all kinds of festivities. As a kid who loved the holidays, I wanted to go to every single event. One night, we were supposed to get some snow, so my parents decided we’d skip the outing. I threw a fit because I was supposed to meet my friends at the local orchard for their annual floating lantern festival. Everyone from school was going to be there, including my crush.”

My stomach hits the floor, hating that I know where her story is headed, and that I chose the orchard for our attempted surprise date.

“Anyway, I finally convinced them to let me go. They dropped me off, and I had the best time ever. It was beautiful and magical, easily my favorite event. Seeing the lanterns drift above the snow-covered apple trees like floating stars made me feel like I was at the North Pole. When it was time to leave, everyone’s parents showed up, one by one. Except for mine.” Her voice cracks when she continues. “My crush and his parents waited with me for over an hour, until finally a police car arrived.”

“Jesus Christ,” I whisper, hating the idea of her in pain.

“The officer told us my father had hit a patch of ice on our road and careened over the embankment. Mom died instantly. Dad was paralyzed from

the waist down.”

“Rowan, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t you see? If I hadn’t been such a spoiled, whiny brat, my mom would still be here.” Her sobs come freely now, each one reverberating to my soul. “So that’s why I don’t—I can’t—leave the house. Because the last time I ventured out of here, I killed my mom and ruined Dad’s life.”

“Honey, it wasn’t your fault.”

“Oh, but it was. I will never forgive myself for what happened. I truly appreciate you wanting to do something nice for me, but I need you to understand that I will never be able to give you normalcy. I will always be fucked up. If you don’t want to deal with that, I totally get it. I won’t hold it against you if you need to cut ties with me.”

“Rowan, stop.” I blink through the sudden burn in my eyes. “No one is cutting anything.”

“I’m sorry I was so mean to you.”

“It’s all right. Please don’t apologize. I’m sorry I dredged all this shit up by planning something.”

“With tomorrow being what it is, it would’ve come up either way.” She releases a heavy sigh. “But listen, I don’t want to keep you from your sister. Go enjoy your visit with her. I’m sure I’ll see you tomorrow when you deliver stuff. Goodnight, Henry.”

“Goodnight, Rowan.” I end the call and flop backward onto my mattress. I can’t handle the thought of her crying herself to sleep, but she’s right. I have family visiting from out of state. My sister deserves some of my time.

After a few minutes of pulling myself together, I head back into my kitchen. Dahlia is busy whipping up another batch of sugar cookie dough. I have no idea who she thinks is going to eat six dozen cookies, but I’m not stupid enough to stop her.

“How’s your girlfriend doing?”

Is she my girlfriend? Maybe. I never considered labeling our relationship, but somehow, the word girlfriend falls flat. Rowan feels like more to me.

Sighing, I lean against the counter. “Not good.”

“What’s up?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Um, yeah, I do.”

“Fine.” I quickly fill Dahlia in on my conversation with Rowan, watching her face morph into a mask of horror.

When I'm done, she settles on a stool and taps the counter with her wooden spoon. "Wow. Just, wow."

"Yup." I rub the back of my neck. "Told you it was bad."

"That poor woman has carried this on her shoulders for over fifteen years?"

I nod because there's nothing I can say that will change the reality of what Rowan's family went through.

"I have a question." Dahlia pokes me in the center of my chest with her spoon. "Why the hell are you still standing here?"

"Huh?"

"Go comfort your woman, dumb-dumb."

"But you're here."

"Your point? I'll still be here whenever you get back." She motions to the front door. "Now get the hell out of here, so I can eat my raw cookie dough in peace."

I wrap her in a tight hug. "I love you, Dahl."

"Love you too, Buzz."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I knock on Rowan's door. Her lights are out, so she's probably sound asleep. I should've called instead of just showing up. Remembering she probably can't hear the front door from her bedroom, I scoop up a handful of snow and roll it into a ball.

I hurl the snowball at her bedroom window, then quickly roll another. It takes three hits to get a reaction.

The window flies upward, and she pokes her head out. "Henry! What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, thought maybe you needed a hug."

I will never forget the way she comforted me after my nightmare. How she forced her affection on me and held me close despite my attempt to push her away. I don't think she will ever understand how much her kindness meant to me, or how deeply I needed her comfort, but the least I can do is return the favor. Right now, I'd do just about anything to ease her pain.

"I'll be right down." She closes the window.

I wait by the door, which opens a minute later. "Hey, Princess."

“Hi,” she whispers, peering up at me with reddened eyes and tearstained cheeks. “Thank you for coming. I’d love a hug.”

I haul her to my chest and tighten my arms around her as she dissolves into tears again. “C’mon. Let’s go inside,” I whisper into her hair.

She lets me lead her into the kitchen and secure the door. To my shock, Eugene prances over and rubs against my legs. “Whoa. Didn’t see that coming.”

“He likes you now.”

I cautiously scratch the top of his head. “Hi, Knife Feet.”

He rubs his jaw on my hand, then sashays toward the living room like the majestic beast he is.

I turn back to Rowan. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“You didn’t. I was listening to depressing music and feeling sorry for myself.”

“Let’s go upstairs, so I can hold you.”

“I like that plan better.” She takes my hand and leads me up to her room, then climbs into bed.

I settle beside her and pull her close, gently running my fingers through her hair. She snuggles closer to me and rests her head on my chest. We lie in silence for several minutes, basking in each other’s warmth.

Just when I think she’s fallen asleep she says, “I love you, Henry.”

I tighten my arms around her and kiss the top of her head. “I love you too.”

And I do. The feeling snuck up on me, but now that it’s here, there’s no going back. I will give her all of me and do everything in my power to make her feel happy and secure. Because that is what she does for me.

She slides her hand beneath my shirt and traces a heart shape on my stomach, her fingertips feathering over my scar. Reaching behind her, I draw a heart on her lower back.

I didn’t come here with any sexual intentions. If anything, I promised myself I would resist her advances and focus on comforting her in other ways. That flies out the window when she climbs on top of me.

Straddling my hips, she leans forward and brushes her mouth over mine. All it takes is one kiss for me to hand over my soul. I palm the back of her head and pull her closer, deepening the kiss. Her tongue tangles with mine in a slow dance, but I need more.

I will never get enough of this woman.

Rowan gyrates her hips and grinds her pussy against my cock. Groaning, I slide my hands to her ass and squeeze.

She moans into the kiss before pulling back to whisper in my ear, “I need you naked.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” I lift her off me and shed my shirt, pants, and boxers at warp speed.

Giggling, she removes her nightgown in a slow tease. When she’s finally gloriously naked, she grips my cock and lines us up. Holding my gaze, she slides down onto me, inch by rock-hard inch. We both moan when I fill her.

“Rowan, you feel so good, baby.” She’s a warm, wet heaven I never want to leave.

She clutches my shoulders and lets her hips take over, rolling them in fluid circles until my eyes cross from the pleasure. She rides me like she doesn’t have a care in the world, and we could stay like this for hours. While I love watching her in the saddle, her leisurely pace is driving the animal inside me crazy. I need her faster. Harder. I just need more.

When I can’t take it any longer, I flip her onto her back, pinning her hands by her shoulders. “My turn.”

“Impatient, much?” she teases.

“You have no fucking idea.” I kneel between her legs and lift them, placing her ankles on top of my shoulders. “Spread those thighs for me, Princess.”

She cries out when I slam inside her and fall into a pounding rhythm. Every moan, every wail, turns me on more. I clutch her hips, pulling her body into my thrusts.

“I love when you fuck me.” Rowan arches off the bed as the headboard thumps the wall.

“Love fucking you,” I grunt between thrusts.

She reaches around to grab my ass and digs her nails into my skin. “Don’t stop. I’m close.”

I lean forward, deepening the angle. Her eyes are pinned to mine, lips parted, cheeks flushed. She’s never been more beautiful. When she wails my name and flutters around me as she comes, I know I’m in heaven.

I lose myself inside her on a guttural bellow, releasing everything. All my fears. All my doubts about us, our future. No matter what happens, she is mine and I am hers.

ROWAN

Mood Music: “You Are in Love” (Taylor’s version) by Taylor Swift

MY FATHER LOOKS DIFFERENT. Better. I don’t know what Greta was feeding him during their trip, but his face is fuller, cheeks rounder. Or maybe it’s because I haven’t seen him smile this wide in years.

It’s Christmas Eve. Thanks to flight delays, they just got back this morning, instead of Thursday like they were supposed to. Between unpacking and everything else they needed to do to get settled in, I haven’t seen much of them since they arrived. I cooked a nice dinner for us and set the table in Dad’s favorite room, the one with four decorated trees.

Christmas music floats from a nearby speaker, filling the room with cheer. Greta just took her pies—that I prepped earlier—out of the oven. The aroma of apples, cinnamon, and roasted turkey makes my mouth water. Everything is picture-perfect, except for one missing piece. My man.

Henry had to work today until six. Sadly, I didn’t have any packages coming, and he was too busy to make the trip up here, so I didn’t get to see him. All day, I’ve worn the heavy cloak of disappointment, pattering around feeling sorry for myself.

Although when I really stop to think about it, gratitude infuses my sadness. Henry has been a godsend this week. After spending Monday night with me, he called out sick from work on the anniversary of Mom’s death. It was the first time I had someone there to hold me while I cried my eyes out.

He did his very best to distract me, filling the day with movies, silly card games, even a trip outside to play in the snow. He slept over again on Tuesday night but hasn't since then. I think he felt guilty for neglecting his sister. After all, she flew down here for a visit, so she deserves time with him too.

Even though I understand why he's not around, the holiday makes his absence hurt more. As if on cue, the song switches to Kelly Clarkson's version of "Blue Christmas."

I stare at the lit trees and hum along, feeling gloomier by the minute. I invited Henry for dinner, but he'd already committed to attending the town's annual Christmas pajama and movie marathon with his sister. I can only imagine how adorable he looks wearing festive jammies. I wonder if people will think they're a couple. Henry invited me out of politeness, even though he knew I'd turn him down. I hate myself for my inability to function in society like a normal person.

Dad wheels himself into the dining room. "Are you ready to eat, darling?"

"I've been ready." I pour him a glass of his favorite red wine and set it by his plate. His aide is still in the kitchen. It's sweet that she's willing to spend Christmas with us. "Greta, do you need any help?"

"No, I think we've got it covered." She enters the room carrying the gravy boat. "Almost forgot this. That would've been tragic."

Dad laughs heartily and smiles up at her. "Tragic, indeed."

Greta settles beside him. She looks lovely in a sparkly red sweater dress. Her graying chestnut curls hang loose around her shoulders, and her warm smile puts the glittering ornaments to shame.

"I take it you two enjoyed your vacation?" I ask, spearing some turkey for my plate.

"It was so wonderful to visit with my daughter and grandkids. It's been too long. I wish they lived closer." She motions to Dad. "This guy survived the chaos better than I expected."

"They're sweet kids. Well behaved and thoughtful." Dad sips his wine. "Your family made me feel so welcome."

Greta lifts an eyebrow. "Even when Lizzy wanted you to give her a ride in your wheelchair?"

"Especially then." He smiles across the table at me. "It reminded me of when you were little. We had fun, didn't we?"

My heart clenches, remembering when he'd pull me around in my bright red wagon. Or when I'd sit on his lap on our toboggan as we sledded for hours. Those were the good old days.

"Yeah. We did." Deciding we need a topic change before I burst into tears, I say, "So, what's new?"

Greta and Dad exchange a peculiar look, and she flushes. "I'll let your dad answer that."

Dad's smile stretches from ear to ear as he takes her hand in his. "Greta and I have an announcement. We have decided to marry."

"Oh, wow." I drop my fork, equal parts shocked, thrilled, and saddened by the thought of him moving on from my mother. "Um, that's totally unexpected. But wonderful too. Congratulations."

I've never picked up on anything romantic between them, but maybe my head was simply too far up my own ass to notice. Now that I know, I want to kick myself for not seeing it sooner. Their connection is beyond obvious.

"Thank you." Dad beams, staring at Greta with pure adoration in his gaze. "I haven't been this happy in years."

I blink to dispel the moisture gathering in my eyes. "I'm happy for you." I glance at Greta. "Please tell me he gave you a ring."

"He did." She holds up her hand to show me. A row of diamonds sparkle in the lights. "And it's beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you," Dad murmurs, touching her cheek.

"Always a charmer, Frederic."

"You know it."

The ache in my chest deepens. While I'm truly happy for them, I miss my mom. Beyond that, I wish I were capable of moving past our family tragedy as Dad has.

"What have you been up to, Rowan?" Greta asks, as if sensing the display of affection is getting to me.

"Well, I, uh, kinda met someone."

Her warm, brown eyes light up. "Oh? Who's the lucky man?"

My gaze darts to my father, who looks on with interest as he eyes me over the rim of his wine glass. I turn my attention back to Greta before I lose my nerve. "His name is Henry. He's a former Marine."

"How did you meet?" Dad asks, obviously perplexed by the world of recluse dating.

I assaulted him with a sex toy. "Funny story, actually." I dab my mouth

with my napkin. “He, um, delivered a package.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Is that code for something?”

I snort. “No, Dad. He’s literally a delivery guy. You know Tony, the sweet older man who brings me stuff?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Well, he had a heart attack, and this guy took over his route. Don’t worry—Tony will be fine,” I add when Dad’s eyes widen. “Anyway, since Henry shows up here pretty much daily, we’ve gotten to know one another.”

Dad nods. “How old is he?”

Oh, shit. “Um, in his thirties.” He doesn’t need to know Henry’s only a week away from forty.

He sets down his glass. “You might as well tell me the rest, Rowan-Anastasia.” He leans in. “Because you know I’m going to do a background check either way.”

I roll my eyes. “Seriously?”

He smiles. “Dead serious.”

“He’s thirty-nine, OK? His name is Henry Flynn. He’s divorced, originally from upstate New York, and as I already mentioned, he was a Marine.”

Dad lifts an eyebrow. “Was? From my understanding a Marine is always a Marine.”

“I mean, yeah. He’s still a Marine, but he was wounded in action and retired with a Purple Heart.” I leave out the details about his imprisonment because it isn’t any of their business. “Now he works for RPS so he can stay fit.”

Greta flashes me a conspiratorial grin. “I bet he has big muscles from lifting all those heavy boxes.”

“He does.” Heat crawls up my neck. “Not that I’ve seen them.”

Dad laughs. “Should I leave you two alone to gossip?”

“Nope. That’s all I planned to say.” I chug my water to cool off.

“Is he a nice man?” Greta asks.

“Very much so. He treats me well.”

Dad reaches across the table to take my hand. “I hope to meet him one day.”

IT'S CHRISTMAS MORNING. The gifts are unwrapped, breakfast is done, and Dad and Greta are in the main living room, watching *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Meanwhile, I've done nothing but mope.

I miss my mother. I miss Henry. I'm jealous his sister gets to spend Christmas with him. I'm envious of my father's healing capacity.

"Rowan-Anastasia Punzel, would you please stop pacing and tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing." I plop onto the other end of the couch and hug my bent knees.

"Your mother used to do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend everything was fine." He eyes me sadly and fixes the quilt draped over his knees. "Even when it wasn't."

Greta rises. "I'll let you two talk privately."

"No, stay." I point to where she was sitting beside me. "I want you here. I'm sorry for moping. I'm just a little sad. I don't want to put a damper on anyone's Christmas."

She slowly settles back down. "If I can speak on behalf of your dad and me, you aren't putting a damper on anything. We just want to see you happy."

"Me too," I whisper.

She squeezes my hand. "Where's Henry?"

"His sister is visiting from New York. He's with her."

"Were you invited?" Dad asks.

"Of course, I was." I stare at the lit tree decorated in blue and silver. "But you know I can't leave the house."

"You can, Rowan-Anastasia. You just choose not to." Dad pauses the movie. "I want you to listen to me. I know you miss Mom. I miss her too, and I will love her until the day I die. Part of loving her and honoring her memory is allowing ourselves to move forward. To live. Mom wouldn't want me to be alone."

"Dad, I'm not upset with you for finding love again. I'm sorry if I gave that impression." I glance at Greta. "I adore you, and I'm so grateful to you for making my father happy."

"I love you too, sweetheart," she whispers, squeezing my hand tighter.

I gesture between them. "You two deserve happiness."

"And so do you." Dad wipes a tear from his cheek. "Mom would hate seeing you punish yourself all these years for something that wasn't your

fault.”

“But it *was* my fault.”

“Honey, no. You were only a child. *I* was the one behind the wheel.” Another tear slides down his cheek. “I’m the one who lost control of the vehicle.”

“It was an accident,” I say, realizing after all this time that he blames himself too.

Greta hands him a tissue, and he blows his nose. “Right.” He sniffs and takes a moment to compose himself. “And even though it’s been sixteen years, it still hurts.”

Tears stream down my cheeks. “It hurts a lot.”

“And you know what? That’s OK. It’s allowed to hurt. We’re allowed to grieve. But Mom wouldn’t want us to spend the rest of our lives grieving.”

“I know.”

“I’m finally living again.” He reaches for Greta’s hand. “I’m truly happy, and I want that for you. It’s time for you to start living your life, Rowan-Anastasia.”

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I have atoned for long enough. The problem is, I’ve spent so long locked away from the world that I don’t know anything about the world I hid from.

“What are you thinking?” Dad asks.

“I don’t know how to function in society.”

He chuckles. “Do any of us really have a clue? You’re a bright woman. You’ll figure it out. The point is, you need to try.”

Greta squeezes my hand again. “First, I think you need to ask yourself some very important questions.”

“And they are?”

“Is Henry someone worth leaving the house for? Meaning, does he deserve the effort it will take for you to reacclimate to the outside world?”

“He does.”

She smiles. “More importantly, is he worthy of your love?”

The answer is unequivocally yes.

HENRY

Mood Music: “All I Want for Christmas Is You” by Michael Bublé

DAHLIA STUFFS another cookie into her mouth and watches me as she chews. Then she swallows a gulp of milk to wash it down. “You look sad.”

“Thanks. You look dorky.”

She points to the penguins on her flannel pajamas. “You’re just jealous you don’t have moves like these.” She waddles around the kitchen making weird honking noises.

“Penguins don’t even sound like that.”

“How the hell would you know? Are you suddenly the authority on birds?” She snorts and flaps her arms dramatically, then attempts the crane kick from *Karate Kid* and nearly falls on her ass.

“How are we from the same family?”

Dahlia claps my shoulder. “I ask myself that every day, Buzz.”

“What time do you want to have that lasagna?”

“Whenever you’re hungry.” She shrugs. “I’ve been snacking on cookies, so I’m good for now. Just let me know when you wanna eat.” Her eyes, so much like mine, soften. “In all seriousness, you really do look sad. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

“I wish things were different.”

“With Rowan?”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen her in a few days. I miss her, you know?” Sighing,

I rub the back of my neck. “She should be here, celebrating Christmas with me.”

“Then go get her.”

I’d love nothing more than to have her in my cabin, curled up on my couch in front of the fireplace. I want her snuggled up in *my* bed. I want my pillowcases to smell like her beautiful hair. I just want her here. But that won’t happen.

“She doesn’t leave the house, remember?”

“OK, then you go to her place instead.”

“I don’t want to be rude. You came all this way to visit me. Besides, she’s having family time with her dad.”

“What if I come with you?” A devious gleam lights her eyes. “We can crash her party and share the Flynn love.”

“Huh?”

“It’ll be perfect. We can get dressed, pack up some cookies and the lasagna, and take a little road trip up the mountain. Do the old ‘Hi, how are ya?’ with her dad, eat a little din-din, then head back down here so we can watch *Elf* again.”

“Is this you trying to finagle your way into meeting her?”

“Obviously.” She wraps her arms around me. “But beyond that, I want to see you happy. Also, you know I love field trips.”

“A, you just might be on to something. And B, I am *not* watching *Elf* a third time. You’re on your own there.” I smile at my little sister. “Let’s do it.”

Dahlia claps her hands. “Excellent. Go shower and get your shit together. You can’t show up on her doorstep looking like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like there’s a ferret living in your hair. Who the hell gets bedhead like that? Did you sleep upside down?”

I bark out a laugh. “Nope. I’m a side-sleeper.”

“Shower your side-sleeping ass so we can get moving.” She snaps her fingers. “Chop. Chop.”

Forty-five minutes later, Dahlia and I are headed up the mountain toward the Punzel estate.

“Wait until you see this place.”

“Is it big?”

“Huge. It’s a literal castle.”

“Are you nervous about meeting her dad?”

“A little.”

“Don’t be. You have a lot to offer.”

My laugh echoes through the truck. “You’re funny, Dahl.”

She grips my forearm. “I’m serious. You’re a good man. She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one.” I spot a figure walking up ahead, so I move toward the middle of the road to give them space.

“This isn’t the safest road for a Sunday walk.” Dahlia peers over the embankment. “Why the fuck aren’t there any guardrails?”

“No clue.” I glance in my rearview mirror at the person heading the opposite direction. It’s a woman, judging by her curves and long hair. Wait. Make that long, *golden* hair. “Holy shit.” I slam on the brakes.

“What the hell was that for?”

I throw the truck into park and yank the emergency brake, then unbuckle my seatbelt. “Stay here.” I click my flashers on and hop out of the truck. Cupping my hands over my mouth, I shout Rowan’s name.

She whirls around, and her mouth drops open. Even from this distance, her green eyes captivate me. For a moment, we simply stare at each other in disbelief.

Then she runs toward me.

“Where were you going?” I ask as we collide.

Rowan jumps into my arms and wraps her legs around me. “I needed to see you.” She buries her face in my neck. “I love you, Henry. So much.”

“Love you too, Princess.” My heart swells, knowing how difficult it was for her to leave the safety of her tower. Not only did she face her demons head on, but she did it for me. I mattered enough for her to break with her sixteen-year recluse identity. That’s the greatest gift she could have given me. “How did you plan to get to my place?”

“I really didn’t think it through. I mean, logically, I could’ve called an Uber or something, but I was fully prepared to walk.”

“Do you even know where I live?”

“No clue.” She smiles. “Didn’t think about that either. You were the only thing on my mind, Henry.”

“I love you so much.” I cup her face and kiss her, pouring my soul into it.

She threads her fingers into my still-damp hair and kisses me back like we’re no longer two separate beings, but one joined entity.

Suddenly, a horn cuts into our passionate embrace, jolting us apart.

“What’s going on?” she says on a gasp, as she grips my arm to steady herself.

“Let’s call it a buzzkill.” I take her hand in mine. “C’mon. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

ROWAN

Mood Music: “Adore You” by Miley Cyrus

HENRY LEADS me to the passenger side of his truck and pulls the door open. “Rowan, this is my little sister, Dahlia.”

Before I can even respond, she jumps out of the vehicle and wraps me in a hug. “It’s awesome to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Likewise.” I return the hug, grateful for her warm reception.

“Get in, Dahl,” Henry commands.

Releasing me, she salutes him and climbs into the back of the extended cab. “Gimme the lasagna.”

He hands her a pan, then ushers me inside with a warm hand on my lower back. I settle in the passenger seat and click my belt. He kisses me again, then closes the door and makes his way around the front of the truck.

“He’s been moping all day,” Dahlia reveals. “He really cares for you.”

I meet her chocolatey gaze. “I feel the same way about him.”

Henry hops into the driver’s seat. “Ready, ladies?”

“Yes.” And I am ready. For him. For us, and for everything our future brings. I’m ready for big changes in my life, maybe even some normalcy.

Bottom line, I’m ready to start living.

We pull up to the gate outside my home and park. Henry holds my hand, interlacing our fingers as we walk toward the front door.

“I already told my dad about you.”

“Yeah?” Surprise flashes in his eyes, followed by trepidation. “How’d that go?”

“He said he wants me to be happy.”

“Should Henry be nervous?” Dahlia stage whispers. “If so, I’ll need to pay closer attention because I kinda like watching him squirm.”

“Sadist,” he mutters.

I laugh and kiss Henry’s cheek. “You have nothing to worry about. I promise.” I push the door open. “Dad? Greta? Where are you guys?”

“In the living room,” Greta calls.

Henry tightens his grip on my hand as we step inside, followed by his sister.

“We have special Christmas visitors,” I announce, leading them toward my family. “This handsome gentleman is my father, Frederic Punzel. And the lovely woman by his side is Greta, my future stepmom.”

She hops up and rushes over with a warm smile. “Hello, and Merry Christmas. You must be Henry.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shakes her hand. “Merry Christmas to you too.”

“This is Henry’s sister, Dahlia.”

She and Greta embrace as Dad wheels himself over to us. “Hello, there.”

“Mr. Punzel.” Henry clears his throat and holds out his hand. “I’m Henry Flynn, your daughter’s—”

“My daughter’s boyfriend,” Dad finishes, smiling up at Henry from his wheelchair as they shake hands. There’s approval in his gaze and something else. Relief.

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.”

“Holy shit. I actually have a boyfriend,” I squeal, wrapping my arms around Henry.

Hugging me tightly, he gifts me with one of his megawatt smiles. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Princess.”

“Who’s hungry?” Dahlia asks. “I made lasagna.”

Dad’s eyes light up. “Oh, I *love* Italian food.”

“You’re in for a treat, sir. Our mother is Italian, and my sister knows all her recipes.”

So far, so good.

Henry, Dad, and Dahlia gather around the table while Greta and I head into the kitchen for plates and silverware. Once everything is all set, we join them at the table.

Dad lifts his wine glass. “I’d like to propose a toast. Here’s to health, happiness, and good fortune. Merry Christmas, everyone.”

“If it’s all right, I’d like to add to that,” Henry says, raising his glass. “Here’s to hope, healing, new beginnings,” he meets my gaze, “and everlasting love.”

Dad chuckles and clinks his glass to Henry’s. “We just met and you’re already outdoing my toasts?”

Henry smiles. “I’d say I’m sorry for that, sir, but I’m really not.”

“It’s all right. I won’t hold it against you.”

“I also won’t apologize for loving your daughter, so I’d appreciate if you don’t hold that against me either.”

Oh my God.

“Never apologize for loving her,” Dad says fiercely. “And you’d better make damn sure you love her with your whole heart, and every piece of your soul because that’s what she deserves.”

“I will, sir. You have my word.” Henry’s gaze meets mine once more. Unspoken promises dance in his eyes.

Maybe I’m dreaming, or maybe it’s a Christmas miracle, but for the first time in my life, I am at peace with my past, and hopeful for the future.

Want more Rowan and Henry?
Grab the [Bonus Epilogue!](#)

THE END

THANKS SO MUCH FOR READING! IT MEANS THE
WORLD TO ME.

Remember Austin? Meet him in *True North*.
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MISTLETOE CREEK



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Much love,

Aria

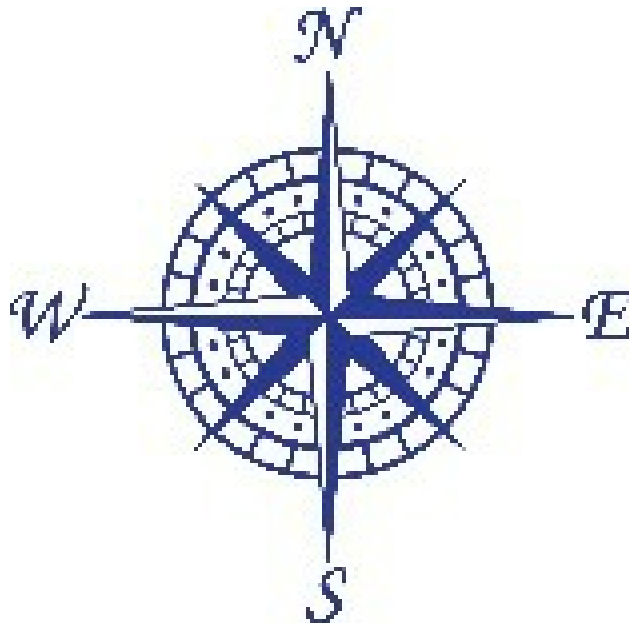
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aria Wyatt is a pharmacist mom who spends the inhumane predawn hours with a cup of coffee and her laptop, gleefully indulging in her passion for romance. Her novels range in heat from steamy to scorching, and she doesn't shy away from writing flawed characters with real life issues.

She resides with her husband and two children in New York's picturesque Hudson Valley, near the Catskills and iconic Woodstock. The avid reader balances marriage, motherhood, her pharmacist career, and her romance author dream. When not writing, she dabbles in photography, using the natural beauty of the region to her advantage. She's a self-proclaimed cat lady who cannot live without coffee, chocolate, music, and books.

Author of True North and the Compass Series, Aria has a soft spot for those who are searching, yearning, and ultimately, finding. Whether on a mission to find themselves, find love, find forgiveness or solace, she believes the answer is out there somewhere.

“Journey to Love.”



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