

Monsters,
Marriage,
and
Mistletoe

S.C.

PRINCIPALE

Monsters, Marriage, and Mistletoe

A Cozy Paranormal Romance

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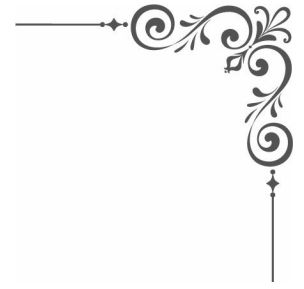
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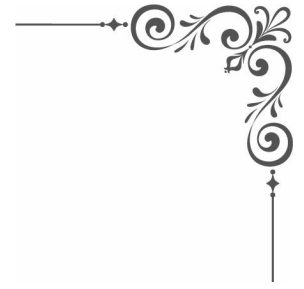


Acknowledgements

To all the people looking for their other half. I hope you find the one who makes you whole.

This is for Judy, Rachelle, and all the girls in the Monster Brides series who were like... Don't stress yourself. I didn't, and this book is proof that it's okay to have a lovely bit of holiday fluff.

Thank you to Judy, Rachelle, Sofia, LoLo, Edna, Luke, Judy I., Grace, Mikayla, Melba, Ingrid, Amy, Hannah, Kadejah, Michael, Kit, Marilyn, and my massive long list of writing and reading support sisters and brothers. You lift me up.



Frankenstein made them. Life tore them apart. Can the holidays bring them back together?

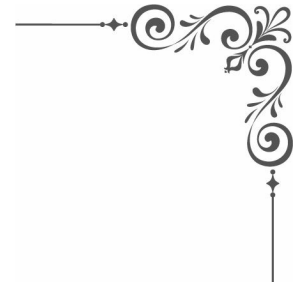
Rhea (AKA Mrs. Stein) has never gotten over her ex ending their marriage and abandoning her, but after several lifetimes apart, it's time for them to bury the hatchet, the pitchforks, and the flaming torches, and be mature adults. After all, they're both over two hundred.

Manny Finklestein changed his name when he left Europe decades ago. He thought leaving Rhea behind would be the best thing for her. It was his fault that such a beautiful creature even existed—and was branded as a hideous monster.

Manny is in shock (no pun intended) when he gets a message that Rhea is not only alive but in Pine Ridge for the holidays to say goodbye, part as friends—and get him to sign divorce papers.

But what happens when magic, mistletoe, and merry-making combine with the former Mr. and Mrs.? Could they be destined for a real shot at love outside of a madman's lab? It'll take a holiday miracle to re-make this monster match.

Monsters, Marriage, and Mistletoe is a standalone novella in the Pine Ridge universe. Inside, you'll find a sweet holiday novella with a happily ever after and a high dose of steam. It's the perfect treat if you like your nice with a side of spice!



Frankenstein Castle, Switzerland, 1818

RHEA LAY STILL, UNNERVED by what she'd just experienced. Her brain and body felt disconnected as if different parts of her had already experienced the intimate tenderness she'd just shared in her bridal bed, while other parts of her felt that it was new and frightening.

But everything was frightening.

The only thing that wasn't frightening was him—the one her creator simply called “My Creation” and “My Adam.”

“I'm sorry.”

Her voice burred and rasped as if her reanimated body was still working out what passages worked to send thoughts into words. “Why?”

“Because you don't love me. I love you. What we did should be when both people—both creations—love each other.”

“Love?” Love was a strange sensation, familiar and foreign at once. She looked down at her hand, seeing the patchwork of dead white skin and sharp black stitches.

“And he made you so beautiful...”

Her husband remained in the dark, even when he had taken her to their cold, dank cell and warmed her in their shared bed. In the torchlight, he slipped into the shadows.

“Do I have a name?”

Her husband's dark eyes flitted over her, shining from the shadows like jewels catching candlelight. “I have read many books since I awakened. You should have a beautiful name, a name with meaning and history.”

He was passionate about a name, and she knew it was because he had none.

“Eve. Or Gaia. Rhea. Hera. Galatea.”

She liked Rhea. She liked the way his voice rumbled on that syllable, hitting a tender spot deep inside her cold body. When she was with him, she felt warm.

“I will be Rhea. And you will be... what?”

“All I hope to be is a man. Not a monster,” he growled, stepping forward.

Rhea, as she would be called, took a step back when she saw him in the dim light. As days passed, her eyes adjusted to their dark environment. Each day she could see him better.

He was a creature of twisted and puckered flesh, strips of all colors, the stitching hasty and rough in some places and fine and neat in others.

Pity overwhelmed love. Feelings were already such confusing things.

“Then you are Man. You have not been a monster to me,” she whispered.

“Everything he makes is monstrous. Playing God...” Man spat.

“You are not a monster to me. You are my man, and I am your woman.” Rhea tried to smile and held out a trembling hand. “Together, we’ll be safe from him.”

The light in his eyes made her smile a reality. Man hurried to her and kissed her soundly on the lips, large, thick-fingered hands cupping her face.

“I won’t let him hurt you again.”

Shouting and thunderous footsteps echoed above their dark cellar rooms. “What’s that?” Rhea held onto the muscular forearm with her slender fingers, bruised and suffused with stagnated blood at the tips. The doctor told her it would fade soon. In the weeks she had been awake, it had already improved.

“There is danger. The people of the village know what perverse things he’s doing, how he is tinkering with life and death. Let them stop him! But they will not hurt you. I will make them leave. You will go. Take the tunnel and wait in the woods until all is clear.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“No. Don’t wait for me, sweet Rhea.” Man took her hands in his and held them to his heart. “These few weeks with you were true beauty in an ugly world. I know you don’t feel the same.”

Did she? She couldn’t remember the world, and her creator kept her confined to a few rooms. Her companion was the only thing she knew, and yet, she couldn’t say she knew him well. They were strangers, thrust together. More than that—they were bits of strangers, sewn together, just shards of people turned into a madman’s toys.

“Madness...” That word rang true in all of this.

The hurt on Man’s face was more painful than anything her creator had done to test her reflexes. “I don’t blame you for thinking that. I know it’s true. I... I can’t understand my own thoughts, what’s happening to me... I only know that you were the bright and beautiful spot in this hell.”

With painful suddenness, the darkness in the cell seemed to leak into his eyes. His entire face turned into rage and pain.

In terror, she stepped back. She was afraid, not of Man, but that those emotions would soon make their way out of her soul and onto her face, too.

Did she still have a soul?

Did Man?

“Is my soul torn apart?” she whispered.

With a roar of fury that didn’t match the tears pooling in his eyes, Man pushed her away and ran.



OFF THE COAST OF THE British Colony of New South Wales (Australia)
1819

“Good God, man! What happened to you?”

Man looked up at the figure pulling him into the boat. “I have been... on the ice for a long time. And bitten by sharks. Bears. Seals.”

All of that was true. Man didn’t tell the horrified human sailors that he’d also bitten them back and used his monstrous strength to rip the attacking beasts to pieces—that he wore their sea-scrubbed furs to hide most of his face and body. It was bad enough that they could see his healed-over scars, the little dots where the late Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s stitches had been. Nothing could hide his immense bulk and height, either.

Weatherbeaten sailors swaddled in furs whispered.

“Look at the size of him.”

“Only way he could survive, I reckon.”

“Did you see his hands?”

Man interrupted. “Please put me ashore wherever you’re going. I’ll pay my way in labor.”

“We’re all going different ways, big fellow. Some of us are staying on and fishing in coastal waters. A couple of us are going to try our luck where there ain’t no king to play God with his people!”

That appealed to Man greatly. “Where is this land without a king?”

“America! New York City! I hear if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere!”

“I would like a new life very much.”

“Yeah, but where, that’s the question!”

The sailors laughed amongst themselves, but Man was silent as he thought about a new life. He wasn’t sure he deserved one—but he hoped his sacrifices had given Rhea one. He hoped she was doing well. Making a new life, without her hideous monster of a mate, a half-mad killer, tying her down.

True, he had only killed twice, once by accident and once on purpose, but... Rhea deserved so much more than him.

“I pray she’s found it,” he murmured to himself as someone passed him a bottle of explosive, hot-smelling alcohol in a fat, squat jug.

As he drank, he thought, wondering, as he did every day, what happened after she escaped the mob. Rhea’s skin, while dead snowy white, was at least uniform in color. People would not class her as a monster at first glance. Maybe simply sickly. And if some man should look beyond the paleness of her skin and discover the sweetness of her voice or the tenderness of her heart...She was probably happily wed to another by now. Someone who loved her and would protect her, someone who would overlook all the scars she had, inside and out.

“Take me to this new city.” Man slammed the bottle down, now mostly empty.

“New York City, mate! It’ll take about a month, mind. And nothing is guaranteed anywhere you go, don’t care what those yank-fanciers say,” one voice cautioned.

“I have time. I don’t need guarantees. Only a change.” Man’s voice boded ill for anyone who argued with him.

Everyone left him alone after that, but his thoughts kept him occupied.

This is the chance I gave Rhea! I can make something of myself... not just become what others have made me.



GRAY’S PAPAYA, NEW York City, 2023



RHEA PUT HER CAMERA down reluctantly. New York City was beyond compare—but not in beauty. She had seen forests in Bavaria, mountains in Carpathia, jungles in Burma, and more. Now, as a freelance photographer, Rhea Stein was respected for having “the eye” for the perfect shot, whether it was the angle of the sun hitting a skyscraper or an ant carrying a blade of grass.

“Hey, pretty lady, the food is inside. It’s on me.”

Rhea stiffened. She preferred to hide behind a natural peach foundation, her hair worn down to cover her neck, and she studiously avoided people unless a camera was in front of her face.

“No, thank you. My husband is jealous.”

The man who had been staring at her nodded and wandered off, muttering in a slurring voice, “Lucky man.”

Rhea left without going in or taking a picture, reminded afresh of her mission.

It had to do with said jealous husband—even though that was a work of fiction. Oh, she’d had a husband... once. But he must not be too jealous, she thought with a pang of hurt that even two centuries hadn’t fully erased. Jealousy was an extreme form of caring—sometimes a vile, twisted form of caring. Man hadn’t been jealous enough to find her and see what she was doing or who she was with.

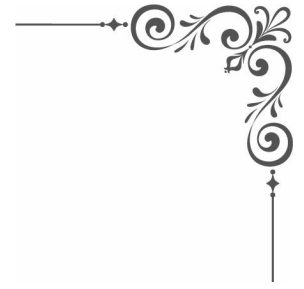
Her husband must not care about her, but that hadn’t stopped him from being useful—on paper.

Rhea used Man—funny, over the years she’d come to call him Manny in her head—as an excuse and a safety net. Obtaining a passage in the 19th Century had been easy for a reanimated human who could go for long periods of time without food or water. She’d simply slid aboard a steamer or a freighter and hid. But overland, people were harder to avoid, so whenever men looked at her with lust or suspicion, she was quick to trot out her long-lost husband. And when she arrived in California in the early 1900s, signing “married” and “Mrs.” on any official paperwork had granted her some protection and standing from those who took notice of her. Fortunately, unlike many other supernatural beings, Rhea could pass for a normal human as long as the contact was brief.

Rhea made her way to the 34th Street-Penn Station and stood in front of the ticket kiosk. She pulled out her wallet and patted the papers in her purse, afraid to let them out of her sight for too long.

Manny got her into this—even if he wasn’t aware of it. Well, times had changed and so had she. He got her into this, and he could get her out of it.

“One, please. Pine Ridge, New York.”



Pine Ridge, New York, 2023

P “Manny’s Automotive, Established in 1902 as Manny’s Bicycle and Machine Repair, wishes you a happy and safe Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Eid, Solstice, Yule, and New Year. What better gift for one you love than peace of mind with a ride that you know can handle the winter weather Pine Ridge dishes out? Come on down to Manny’s for all your repair needs.”

Manny Finklestein smiled widely at Jasper Wainwright, the weatherman from Pine Ridge’s local television station. “How was that?”

“Um. Well. It was good! It was nice and heartfelt. I just think it’s a little long for a twenty-second radio spot.”

“Well, newspaper ads aren’t bringing in as much business, and television is out of the question. The overhead lights really don’t let you hide a thing.” Manny’s skin had faded to a motley greenish-gray. Almost two centuries of relative peace had saved him from gaining new scars. His old stitching had mellowed to deep, uneven creases.

But his fear of cameras hadn’t faded, even after 120 years of safety in Pine Ridge. The idea of being hunted down and driven out had never really left him.

Driven from her side... and then I kept going. But she didn’t love me. She didn’t choose me. Rhea was made for my “use” like a living sex toy, a slave. She must’ve hated every second we were together.

“You okay, Big Guy?”

“No. Yes. I’m fine. So, it’s a little long?” Manny sniffed hard and tried to smile at the handsome weatherman.

“For a radio spot, yes. A commercial spot at the TV station? I think you could pull it off. And you know most humans don’t look twice at monsters like us.” The werewolf weatherman winked. “Unless it’s Georgia or those cute waitresses at The River House checking you ou-out.” His smile turned into a smirk as his voice turned into a teasing song.

“I’m pretty sure they’re only checking to make sure I didn’t accidentally step on a small child.” Manny winced. “Back to the ad. What should I cut?”

“Well, you listed almost every holiday I can think of! How about just ‘Happy Holidays’ instead?”

“No... I want to be inclusive. I don’t...” Manny looked down at his hands and chest, remembering that they had once been parts of many different people. How many was he made of? Six? Twelve? God, what a monster

Frankenstein had been. Man had been delighted to take the name of Finklestein, a namesake of the kind Ashkenazi family that had first taken him into their hearts when he arrived in New York City all those years ago. They had also been the first to call him Manny.

“You don’t what?”

“I don’t know how many of those cultures I hold in my hands. Or, you know, my legs, either.”

They shared a macabre laugh.

“Okay, okay. Good point. What about keeping the holiday list and cutting out the part about your old 1902 establishment? I know history is important, but you want people to bring you their cars, not their antique tractors!”

“But I could fix ‘em! I can fix anything metal that moves.” Mr. Finklestein had been a great tinkerer and taught Manny that his size and strength were a blessing.

Jasper sighed. “You’re a freaking mechanical genius. Just say, ‘Manny’s Automotive wishes you a happy and safe insert list of every holiday here.’ Then, ‘There’s no better gift than protecting your loved ones with a safe ride for whatever winter brings!’”

“I like it, Jas. You’re good with the snappy patter.”

“Dear God. Don’t use words like *snappy patter*, or you’re never going to get a girl under eighty-five.”

Manny’s face twitched. “I had one, you know? You know all those old legends about Frankentein’s monster and the ‘Bride of Frankenstein’ are based on something.”

“Well, yeah, but I’ve never... I mean.” Jasper blinked. “I guess I thought that part was made up. That was a long, long time ago, huh?”

“Over two centuries ago.”

“She... She passed?” Jasper put a sympathetic hand on Manny’s giant shoulder.

“I hope not. We’re very hard to kill. Only fire, I think, would truly do it. No, I... I made sure she escaped before the mob got her—before our ‘creator’ could find her again. I found my feet. I’m sure she did, too. She was much more human-looking, much more beautiful, and much more intelligent. She learned far faster than I did.”

But I shouldn’t have hoped for the best and assumed it worked. What if she has passed? What if she wasn’t okay? What if another mob found her and she was killed, thinking I abandoned her?

Manny swallowed. Guilt had tried to kill him for years, but... Well. It wasn't fire, even if it burned plenty.

"Manny... Manny, you need to talk to someone about this stuff, man. It'll eat you up."

"I'm a pretty big meal to swallow." He gave a bitter smile.

"Still. Mr. Minegold might be good to talk to. He's... well, his situation is similar. Or that new guy, the one we're all keeping an eye on? Calls himself Lazarus. He's built like you."

Manny winced. "That's horrible. It means my story inspired others to evil, instead of warning them against it."

"Yeah, but he's here in town, not being a threat, so your story also inspired him not to live as someone's pet monster."

"I guess. Thanks for the pep talk, Jas. Maybe I will talk to Jakob Minegold at some point. I always go to his place for a couple of nights during Hanukkah."

"And you know you're always welcome at Casa Wainwright for Christmas dinner!"

"Dude. *Casa Wainwright*? You can no longer give me dating tips."

"Hello, boys."

"Oh! Speak of the devil—no offense! Jakob, we were just talking about you." Manny hurried to the front door of his shop where a beautifully dressed man in a striped scarf, long frock coat, and flat gray cap was standing. "Car acting up?"

"No, she's running like a champion. I was just at Madge's to pick up a few ingredients for warding the town, making protective amulets for everyone who helps with the Night Watch, that sort of thing, and I ran into Sera."

"Sera... Pretty skeleton lady?" Wainwright asked.

"A morrigan," Mr. Minegold corrected sharply. "A keeper of the comings and goings of the dead, retriever of souls, guardian of gates, starter of war, and bringer of death."

"And her dad owns the funeral parlor," Jasper added, helping himself to the last donut left on the counter for Manny's customers.

"She would most likely not enjoy being called 'pretty skeleton lady'—especially since her skeletal persona is only related to the care of souls. But, well. Um." Mr. Minegold took off his hat and twisted it with a nervous expression. "She has been helpful to the Night Watch a few times when

dangerous undead or unfamiliar spirits have approached the town. She can see those things.”

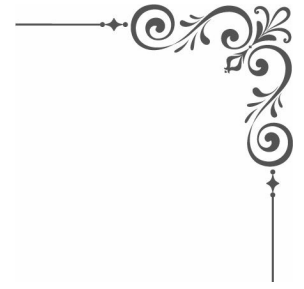
“Cool. Handy. I mean, I’m not opposed to having women on the Night Watch rotas. We already have a few,” Manny said, a puzzled frown on his face. He volunteered with the Night Watch, a supernatural version of a Neighborhood Watch that protected peaceful paranormal Pine Ridge from those who would seek to injure innocents.

“Sera sees a beautiful woman coming to town. She is seeking to break something, change something, disturb something—but Sera is unsure what specifically. I came to you because this woman is not truly alive, which is why Sera can sense her impending arrival. Now, she cannot always sense things clearly, but... But she said this woman was like you. She drew a picture of her, Manny. Do you know her? Is she dangerous?” Minegold’s Eastern European accent became more evident in his agitation as he drew out a small piece of paper and held it out.

Manny took it, and his creaky old heart faltered in its slow, steady rhythm. “Rhea.”

“Who?”

“My wife.”



Manny Finklestein, age forty, small business owner. Lives in the Pine Point Townhouse Community, in Pine Ridge, New York.

And that was all the private detective she'd hired two years ago would give her. He'd been unwilling to explain how a Swiss immigrant had arrived in New York in 1820 and moved into an Ashkenazi Jewish tenement area in New York. How he'd fed rumors about a 'golem' protecting small businesses, families, and synagogues during times of unrest until Manny Finklestein's Bicycle and Machine Repair opened in Pine Ridge in 1902.

So Manny is good with his hands.

Rhea blushed as she remembered his hands on her. He'd been so thorough in his explorations, clumsy but gentle, acting solely on instincts—hers. He'd responded to every sound of pleasure and pain like he was made for her, not the other way around.

No other lover or battery-operated assistant had ever been his equal.

He had listened to her so well back then.

How had he missed the part where she said, "I love you. Never leave me. Save me from this horrible world."

Because you didn't say it aloud, did you, Rhea?

And you can't really blame him, can you? He was only a few months older than you and way more traumatized. You had him to shield you and protect you at first.

Who did he have? You weren't much use.

"Pine Ridge!"

Rhea tucked the report back in her purse, next to her petition for divorce and her marriage license. She shouldn't have obtained the license illegally years and years ago, as it was now part of her identity, her tax records, everything. And now it necessitated this *other* item.

No, time and change necessitate it, Rhea. Buying a house and having to prove you're legally divorced from your 'illegal' marriage to get a mortgage necessitates it. More than that, it's time to get closure. Say your piece. Understand him. Use your words. Be an active listener.

Her virtual therapy sessions were really paying off.

Maybe she would pay for some for the poor detective who had hunted down Manny's information for her. The private detective who said 'nothing could surprise him' now looked like he needed therapy, or maybe a nice, long stay in a small, padded area with lots of alcohol and soft music.

Rhea blinked in the chilly December dusk as she stepped out on the platform of the small station. She pulled out her phone and opened her MapApp to figure out where Manny's shop was. Or should she go to his home?

His home with a new wife? Kids? Could they have children? She didn't know. Her body was reanimated. It worked, but not in the normal way of human biology.

Well, let him have his new woman and a new life. She hadn't been a pure and sinless woman, waiting for him.

Okay, maybe *some* part of her had been waiting for him.

Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor* suddenly bubbled under her fingers, making her lose her grip on her phone in surprise.

"Oh! Miss Kimball. Hello." Rhea put the phone up to her ear and moved to the exterior corner of the station, watching lots of college-aged adults hugging each other goodbye. She surmised they must be heading home for the winter break. According to the signage, Pine Ridge was a college town.

Her realtor's voice was impatient. "Someone else put an offer on the condo you wanted. Five thousand more."

Rhea smiled. Since the turn of the century, money had become easier for women to earn and the wage gap had narrowed, particularly in the last fifty years. She could easily counter that offer, and even stretch a little higher. "I really love it. It's the perfect location. Tell them five thousand more than that."

"Sorry, I can't. You're not approved for that amount."

"Well, I know, but you said that was just a technicality since—"

"It's not in my control any longer. It's been thirty days since you received pre-approval, but that was temporary. During that time, you had to declare which assets were marital property and which were solely yours. You have three days to show them either your husband's W-2 and other required paperwork, or the divorce decree."

Rhea gripped the phone hard, slender white fingers threatening to smash it with their surprisingly brutal strength. "But—what about a petition for divorce?"

"I thought you said you and your husband were divorced already?"

"Separated for years. We met when we were...very young." *Hours old, in my case. But parts of me could have been twenty, thirty, or even older.*

Try explaining that science fiction monster madness to your realtor with an intimidating blonde Karen-cut and the energy of a chihuahua in a power suit.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Stein. It’s not feasible for us to pursue house-hunting until your documents are in order. Many separated individuals are able to purchase homes while a divorce is being finalized, but you’ll need to get some information from your former spouse so that we can ensure that his assets and any marital property aren’t counted as part of your assets when you apply for a mortgage. Until you have those pieces of information or your decree of divorce, house hunting is just a waste of time.”

“But—”

“It’s also not something my office encourages. You see, many families with young children who are ready to purchase a home *immediately* use the winter break to view homes or throw open houses when everything looks festive. I have to devote my time and resources to those *pertinent* clients at the moment.”

Rhea didn’t often let herself get angry. To her, there was a clear connection between anger and evil. Rumors and tales of her origin might make her some creepy, violent horror, but whenever she could, she chose a life of simple actions and peace.

“I see.” Rhea did see, through a haze of mounting fury. She was mad at Alice Kimball for sweet-talking her into touring houses and condos that were at the tippy top of her price range, then dropping her. She was mad at herself for lying decades ago about having a husband and then again when she had claimed to be divorced. Anger turned into a tidal wave and a time machine, unburying all the rage she carefully managed to keep under wraps. Rhea was livid at Dr. Victor Frankenstein for sewing bits of dead bodies together and giving her life without a proper birth, making her grow up when her body was already that of a woman, forcing her to navigate the world with hiding, lies, and clumsiness. She was even angry at society for spending decades telling women they had no rights to work, earn money, or hold property unless they were someone else’s property—someone’s wife.

“Well, thank you for understanding, and have a happy holiday season. I’ll be ready to help you find the perfect home as soon as your mortgage is properly pre-approved.”

The realtor hung up, and Rhea let out a bitter little chuckle.

“Don’t think so, Alice.”

Rhea went back to opening MapApp. Pine Point wasn't far. Manny's Automotive wasn't far.

Caught in the middle again.

Sudden tears leaked from her eyes.

Man. Manny. She was so angry at him, and yet she couldn't even explain why. Mad at him for leaving her? He had made sure she was able to escape. Everyone knew he killed the madman who created them.

Mad at him for not coming back?

I don't need him. Don't want him. I just used his existence as a crutch.

He wanted me to stand on my own two feet, huh? Well, I will.

Fear mingled with anger.

What will it be like to see him after all this time?



“WHY IS SHE COMING HERE? Oh, my God. Oh, no.” Manny paced, hands running through his thick dark hair. “What could she want?”

“Should we have someone stay with you? Watch your back?” Jasper asked his frantic friend.

“She can't be angry at me! Can she? Why would she be? I set her free!”

“Free?” Minegold's graying brow arched.

“She... She was made for me, guys. A plaything to keep me happy. I wanted a woman like other men had—and Frankenstein knew no ‘real’ living woman would have me. He made Rhea and trotted her down to me, and...” Manny knew his blood was sluggish. His green-gray cheeks didn't flush with hot blood as he blushed.

How could he explain that he had tried to woo and court her in his clumsy, confused way, and had consummated their unorthodox marriage without knowing if it was truly her desire? Oh, Rhea had seemed pleased and even enthusiastic for his touch, but...

Manny couldn't speak. Two centuries of education on love, sex, and relationships had opened his eyes to so many things. What a horrible beast he must have seemed. And he hadn't even heard of all the techniques and positions *AutoMech Monthly* included in their “Keeping Her Happy” column.

Jasper came up beside him. “Hey. Whatever happened between you wasn't entirely your fault. Did you hurt her?”

“I don't think so,” Manny whispered.

“Maybe she needs your help with something,” Minegold suggested. “It could even be that Sera was wrong, or this woman just looks very similar.”

Manny shook his head. “I never searched for her to make sure she was safe. What if she wasn’t? What if she’s in trouble?”

“Wait, are we gunning for this lady or riding out in the full damsel-saving outfit?” Jasper demanded.

Manny reared and gave a single roar as if lightning had suddenly zipped down his spine. “No one hurts her!”

“Manny. Be at peace,” Minegold warned, eyes glinting crimson in the overhead lights of the small office attached to the three-bay garage. “Jasper meant no harm.”

“I know. I’m sorry. But no one harms Rhea. If she wants to hurt someone—she can hurt me. I would deserve it.”

“We cannot allow that. We cannot allow anyone, even those we love dearly, to harm the people of this town,” Minegold warned, voice severe.

Manny knew he was right—but the words struck him, the thunderclap following the lightning.

Do I love her?

“It’s been over two hundred years since we were together. Am I still *allowed* to love someone I let go that long ago?” Manny murmured, giant hands resting and flexing on the service counter.

“Letting go of someone we love is such a strange idea.” Minegold’s eyes returned to their normal hue and he rested an elegant violinist’s hand on the shoulder that was hunched over him. “I made sure my Magda and our children escaped Warsaw nearly a century ago. In eighty years, I have not looked at another woman. Magda is long gone, but I love her still. Your Rhea is still on this earth.”

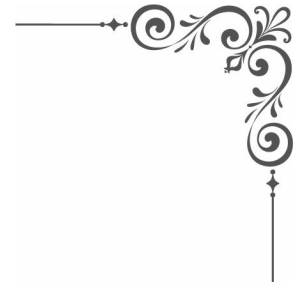
Manny nodded, swallowing twice. “True. Yeah. I don’t know what to do with all of this, guys. Thanks for being around. I’ll handle Rhea if she’s dangerous. Honestly, I don’t think she could be.”

“You left her and didn’t call for two hundred *years*? Dang, I’ve had girls refuse to speak to me when I didn’t call back after two *days*.” Jasper shook his head, eyes wide.

Minegold huffed and took the young, handsome weatherman by the elbow. “Come along, Jasper. I will give you dating advice on the way to the Night Market. We will stay there, near the shop, Manny. It’s not too cold for an evening stroll, and the Night Market looks most festive just now.”

Jasper dug in his heels. “I wanna stay here! And I don’t need dating advice from you. No offense, Jakob, but you just said you haven’t dated in eighty years!”

“And out of the two of us, who has been happily married? Me. Now, walk.”



Manny's. A green, white, and yellow porcelain sign with rolling cursive letters straight from the 1940s made Rhea ache to whip out her camera. It was lovingly cared for, in mint condition, despite the fact that a small fenced-in lot packed with cars next to the white and gray building indicated Manny's was a popular destination for auto repair. The whole thing was neat as a pin—and the lights were still on.

Fat red, green, and yellow bulbs were strung over the protrusion of the roof that ran along the edge of the garage. A neatly-lettered black and white sign on the left picture window proclaimed "State Inspections" and held a glittering menorah. The right window held a miniature Christmas tree covered in faded white angels and twinkling lights, while the sign above it proclaimed "We Service All Models."

She hesitated before going in, standing in her chic red boots in a smattering of snow flurries as she looked around the town. Ponderosa Avenue had lots of little businesses on it. Rhea could see a school and a big grocery store in the distance, and then some sort of holiday bazaar across the way in a big lot between streets. Dozens of stalls were set up, and white lights were strung over it.

Homey.

The word was delicious. She had wanted a home since her creation, and years of wandering, war, and fear had denied it to her. Rhea had kept moving, afraid of being discovered, even though most humans couldn't see the paranormal things of the world.

Pine Ridge was a prime example of that. She was sure she'd just seen an Orc and a human strolling through the bazaar together without attracting anything but nods and waves.

Anger muted to a sad sort of wistfulness.

What right do I have to upset Manny? None. It wasn't his fault he was saddled with me, and he made sure I got away free. I could have searched for him harder.

Don't give him a hard time. Just get the papers signed.

With a bigger shove than she intended, she pushed open the glass door and flung herself into the middle of the sales and service office of Manny's Automotive.



MANNY CAME BACK FROM the long parts and supplies room behind the garage area of the shop, carrying several oil filters and boxes of brake pads. He stopped dead behind his desk, swaying slightly, all the boxes toppling to the floor.

Even though he'd known Rhea might show up, seeing her in person was a shock.

The last time he had seen her, she'd been in a simple white cotton dress. It was clear Frankenstein never expected her to venture outside of their confinement or need the fine clothes other women wore. Her hair had been long and somewhat brittle and matted, her face, haggard and tired, perpetually confused—except when he'd found ways to soothe her.

Manny shook that thought free as he tried to speak.

Rhea had been beautiful to him then.

She would be beautiful to anyone now. Her long black and white hair was thick, full, and in a cute pile on top of her head. The loose gown was replaced with tight denim jeans, a puffy red jacket, and lace-up red boots that reached just under her knee and ended with a low heel.

Holy Hot Wife.

At last, he managed, “H-Hi.”

“Hi.” She waved back, slender white hands with ruby-tipped fingers flexing along with a small, nervous smile.

“What brings you to town?”

Argh! No! Don't say casual small talk words. Say big words! Important words.

Stupid second-hand brain.

“Oh. Good. Right to business.” Rhea's smile faded. “I need you to sign divorce papers. I can fake a lot of legal documentation, but not for a mortgage. It's funny what they choose to scrutinize, too.”

Manny pitched forward, hand coming down heavily on the keyboard of his ancient beige desktop, sending it slamming off the counter and to the floor. He caught the monitor just in time. “Divorce?”

“Yeah. Sorry to spring this on you. I know we weren't really married, but —”

“We weren't? I thought... I thought it counted. When—you know. Back then.” Manny put the monitor back and cautiously made his way around the counter. Rhea didn't back away.

Good sign.

“*Legally*, we weren’t married. But life was very dangerous for a single, unmarried, *unprotected* female in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Man. Claiming my husband was alive but overseas or in the military was the only way I was able to find housing or work. Unless I wanted to live as a monster, lurking in the shadows, hiding and stealing.” Her eyes hardened. “I see you didn’t choose that. Neither did I.”

“Oh. Oh, no. I never... I never knew how hard it would be for you. I didn’t know much about the world, Rhea. I only knew we were Frankenstein’s specimens to play with. I knew more death and madness were waiting in the walls of that castle. I just wanted you to be free. And safe. I knew you didn’t want to be with me, but I should have made sure you were —”

“What do you mean? *What?*” Rhea’s voice lost the cool, factual tones she had been using and turned shrill.

Manny stopped walking toward her, slab-like boots rooted to the neatly mopped and seal-coated concrete floor. “What?”

“What do you mean, I didn’t want to be with you? You were the only safe thing in my world! Of *course* I wanted to be with you! You loved me!”

The world tipped and flipped. “But... No! You were gifted to me like a plaything. You didn’t *choose* me as your husband. I mean, partner. Whatever. It was... You were forced. I didn’t give you a choice. You looked at me with such... *fear* at times.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying not to cry. She didn’t deserve to have her emotions toyed with or her pity evoked. “I don’t blame you. I was scary and mentally not in a good spot. Of course, I’ll sign anything you need me to. But... I hope that one day you’ll forgive me.”



RHEA SHOVED THE PAPERS back in her purse, a look of consternation on her face, head tilted, mouth half-open. “Man! Manny, I said I was your woman and you were my man. I said we’d be safe together. Don’t you remember that?”

“Yes, but I thought... I thought that was all you knew and what you believed had to be. You did, Rhea. You believed you were meant to live in a dark dungeon with a big, ugly monster, *s-servicing* him.” Manny’s mouth twisted as if he could spit out the vileness of the words and thoughts in his head.

Rhea put a hand to her mouth, nodding. Yes. She had believed that. But the big, ugly monster hadn't been her husband. It had been her creator. Not the gentle giant who'd shown her their cold, dark world also held pleasure and softness—the man who was standing before her.

“I didn't want to be free of *you*. I wanted to be free of that life.”

“I delivered, didn't I? And I hunted him down. He fled the mob and got away, Rhea. I tracked him to the very ends of the world, and I... I ended him while he ordered me to obey his commands as his ‘Creature,’ as his ‘Creation.’ I didn't listen. Because if I let him live... there was always a chance that he would hurt you again. It took me nearly a year to find him and destroy him. I figured you would have realized you were free and been happy about it by that time.”

Rhea nodded slowly. “I did appreciate the freedom. I didn't appreciate the loneliness. But, I figured... I figured you'd done your best by me. You didn't want me. You were just gifted this... this *thing* and expected to love it.” Rhea gestured to her body.

“I did! I do! You were made for me, and you were unhappy! My selfish wish not to be alone brought you into this world and hurt you so badly.” Manny came over to her, hands outstretched in supplication. “Oh, Rhea. I've replayed that last conversation in my head so many times. All of our words. There weren't that many, but I hope I told you how much I loved you. How you were the beautiful, bright spot in a living hell.”

Her hands lifted from her sides, fluttering uncertainly as they went to reach for his but stopped short. “Your actions didn't match. You *left* me.”

Manny's spine stiffened, and he drew himself up, looking down on her with hardness in his black eyes. “You never said you loved me. I thought you tolerated me and allowed me to be with you out of necessity. I didn't think you were with me by choice, Rhea, but only because you lacked the freedom to choose otherwise. I knew what that was like. I longed for freedom.”

“I longed for *you*.” Rhea bit her lip hastily. Those words were not supposed to pop out.

“Oh.” Thick dark brows reached the scar under his hairline, lifted in surprise.

“But that was a long time ago.” Rhea fumbled in her bag. “If it was mutual, that would be different.”

“I came to New York and never left. I... Part of me hoped if you ever needed me, you would find me. But I didn't seek you. I didn't want you to

think I was hunting you down to get you back. Like property. Frankenstein gave you to me, like property.”

Rhea was a modern woman, but some parts of her were very old-fashioned—including her actual body. The idea of belonging to someone was beautiful—if it was mutual. Words like *home* and *husband* made her soul ache, a soul she now knew was scarred and torn but mended and fully her own.

The modern side of her absolutely adored the way Manny was so incensed by the idea that she had been his against her wishes or without her consent. She could tell he realized that she had been some sort of pawn to appease him.

And he really meant it when he said he'd make sure I was able to be free. And if he didn't believe all the things I said, I suppose he had a good reason. When you believe someone is only with you out of fear or obligation, it casts everything in a different light.

“What Frankenstein did and what you did were two very different things. I think that both of us made mistakes—and that neither of us could help it.”

“So, you’ll forgive me? That’s all I want for Hanukkah. Or Christmas. Or Yule. Any of the holidays, really.”

She gave her long-lost husband a half-smile. “For some things. Other things might take a little longer.”

“What can I do? Tell me, Rhea, I’ll do anything. I only ever wanted you to be free and safe. I thought that would make you happy. And if I miscalculated on any of those areas, then I am so truly sorry. I’ll do anything.” Manny took her hands in his, folding them in an earnest grasp.

Rhea jumped, a distant memory of electricity coursing through her veins. His touch. Only his touch. Had Victor Frankenstein added some witchcraft to his science that meant only her designated “mate” would instantly spark such feelings in her?

Or was it the pleading in his voice and the hunger in his eyes?

“I knew you were a good man,” Rhea whispered. “Never a monster.”

Manny’s face went from sad, to stunned, to pleased. He smiled and swallowed as he nodded, two tears trickling from his eyes as he blinked. “That’s all I ever wanted—and all I’ll ever ask for from you. That you believe I was trying to be good.”

Her fingers kneaded his as she watched the emotions on his face shift again. Confusion. Cautious hope. “I believe it. But why did you think I would

be okay on my own?”

“You learned far faster than I did. You were his second successful creation. I was the bigger, clumsier model.” Manny pounded his chest with a hollow laugh. “With your incredible beauty and your intelligence, I figured that... I figured that you’d be someone’s treasured wife within a few weeks. He did a much better job crafting you.” Manny deftly ran his finger over her cheek. “Even then, you could barely see the scars...”

Rhea leaned into the lukewarm gentleness of his hand, eyes closed. “Only you would have thought this face was beautiful,” she murmured.

His voice was low and soothing, familiar yet more refined. “Nonsense. So beautiful, Rhea. I should have told you to choose the name Aphrodite or Venus instead...”

And then a horrible thought struck her out of nowhere, the way bad thoughts do when you finally allow yourself to relax for a moment. “What about your life now? Wife? Children?”

Manny shook his head and cupped her chin, tilting it up so she could see the intensity in his eyes. “All of my life, all the decades I’ve been on this earth—I’ve only had one lover, one beloved, one wife. Rhea.”

Rhea swallowed, another bolt of lightning hitting her middle.

“But you?” Manny dropped his hand from her face.

She caught it. “I’m single and looking for a place to settle down.”

“Oh! Oh, Rhea, please try Pine Ridge! You’ll love it!” Manny squeezed her fingers with his own. “I’ll show you around, introduce you to some people. You won’t have any problem getting a mortgage here!” He dropped his voice, “The bank is run by werewolves. Hey, I’ll even co-sign. Or... Um.” Manny stopped talking, suddenly bug-eyed and looking as if someone was choking him with the collar of his navy blue work shirt.

“Um, what?” Rhea asked, smiling. She was both delighted and disappointed by his response. Delighted because he hadn’t automatically assumed she’d just be his little wife again and was talking about her making her own life here. Disappointed because a large part of her *wanted* to pick up where they’d left off, now aided by knowledge, experience, freedom, and much better communication skills.

“N-nothing. I... I just had a thought.”

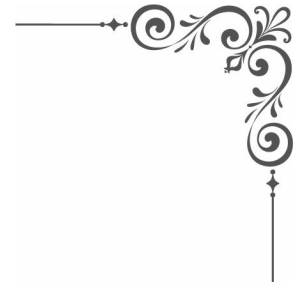
“I always liked when you spoke to me and shared your thoughts. Both of our vocabularies have improved with age. So have our listening skills and knowledge of the world. What... What were you thinking?” Rhea hoped her

body language was coming across as open and receptive. She let her hand dare to find Manny's elbow and hold on.

"If you like Pine Ridge enough to give it a chance, maybe you would also consider giving me a second chance? Starting tonight?" Manny patted the hand on his arm gently, his touch light and without pressure.

Which was so very, very attractive in a man. All new kinds of pressure developed, nebulous thoughts turning into solid weights and lining her insides, making all of her feel hot and tight. Breathless.

"I've been looking for home for so long," Rhea whispered. "I should have started by looking for you."



“What’s your favorite food?”

“Anything and everything. I love to eat, and I’ve been all over the world. I’ve tried so many things and haven’t found anything I didn’t like enough to have a second time.” Rhea took his arm, and Manny felt like the centuries apart dropped away.

He wanted to pull her close and nuzzle his head into her neck, holding her tight. Then he wanted to take her someplace private and prove that he wasn’t an oafish rutting science project in the bedroom anymore.

Does she even remember that? Would she ever let me near her again? I must have seemed like such a terrible lover. Only had instincts to guide me. That, and her responses. I tried to follow every clue and cue she gave.

He locked the shop door and waved goodnight to Georgia Fenclan, his business neighbor from across the street and his development neighbor by a few cul-de-sacs.

“This is the kind of place where you wave to people? To humans?” Rhea looked up at him, eyes wide.

“Oh, Georgia’s half-Orc, but you’d never know by the outside. And as for waving... yeah. Most people in town don’t see us as we are, but there’s a bunch who do.”

“I know most can’t see us, but I rarely draw attention to myself. It took me thirty years to decide to apply for a mortgage!”

“I’m sorry, Rhea. That’s my fault. I should—”

“I think we’ll have to stop blaming ourselves—and each other, if we want the next two hundred years to be happier than the last.”

Manny knew his face must be brighter than the strings of lights up and down Ponderosa, Pinecrest, and the Night Market.

She said the next two hundred.

He risked pulling her shoulders under his arm and holding her tight. “Dinner and then the night Market, if you’re up to it. Where are you staying in town? Do you have to leave tonight?”

Yes, he was babbling.

Rhea smiled and shook her head. “I’m a freelance photographer and a keen investor. As long as I have the internet, my camera, and my phone, I’ll stay afloat. Photography is slowing down more and more as everyone turns amateur. These new phones... I’m actually considering a career change. Something slow and steady. Stable. Every day you go in, see the same people, and know how to do the same tasks. I’ve never been able to have a

job like that for fear of being seen for what I am. But in a place like Pine Ridge, it could work. I bet that sounds boring to a lot of people, but it sounds refreshing to me.”

Manny could hardly keep from squealing—and his squeal sounded more like a bull bellowing. “I haven’t had a receptionist in four years! I do everything myself at the shop, and it’s hard to juggle sometimes. I don’t know if you’d ever consider working there—with the customers, not the engines—but I could use the help. I’d show you what to do.”

“I’ll think about it.” Rhea snuggled under his arm.



THIS IS A DREAM.

So, I’ll wake up soon.

But it can’t be a dream. It’s too cold and this fudge is too good and everything in my mouth is too good. Manny feels so incredible against me...

Rhea sipped hot cider from a stand at the Night Market. They were cutting across it to go to a Chinese place, the Jade Forest, and her taste buds had been enticed by the dozens of different scents wafting around them.

“Anything else, Manny?” The man at the fudge stall asked.

“That’s it.”

“Who’s your friend? New in town?”

“This is my—my—”

“I’m his wife, Rhea.” Rhea saved Manny, just as she had with every person who’d come up to greet him that night. He seemed uncertain about taking the liberty of calling her his wife, but she utterly loved the reactions each time she supplied the term. The people talking to them stopped, shouted with joy, and hugged them both, babbling away.

And every time, Manny stood up straighter and hugged her closer, beaming.

Soon he’ll touch the moon, she thought with a grin.

“The Bride of Finkelstein. Love it!” The man at the fudge stall pounded Manny’s shoulder and gave them another box of fudge. “For the bride and groom. Hey, Manny, I need you to look at the Toyota again. I think it’s the alternator this time.”

“Bring it in tomorrow. I’ll squeeze you in.” Manny waved and turned them from the stand, back on the trajectory of cutting across the lot to get to the restaurant.

“Manny! How good to see you. This must be the beautiful Rhea.”

Rhea stopped short as a man with a charming Old World accent and lovely Old World manners bowed over her hand and pecked the air above it.

“Mr. Minegold is one of my oldest friends, Rhea.”

“Very pleased to meet you.” Rhea smiled.

“You have absolutely no idea how thrilled I am to meet you. Ah. Manny’s other half. You know, you two look as though you belong together. In almost eighty years, I have never seen Manny look this happy. Not even when he won Pine Ridge’s Best Automotive Repair for the tenth year in a row and was mentioned on the news.”

Rhea didn’t know what to say, so she nodded politely.

“Rhea’s seeing if she likes it here, Jakob. She might relocate.”

“Do, my dear! Do. It’s a very nice place to call home.”

There’s that word again, thought Rhea.

Too good to be true.

All a dream.

But I know I’m awake.

Is this my reward for living in a nightmare for so long?



“SO. TEN TIMES IN A row? Best in Pine Ridge? You got your picture in the paper?” Rhea stared at him as she delicately speared her pepper steak.

Manny blushed. “Nah. I just got mentioned on the local news, that’s all. No picture in the paper. I hate having my picture taken. I know people don’t usually spot that we’re ‘different’ when they see us in person, but you can’t control who sees a photograph.”

“It’s true. That’s one reason why I love being a photographer. You can stay on the other side of the camera. And you know who people never take pictures of? Who they almost never even glance at?” Her lips quirked in a crimson slash, impish and knowing.

She might as well have speared his heart instead of helpless slices of beef. “The photographer?” Manny hazarded.

“Yep.”

“Smart. I knew you were smart. Not like me.”

“Honey, everyone seems smart when they have decades to study. Also, don’t sell yourself short. I look under the hood of a car, and my brain shuts off.”

“I bet in a year I could have you rebuilding an engine. I’d teach you if you wanted to learn. I’d do anything for you. Help you do anything,” he whispered, and he didn’t know if he sounded desperate, or just chivalrous. He hoped it was the second option. Manny had years of neglect to make up for, despite what Rhea said about moving forward.

The toe of Rhea’s sexy red boots touched his thick black steel-toed boots. “You’re very sweet.”

“Well, I try.”

“No, I can tell. Ten people must have stopped to greet us tonight, and each time they found out I was your wife, they were nearly hysterical with joy.”

“Oh, I fix almost every car in town, that’s all. It’s either me or the dealership, so people know me.” Manny shrugged.

Rhea shook her head. Modest to a fault. “I’ve met plenty of people who don’t have a good word to say about their mechanics, their hairdressers, their doctors... No. Those people love you, and they were genuinely happy for you. That only happens to good people, with good people.”

Manny wracked his brains. Was he supposed to agree? He turned to praising the town. “You’re right about the sweet people. Especially in the supernatural community. We’re pretty close-knit. You’d be welcomed with open arms. You know, by all of us. Not just me.”

Her boot moved up his calf and rested there.

“I missed you so much,” he confessed. “I know I had no right to.”

“I don’t think there was anything right about us being thrown together or torn apart, Manny. We could try to fix things—*really* fix things. If you wanted to.”

“More than you could ever guess.” His fingers laced with hers on the tabletop.

“I’m not so sure about that.”



MANNY HAD AN OLD BLUE pickup truck, all shiny chrome with a hand-painted sign on each door of the cab proclaiming, “Manny’s Automotive.” He held the door for her and boosted her up into the cab with his hand on the small of her back.

The contact made her shiver.

When was the last time?

1999?

No, maybe in 2009.

Lovers had been few and far between, each having had to earn some modicum of trust.

“So, there’s a beautiful little paranormal-friendly hotel out on the outskirts called Country Pines. I’ve never stayed there, but everyone who has tried it raves about it. I’ll put you up there.”

“It’s not that late.” Rhea glanced at her phone.

Oh. It *was* that late. Almost midnight.

They’d closed the restaurant down and made another trip through the Night Market, arm in arm, talking without stopping.

“No! It’s not. I could talk to you all night. There’s a place called Jax Alley. It’s not exactly elegant, but they’re open until two.”

She said nothing, trying to find the right words.

Take me home. Your home. Make me yours again. Let me make you mine.

She went with, “I didn’t plan on needing a hotel.”

Simultaneously, Manny blurted, “I have a second bedroom.”

“Oh. I’d love to see the townhouses you mentioned. Especially as a potential resident of Pine Ridge.” Her fingers tiptoed on his knee.

Am I giving mixed signals? I don’t want to.

But if I give myself to him again and he lets me go...

I can’t even die of a broken heart.

“I w-wasn’t expecting to pick up where we left off in every way,” Manny murmured. “I hope you know that.”

“I know you weren’t expecting it. I sure as hell wasn’t. Not until I saw you.”

Rhea let the words hang over them both as Manny drove slowly through the dark winter night. Lights were already up on most houses and all through the streets.

If I lose him without telling him that I want him... If I let him slip away this time...

Nope. Still can’t die of a broken heart.

“What would you do, if you could rewind everything?” Rhea asked.

“I’ve thought about that question every single day for two hundred years. My answer changes every time. But now that I’ve gotten to see you again, I think I finally know for sure. I would have asked you if you wanted to be with me. If you loved me, or even if you just liked me enough to hope things

would develop into love. If you'd said yes, then I would have asked you to wait for me in the woods by the castle and promised to return, even if it meant you had to wait a year while I tracked down Frankenstein. Then, we would have gone to New York together. Or Australia. Paris. Rome. Wherever. We would have had a little home and a little business. Maybe even little ones—somehow.”

Manny's voice drifted and she drifted with it, eyes blurring with tears that turned the bright lights into radiant stars and snow flurries into shining white specks.

“What would you have done?” Manny asked.

“Followed you and helped you kill that monster. Then escaped to New York or Paris, or wherever we thought we could be safe, and become Mrs. Rhea Finklestein. With a little wedding in a synagogue or church, not just—not just being put into the same cell with you.”

“Oh, Rhea. Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. I'll... We get another chance.” Manny pulled the car over and reached for her, letting her fall against his chest, lips buried in her hair.

She didn't sob. Rhea nuzzled in, loving the ancient scent that was just him mixed with other new scents like fudge, clove, and engine oil that lingered on his clothes.

“What would you have said? Back then?”

“I would have gone with you!” Rhea mumbled, muffled in his shirt.

“Good. But, no. A-about loving me?”

Words wound from the recesses of her mind, through all the anger and resentment, through all the fear and torment. “I didn't understand what love was or what it should be like. But if you had explained that it meant wanting to be with the person no matter what, knowing they care for you and want to protect you and wanting to do the same in return—then I would have said yes with every bit of my borrowed heart.” Rhea peered up into his face.

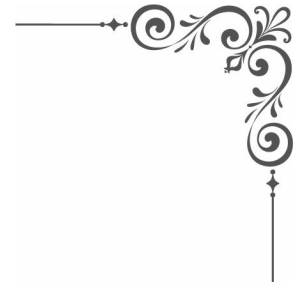
“Borrowed heart,” he mouthed, nodding in wonder. “Mine has always been borrowed. I've been keeping it safe for you. You've owned it since the first day I saw you.”

Now, she was sobbing, unbuckling the heavy old seatbelt, and sliding across the worn bench seat to cling to him like moss on a tree branch. “Take me home and promise me we won't ever leave each other again unless we both want it?” she hiccuped, messy crying and not even caring.

Manny put his foot on the clutch, shifted into first, and roared through the windy streets of the development until he jerked the car to a halt in front of a pretty little cream townhouse with brown trim covered in icicle lights. With his supernatural strength, Manny didn't bother to release her as he got out of the car. He pulled her with him, lifting her in one arm as she curled her arms around his neck.

"May I please carry my bride over the threshold?" Manny asked, slamming the pickup door shut behind them.

"You may."



This is a dream.

T Rhea bit down on his lip as they shared a long, lingering kiss in the small entryway of the townhouse.

It hurt in the perfect way.

Correction. This is a dream come true.

“I thought about you every day,” Manny gasped when she released him.

“I always wanted another chance to be with you,” she gasped back, hands on his chest, not letting him take off his coat or even back up. If he moved, she did, too.

“Rhea. I won’t leave again. It was a foolish mistake, a misunderstanding. I understand now. I think. I think...you want us to be together? In every way?”

“I want to at least try. Sometimes magic does funny things to time. I wonder if this magical little town can erase two hundred years of loneliness and heartache?”

“With you in it, yes. It can. We don’t have to rush, though.”

Rhea used to look at him with timid eyes. That was no longer the case. Only death by fire, he remembered as her eyes scorched him.

“I’m not trying to slip away, my love. I don’t think I gave you enough time last time. I don’t want to make the same mistakes.” Manny’s hands closed over hers, willing his body to be calm and rational.

Rhea nodded, letting her hands drop, slowly slipping off the coat that hugged her figure, revealing that mouth-watering outfit of tight jeans and curve-hugging sweater again.

He’d never appreciated just how generously padded his beautiful bride was—or maybe time had changed that.

“You probably did rush me—but we had no idea. We were made out of death, put into a timeless state. We seized the moment. Seized each other. I wanted you. Your touch was comforting. Pleasurable. No other hands, not even my own, have ever delivered the kind of bliss yours did. Given the conditions we were in and how little we knew? That’s quite a testament to your ability.”

“I went by instincts, yours and mine. When your noises changed, so did my actions. You were my guiding star in a dark place.”

“Manny.” Rhea slid close to him again. “I won’t let us repeat the same mistakes. I’m no confused fledgling any longer. I know exactly what I want.”

“Tell me, so I can give it to you.” Manny put his hands on her waist, head bending to hers, hoping to catch her lips.

“I love you. Want to show me those bedrooms? Actually, just yours.”

“Easily changed to ‘ours.’” Manny tensed, waiting for rejection despite her reassurances.

Instead, she melted against him, limp enough that he scooped her up, kissing her as he carried her through the hall and up the stairs.

Beautiful angel. Finally home.



MANNY TRIED TO REMEMBER the thousands of articles and soundbites he'd been exposed to over the years.

Gentle. Tender. Patient. Slow. Make a woman feel safe and warm. Cherish her. Treasure her.

“How about we wrap up in blankets, and I'll pour us some wine? Hot toddy? Are you cold?”

“I'm actually very hot at the moment. I'd like to get out of these clothes and into that bed.”

“I don't want to rush you.”

“Think of it as meeting me there, Manny. Or...” Rhea's eyes widened in shock and then shrank down in worry, scrunching with pain. “Do you want to refrain from being intimate so soon? I understand.”

“No! God, no. I want to show you everything I never got to try before. I want to make you come a thousand ways, hear you cry my name, and kiss every inch of you! I just... I just want to be a good husband this time.” His shoulders fell.

“First rule of good husbanding is ‘happy wife, happy life,’” Rhea laughed in relief.

The relief was shared, square face breaking into a wide grin. “Oh. Good rule.”

“It would make me very happy to get reacquainted with that body I was made for,” Rhea purred, tugging him toward the bed.



“I...I NEED TO TAKE a shower first.” Manny put one knee on the bed and paused.

Rhea's confidence faltered. *How many hesitations do you need to tell you that he wants more time, even if his hormones are ready to go?*

But Manny pulled her from where she'd landed on her curvy rear, one hand on her wrist, the other cupping her ass in a way that sent a shockwave of heat through her.

"I'm a mechanic, which means I'm always covered in grease or smelling like brake fluid... Not sexy smells and hell on the laundry. I usually come right home and shower before I go anywhere, but I didn't do that tonight. You changed my routine, but I'm not complaining. Come with me? Want to?"

Hot, steamy shower sex? She'd never had that. The townhouse was a far cry from their first "apartment" made of iron bars, damp stone walls, and mossy floors, furnished only with a bowl of cold water, straw pallets, and guttering torches.

And that meant Manny would see her without her carefully applied makeup, naked, possibly in unflattering lighting.

Desire dealt with a pang of shyness when Manny's lips roved from her cheek to her throat, finding a spot between her collarbone and paradise, scraping it gently with his teeth as he suckled her skin. "Okay," she moaned, eyes closing and head tipping back.

Yet again, Manny picked her up and carried her.

Must be an instinct with him. To pick me up, protect me, and cradle me like he can't bear to let go.

She clung back. Decades of standing alone had created space for some serious snuggling.

"This shower is huge." Rhea had to be put down when they reached the bathroom so they could undress. She looked around the surprisingly palatial bathroom attached to the simply furnished master bedroom. It saved her from gawking at Manny.

Modern lighting is an aphrodisiac, she thought, all but drooling as Manny stripped off his blue work shirt and the work trousers that matched. All of his scars had faded, but his muscles had become thicker, fuller, and more well-defined.

He wears boxers. How very... tent-like. Rhea wondered if he had always been that large, or if she just had a new appreciation for the male body after observing so many others.

Not that I got to observe more than a few up close. She rolled her sweater off over her head and swayed closer to the massive hunk of man before her, appreciating for the first time how truly huge her husband was.

And how proportionate.

Her hands raked down his chest and over his back as he unhooked her bra and pushed her jeans down to her knees. They worked together in a frenzy to get her boots off, breathing turning rapid.

“You in those boots, bra, and panties... Rhea. If I don’t last long, I’ll make it up to you.” Manny was down by her feet, looking up at her black panties and the way her full breasts swung as she slithered her final piece of clothing free from her body.

“I’m going to bet you have the stamina of a superhero,” she panted, watching him rise and shuck his boxers, too.

She swallowed. Maybe their creator had been sick in more ways than one. Maybe he had a few other complexes besides the one that called him to play God.

Manny’s erection had a long, faded scar. Was that a cock and a half? Had Frankenstein given him extra inches, or just been fixing a tear in decaying skin?

“It’s not pretty, I know. I have candles in the kitchen in case the power goes out. Let me just—” Manny reached for a towel with a self-conscious stammer.

“You’re huge. You’re gorgeous. You’re mine. I l—” Rhea stopped, waiting until her voice was steady. “I love you, Manny. I love you just how you’re made.”

“He made you so incredibly beautiful,” Manny whispered, pressing their naked bodies together, hands massaging her shoulders, slicking down her back. “But you’ve added to it with grace, poise, and strength. You’ve made yourself the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen.”

His words undid any little knots of tension that remained. Manny had seen her at her true worst, and also at her best. What’s more, other men might see some vague, unobservant version of a pretty brunette, but Manny saw her as she truly was.

He means it, and he sees the real me.

“I love you, Rhea. Never going to let you go—unless you tell me to. Even then, I’ll argue.”

“Just never let me go, and we’ll skip the arguments.” Rhea laughed and let him help her into the immense bathtub. “Was this custom-made?”

“Installed it myself. This room used to have a walk-in closet, but now it’s just a little thing. Don’t worry. We can get you a wardrobe. Or my stuff can

go in a dresser. All I have is uniforms, some t-shirts, a couple of pairs of jeans—*mm!*”

Rhea kissed him to silence. “We have years of talking to make up for, I know.”

“It can wait a few more hours.” Manny agreed, a low rumble in his chest as he guided them under a steamy stream of water.

“Hours?” Rhea squeaked.

Her husband gave her a long, slow smile that made her wonder if there was just a hint of devil in his monstrously mixed-up genetics.



SUPERHERO STAMINA?

Not easy to live up to when your gorgeous wife has a monstrously hot pin-up body, with T&A for days, a tight little waist, and haunting blue-black eyes above a mouth that looked like it was made for sinful pursuits.

Show her you've changed before letting her show off her skills.

Manny scrubbed himself hurriedly and then directed his soapy hands all over Rhea, washing her breasts and back, sliding over the globes of her ass and over the perfect lovenest of curls between her thighs. With soft, soapy fingers, he massaged one breast as he cupped it in his palm. Standing behind her, he made her moan and go limp, giving him a chance to move onto the second front—that soft, sweet, velvety pussy.

“Oh!”

Rhea’s gasps were his guide, just like they had been all those years ago. One hand milked and rolled her nipple, twisting it as he kissed the curve of her neck. The other hand stroked her curls, over her folds, and found the tight protrusion of her clitoris. With light pressure, he circled on it, happily letting out a low hum against her skin.

“So good,” she whimpered.

“Just getting started. More?” Manny pressed harder, changing positions and reaching from behind, going through her legs so that her entire mound was cradled in his wide palm. Rhea let out a grunt of pleasure, wriggling against him. “Does my sweetheart like that?”

“Want to feel more of you. Inside,” she half-begged.

“I need to make you come first. Lots of times.”

“I can’t take lots of times without you!” she whimpered.

“You’re not without me. You’ll never be without me again.” Manny circled harder and faster, loving the feel of soft, soapy thighs clenching on him, feeling something slicker than soap and water flow into his palm. “So wet for me. I’m so hard for you.”

“I can tell.” Rhea’s hand slid behind her back and between their bodies, gripping his erection in her slender but strong fist.

Manny’s eyes rolled back. His bride had never stroked him before, but she was massaging him like an expert now, as if her sole purpose in life was to make him come. “Ohh, Oh, God.”

She took his moment of weakness to face him, yanking his head down to meld their mouths together while she pumped his cock.

But he could play at that game, going where she wanted him most. A single finger slid gently inside of her clenching walls, and Rhea began to buck forward instantly.

“Is that good? Want more?”

“Fuck, yes,” she whispered, eyes shut, face beaded with water.

How she could look so beautiful and make him want to do so many sinful things to her all at once was one of her great mysteries, Manny thought. His hand sped up as her hand squeezed and bore down, twisting against the sensitive head of his cock. When her whimper rose to a higher pitch, it was his cue to give her more, squeezing a second finger into her tight little pussy.

“Fuck, Rhea. You look so sexy like this.”

She did. Bobbing on his hand, breasts bouncing, her fist clamped on his cock. “Ride my hand. Good, take me in deep and squeeze me.”

“I love when you talk to me in bed. Or shower. Whatever, I love it.”

Rhea’s eyes rolled back as the heel of his hand rubbed her clit and his strong fingers pumped inside her, finding a soft, delicate spot on her upper wall that made her stumble and scream in pleasure.

I made her come. Manny could tell by the way she let go of his cock to grip his arms for support, her pussy spasming on his fingers and her thighs trembling slightly.

“Are you scrubbed enough?” Rhea asked as her tremors stopped.

“Almost.” Manny eased out of her, the scent of her arousal heavy in the air, trapped in the steam. So sweet and speaking of secrets and hidden pieces... Good enough to eat.

He hadn’t known before about pleasing a woman at all, let alone orally.

He knew now, in theory. Manny brought his fingers from their sweet, pallid nest up to his lips, watching Rhea's eyes dilate for a mere fraction of a second when he stuck them into his mouth and sucked. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" she asked in a hoarse, slightly dazed voice.

"That you'd taste as good as you look."



RHEA FOUND HERSELF swaddled and carried again, this time over his shoulder, something relaxed and playful between them for the first time ever. Manny turned his head with a growl and bit down on her thigh. "Manny!" she squealed.

"Yesss. I love it when you call my name."

"Then get in bed with me so I have a reason to!" Rhea squealed again when she was suddenly airborne, falling for only a second before she was in a plush nest of comforters and pillows.

"I *am* in bed."

Rhea adjusted herself onto her back and pushed her curly mass of hair out of her eyes.

Manny was smirking at her from the foot of the bed, while she was positioned all the way at the top of the immense double king-size mattress.

"I meant closer," she encouraged, voice tightening in tandem with her stomach as her husband planted his ham-like fists on the bed and grinned at her.

His body moved slowly and sinuously. The clumsy, jerky motions she recalled were completely gone, ironed out with use and time. Manny was prowling up to her, licking his lips. "One taste wasn't enough. I want more of you. I want to learn what you like, and I know so much more now. At least, in theory." His panther-like motions ceased with his head over her knees. "I don't know exactly how to use my mouth, or my hands, or any of these special toys they make for the bedroom, but I'll learn to do whatever you want."

Rhea leaned forward and cupped his square jaw, looking into his eyes. "This isn't only about me. Tell me what you like."

He shrugged, eyes dropping. "I liked staying busy. No one else has... There's only been you. It's okay if that's not the same in your case! I just never met anyone who could compare with my Rhea." Manny thrust his head forward, catching her lips. His next kiss fell on her neck, then her breastbone,

before his tongue trailed to each nipple. He left off when she gasped and wriggled her hips forward, seeking stimulation that would match the erotic sensations her upper body was experiencing.

Manny's tongue flickered over the long central scar that ran from ribs to pelvis, dropping a dozen kisses on the way. He paused and flattened out his broad gray-green body as he nudged her hips apart.

Rhea swallowed as he settled between her parted thighs, eyes locked on pieces of her anatomy that she knew were unnatural. Her lips and folds were pale as paper, snowy white instead of pink, brown, or peach. She was warm and wet—yet not fully alive. Blood flowed in a sluggish closed system, but didn't color her insides. Without her lipstick, her lips were beige at best. Even her tongue was a soft foggy peach instead of a vibrant pink.

“Look at you. Perfection. Like a gardenia. A lily. That must be why you smell so irresistible. So sweet. Like salt and honey.”

Rhea closed her eyes, limbs tight as his mouth met her nether lips in a slow, careful kiss.

No one had performed this act with her.

Manny is my first all over again.

She put her hands on the top of his head, fingers massaging his scalp, curling in the thick black hair as his tongue swam lazily against her, tasting her, touching her. “Suck on the clit,” she whispered, faintly, in case she wasn't supposed to say anything.

That's silly. He wants you to talk. To be a real partner.

Manny nodded against her, tilting his head up. “Like this?”

Rhea's eyes rolled upward and stayed there under closed lids. “Yes! Yes, like that.”

Manny sucked on her, pulling more and more of her pussy into his wide mouth. The seal of pressure and the pulsations as he made greedy little tugs were turning her into a clawing wildcat. Her hips slid down the bed, and Manny moved with her, letting her rub against him, smearing her juices across his cheeks and chin. He groaned in approval, the vibrations making her even wilder, more desperate to be filled.

“Fingers in me while you suck,” she gasped.

“What about tongue?”

Before she could say that probably wouldn't work, his firm, agile tongue was inside of her, swirling and thrusting.

“Oh, God! God, that's *good!*” Rhea squirmed more desperately.

“You certainly are.”

“Less puns, more sucking.”

“Okay.” Manny gripped her hips and rolled.

“What’s going on?” Rhea demanded.

In answer, Manny pulled her by the waist until her knees were spread on either side of his head.



ONE OF THE TRULY GREAT accomplishments for a newlywed—or an estranged newlywed, is making your sweet, angelic-looking wife come all over your face while she half-sobs your name.

Manny’s scalp was sporting a few gouges and his hairline was probably a little thinner, he realized. He didn’t mind. It was all proof of Rhea’s pleasure. Rhea was shuddering over top of him, coming hard on his tongue and fingers. It hadn’t even been that hard. All he had to do was adore all the inches of her, eating her like she was a white-fleshed peach.

“That was... How did... You haven’t been with other women? You can tell me. I won’t be mad.”

“No. Never. Well, there was a pretty girl in the late 1890s who kissed my cheek once.”

Rhea glared at him from her perch above his mouth. “That was it?”

“I promise. I just pretended you were a juicy peach and gobbled you up. Wasn’t hard to pretend.” Manny bent his head to get another mouthful.

A strong hand under his jaw stopped him.

His eyes met Rhea’s. Hers were burning and steady, unreadable. Anger? Passion?

“Did I do something wrong?” he wheezed.

Her grip loosened, and she shook her head. “No more for now. It’s time for something else.”

“Oh. Of course.” Manny sat up and slowly stretched his way up to lie beside her, reaching for her hand. “I’ll get better at it.”

She laughed, a sweet, trilling burst that he’d never heard and wanted to keep hearing forever. “You were wonderful at it.” The secret smile playing over her lips fled as she stared at him, letting the heated intensity in her eyes return. She ran a finger over the midline of his torso, weaving along faded scars and the natural definition of his rippling abs, pulled taut by years of carrying heavy hunks of metal.

Manny sighed as Rhea's hand finished its journey and wrapped around his swollen cock. Her gentle touch tightened, pushing his crown further from its sheath, revealing a stream of pre-cum dripping from his tip.

"So ready for me."

"Always. I hope I got you ready for me." Manny placed his hand over hers. He hadn't meant to dive headlong into sex and neglect romance. He moved one hand to caress Rhea's hair, hoping to bring her close for a kiss as their heads rested side by side on plush pillows. This was the first time they should have had, in warmth and safety, not in darkness and drear. Manny closed his eyes and moved to kiss her beautiful vermilion mouth.

And his lips met air.

"Rhea?"

His wife was fast and slippery, a beautiful white seal skimming down the sheets to lean over one of his muscular thighs and look into his eyes with a seductive little grin.

He held his breath.

A pale pink tongue darted out and then flattened against him, dragging up and down his shaft, over his crown. Teeth scraped gently before her mouth closed over him.

"Ohh." He felt his body go limp as Rhea began to suck on him in long, slow, deliberate pulses, pulling him deeper into her mouth, taking him to the back of her throat in an effort to get every inch of him inside. A slight choking sound made his eyes open and refocus.

"So big," Rhea gasped, pulling off, a delicate web of saliva connecting her lip to his swollen crown.

Something so little, but so sexual and intimate made Manny struggle to keep his lusts in check. His voice was more growl than rumble when he spoke, "You want all of me?"

"God, yes."

"I think there's another place where I'll fit better."

"I want to make you come, too." Rhea pushed his hand away when he placed it on her shoulder to guide her up. She went back to licking around the edges of him, little flickers of her tongue, followed by little nibbles with her soft lips.

“I want to do everything you want...” Manny tried to put words over the pounding at the base of his cock. *Don't be stupid. She wants you. Take whatever she gives. What she's offering is so much more than you deserve, what most guys would kill for.* He could picture Rhea's moans mingling with his as she worked her mouth on him until he broke and his cool, thick cream poured over her pouting lips, splashing over her breasts.

He had to bite his tongue, hard, to stop from coming right then.

“What's wrong? What do you want?” Rhea whispered, mouth temporarily above his leaking tip, her hand still pumping him with a fast, steady tempo that would undo him in seconds.

“I want to be inside of you. If I...Oh. I don't have protection.”

Rhea sat up, which only put his cock against her breast, and created a visual designed to torture him. “I can't get pregnant. Can I?”

“I don't know. We're made of dead things, but we live. I know of two vampires now who have had children.” He would have to introduce her to Sophie, Jesse, and their little boy later. “I'm trying to keep you safe in all the ways that matter. No matter what we try to move on from, I'll always wish I'd done better for you the first time.”



RHEA WAS SILENT FOR a moment, lazily stroking him in the warm, soft sanctuary of his room, his home.

Our home.

Our family.

I was willing to take a chance on him before with so much less.

“Do you want to be a parent?”

“I want to be a husband first. But, yes. I would love to have children with you, whether we adopt them, make them naturally, or need the assistance of magic or ethical science.”

“Good. I don't know if it can happen, but it didn't happen when we were together before. I think we're safe enough to try—and whatever happens, we'll handle it together. I know I want you inside of me. All the way. Every inch.” Her pussy jumped as she pictured his massive length filling her, stretching her aching walls until they wrapped around him and held him deep inside. But with his strength... no, she wouldn't be able to simply hold him. He'd pound into her, turning her into a quivering pile of pleasure until he was buried deep, coming inside of her while looking into her eyes.

Saying he loved her.

She could say it back this time.

“I love you, Manny. Come here.”

“My Rhea.” Manny came easily into her open arms, cuddling with her in the center of the bed, an island of flesh in a sea of softness.

It was different kissing him now. Before, she had been tentative, and uncertain, and he had been more rough and demanding, half of a living machine still finding out how to move with his smaller, weaker other half. Now, Rhea demanded his attention, capturing his lips and loving their softness, but loving it even more how they took it in turns to lead, driving each other to the moment where—

“Unnh!” Her cry popped free from their touching lips as the thick head of his cock pushed into her dripping opening, lodging in so tight that it took her breath away.

“Sorry!”

“Feels so good. Don’t be sorry.”

Manny wrapped her in his arms and rolled to his back, letting her be on top, another difference from their past.

She didn’t sit up, though. Rhea liked being sandwiched against him, her slender legs curving under his thick, muscular ones, feeling him strain up into her as she pressed down, working each notch and unevenness past the sensitive, strained opening of her pussy, feeling her muscles stretch in unfamiliar ways. First, the burn, then, the bliss.

At last, to take him to his impressive (slightly painful) hilt, she sat up, feeling her insides cramp and stretch, then relax as his thumb found her clit and his other hand kneaded her breast.

It hadn’t been like this before. He’d been careful and loving for the most part, but Rhea knew she hadn’t taken all of him, too tense to open fully, too worried that something would break—or that he’d break her with his jerky, unsteady movements. Her body had instinctively closed up.

Now... He let her lead, meeting her at each turn, giving as much as she could take, and looking at her with such open adoration.

Any woman would become a puddle of lust if the man she wanted looked at her like that.

“I never stopped wishing for you,” Rhea panted, looking down at him as she rocked forward. She dug her hands into his shoulders to bear down, capturing every inch of him in her squeezing tunnel. With so little room to

move, they wedged together, pulsing pressure touching each sensitive bundle of nerves inside of her, one long erogenous zone from entrance to womb.

“I never stopped wishing for *you*.” Manny cupped her face in both hands for a moment, trailing down her arms, fingers stopping a little longer over each scar. “We’re a patchwork, you and I. One body made from many parts. But I think... I think we weren’t whole without each other.”

That’s why I feel full in so many ways. Heart. Body. Soul.

Waves of pleasure coursed over her as Manny rocked into her. When she’d grown comfortable with his depth and the sense of fullness sating her, she motioned for him to take the top position, rolling him on top of herself. His teeth sank gently into her shoulder. Wetness seeped onto her skin.

Water from the shower? Her hair was thick and retained moisture.

Blood?

No pain.

Manny let out a little snuffling sound into her cheek.

Tears.

She blinked, and her own eyes overflowed. “Don’t be sad, baby.”

“I’m so happy. You’re every miracle I wished for, Rhea. And Hanukkah starts this week. Solstice, Yule, and Christmas are this month. All the magical, miraculous times are swarming around us...” Manny lifted his head, his features a mix of pleasure and pain as he tried to control his emotions.

“Here you are. Every present and miracle—right in my arms.”

“Manny, don’t. I’m going to cry.” Like she wasn’t already.

“But I’ll be here to make you feel better. And I’ll be here to distract you.” His lips quirked into a smile before pressing to hers.

“Distract me harder. Afterwards, we’ll cuddle and cry if we want. And...” Rhea tried to hold onto thoughts, but they were slipping away as her orgasm built. What had she longed for?

“And tomorrow, we’ll go out to breakfast. We’ll work at the shop. I’ll fix cars, you take pictures. I’ll even smile for the camera. I have something to smile about.” Manny grunted at the end of his sentence, shoving himself in deep and holding there, his large hand slipping between their bodies to rub her clit, pushing her orgasm to hit just before his.

“Man-ny!” Rhea’s cry of completion was a broken gasp as she dug her fingers into his shoulders.

His roar filled the room, and outside, the icicle lights flickered.

“Mm. That’s my man.” Rhea let her muscles unspool as the warmth of his body on top of hers and his seed inside of her sunk in.

“My wife.”

She snickered.

“What?” Manny chuckled back, kissing her brow.

She tapped his chest, then her own. “Man and Wife.”

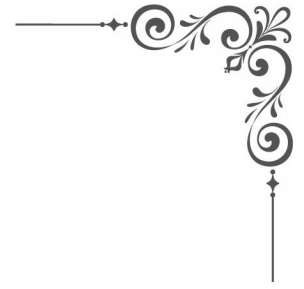
They groaned together.

“I missed this,” she whispered.

Never even had this, but I had him.

“I missed *you*,” he murmured.

Rhea decided Manny was right. They were only whole together.



Manny was dreaming. He had to be.

It was one of his rare sexual dreams, the kind that always ended abruptly, with feelings of grief and loss.

His eyes opened and almost popped out of his head.

Rhea was kneeling over him, hair in a lopsided ponytail, her lips locked over his cock. Her breasts dangled and swayed as she moved on him.

“Good morning?” Manny asked in a confused (albeit happy) voice.

“Mm.” Rhea smiled up at him without letting his cock fall from her cheek.

“You can’t wake me up like that. It’s too sexy for my rational brain. I’ll just grab you by your perfect ass and start banging away.”

“Mmm.” This time Rhea’s tone was definitely encouraging, her head bobbing in a nod that served the dual purpose of stroking his cock within her soft, pouting mouth.

Manny reached forward to capture her breasts, daring to let one hand rest on her head. He didn’t want Rhea to think he was holding her in place, so he made sure to let his fingers tangle gently in her hair before moving on. “This is such a nice treat, sweetie. But you have to get your fair share.” Manny licked his lips.

In answer, Rhea wagged her backside and Manny followed the motion, realizing why her stance was a little lopsided. Rhea was only supporting herself with one elbow. Her other hand was busy.

Manny swallowed as he realized that Rhea’s open hips were in perfect alignment with the mirror over his dresser. Looking behind the bed, he saw two fingers steadily pumping in and out of her glistening pussy, bathed in arousal and last night’s offerings.

I should tell her that I can see every inch of that glorious little slit. That I love watching her ass bounce each time her hand makes contact. That she's giving me the only show I ever want to see.

Or I could just join in.

“Put that pretty pussy over my face.”

“Or what?” Rhea teased, taking a break from sucking on him.

“Or I’ll beg you.” He attempted a pout.

“Very tempting.”

“And I won’t take you to get the best bagels and donuts in the universe.”

Rhea sat up and swiveled, pointing her bountiful cheeks in his direction.

Manny all but rubbed his hands in glee. “I’m glad you came to your senses.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”



“EVERY MORNING, I GO to the Pine Loft Coffee Shop for a breakfast bagel and coffee. I always pick up a dozen donuts for customers, too. Georgie makes the best maple-glazed donuts on earth. Oh! You need a car. Do you have a car? Your clothes. We need to get your things. U-unless that’s moving too quickly?”

Rhea looked over at the man beside her as they drove toward his shop. Not just any man. Her man. Her Manny. The incredibly gorgeous hunk of strength and tenderness that time had softened and refined. A gentle and thorough lover, one who’d proven he still had a bit of monster in the man. Her thighs clenched around the damp gusset of her panties as she remembered how he pushed her to a shaking, quivering orgasm that left her mewling in the sheets. He’d used his mouth, hands, and cock like a lethal three-part love potion, making her more devoted to him than Frankenstein’s cruelty ever did.

Too late did she realize that she wasn’t answering.

“I’m not losing you again. We’ll go wherever, as long as we go together,” Manny muttered in a fierce undertone, waiting at the stoplight. “If you don’t want to move to Pine Ridge—I’ll leave it. But I’ll never leave you, never again.”

Rhea slid closer to him across the bench seat and rubbed his thigh like they were feverish newlyweds.

Because we are. “I think I like it here. Let’s try it. Although... Ah.” Rhea’s purse and camera bag bumped her ankle as the truck went over a speed bump.

“What?”

“Just thinking about some of the old documents I had made to survive. I don’t need them. They’re only paper, nothing legally binding. I don’t need the divorce decree, now.”

“No. What we need is a real marriage license. And a marriage certificate. And of course, you’ll need a New York driver’s license.”

Rhea almost snapped her head, turning to look at him so fast. “What are you saying?”

“In Pine Ridge, it’s no trouble to get those things. Legally. It doesn’t take long, either.”

Rhea was still against him, happiness that had burned into bright excitement mellowing.

Easy to get legal copies of things you need. Right. The town must have clerks who know the ins and outs of getting something without a real birth certificate or a blood test. Probably waivers or forms to file. Maybe I’ll get those, too. I’ll have it read Rhea S. Finklestein.

“W-would that be something you like?”

“Sure!”

“Good! I’ll... I’ll make some calls today. You probably have lots of work to do.”

She didn’t, but it would be nice to have an hour by herself to process what the hell had just happened in the space of a day. “If I could get an hour with my laptop and your WiFi, that would be terrific.”

“Anything for my angel.”



MANNY PUT THE TOYOTA he was test driving into park in front of Stilz Jewelers. The alternator was behaving, but he didn’t drive it back down Ponderosa Avenue to his garage. He would—in a little bit.

“Jan!”

“Manny! How’s my favorite mechanic?” Jan Stilz beamed at him from under a long sweep of silky brown hair.

Manny couldn’t help but puff up with pride when he answered, “Engaged and remarried. Uh. Remarrying? I don’t know the right word, exactly, for when you’ve never been officially married but you’ve always had a bride. I need an engagement ring and a wedding band set. I know that you’re getting married on the 12th, and I need something before you go. What’ve you got?”

Jan Stilz was part poppart, the goblin species of Rumpelstiltskin fame. He could control metals, but only when he could also control his emotions. Right then, he must have been shocked, for he let out a cloud of gold dust that covered the entire display case.

“Wow! What? I mean, congrats, Manny! I’d always heard about the Bride of... Never mind. Yeah. So! What are you thinking?”

“Something old-fashioned. What have you got that looks like it was made in the early 1800s?”

Jan winced. “Not a lot, but give me five minutes on Pinterest and an hour over lunch, and I’ll make you something. Talk to me about budget.”

“You’re getting married. How much is your wife’s happiness and safety worth?”

Jan swallowed. “I don’t have a diamond that big, big guy.”

“Cost is no object. Just don’t take me for a ride.”

“Would I do that? You fix my car. I’ll find something that won’t make your pieces drop off.”

“Ha ha.”

“I’ll bring it by the shop.”

“No! Rhea’s there. Um.” Manny raked his hair and wracked his brains. He looked out at the bustling streets of his small town, lined with holiday shoppers. “Hey. You live right above your shop?”

“I do.”

“So, it’s not a big deal for you to walk over to the Night Market, right?”

“I have a ton of wedding stuff to do, but I can spare three blocks for the course of true love.” Jan smiled.

“Meet me under the mistletoe tonight. I’ll text you when we’re about to leave.” Manny recalled the giant garland hung on the center pole of the Night Market. In the spring, it was decorated with Maypole ribbons. In the fall, Halloween decorations adorned it. In the winter, holly and mistletoe were wrapped around it.

Jan’s smile faded. “I know where you mean, but I have a rule about only kissing my own bride-to-be.”

“Goofball. Bring it to me there. I’m going to ask Rhea to marry me for real, forever, under the mistletoe.”



“OKAY, PICK UP TO ANSWER. Push one to transfer. Two to hold. This is so easy. All of this is so easy. And organized.” Rhea pattered around the shop. It would be so easy to help Manny.

Would it be a job worthy of her intellect?

Maybe not.

Would it be a nice, steady job helping her family... maybe giving her time to have a family of her own? Her head turned to the corner of the cozy little office with its holiday lights and warm smells of donuts and percolating

coffee. Room for a little playpen or a high chair. She could get one of those baby backpacks so Manny Jr. could come to work with Mommy and Daddy.

What am I thinking? That's a crazy dream.

But my other dream came true, so...

Still. Later.

Much later.

But after years of struggling, scrambling, hiding, worrying, wondering...

Rhea sank back in the office chair and spun, a tingle of happiness running through her well-loved body. Simple stability felt like the brightest, shiniest new adventure.

One I want.

Rhea's phone buzzed in the bag at her feet, stored under the slate gray counter.

Manny. They'd exchanged numbers before he left—after making love, bathing together, eating together... being created together.

Topsy-turvy, that's us.

Manny: Don't worry. I took the Toyota on a test drive and stopped to get us lunch, too. Be back in ten.

Rhea: I wasn't worried. I was learning the phone system. How do you order parts, take calls, fix cars, and keep the place in order without any help?

Manny: I had no life.

Manny: But now I do. I want lots of time with you, in and out of the shop. If you can learn the difference between oil filters, cabin filters, and air filters, you're hired. Room, board, and continual kisses and compliments included—with full dental.

Holding the phone in her palm, she laughed and spun again, dizzy with happiness.

Rhea: Deal.

When the phone rang while it was still clutched in her hand, Rhea answered it at once, noticing too late it wasn't her restored husband.

It was Alice Kimball, AKA Snotty Realtor.

What does she want? To make absolutely sure I don't try to bother her? She made that perfectly plain.

"Hello, Miss Kimball." Rhea's voice was icy.

The realtor's tone was warm and honeyed, syrup on sugar. "Rhea, dear! I have the best news for you! The couple selling that condo that you just loved,

your perfect dream home? They had to push their move back by three months. The husband broke his collarbone and needs to recuperate near his orthopedic surgeon. But this is just perfect!”

Rhea blinked in confusion. “Why?”

“Well, that’ll give you the time to get those little paperwork issues taken care of, and you can move in in March.”

“But the other offer?”

“Well, they had to drop out of the running, fortunately.”

“Couldn’t wait three months?” Rhea asked, a sour, knowing look on her face.

“Yes, something about needing a place within the city limits before the first of the year. So, what do you say? Would you like me to figure out the earnest money?”

Rhea shook her head. “No, thank you. I found the loveliest little townhome in Pine Ridge, New York. I’ll be moving in as soon as possible.”

“Ah, a rental?”

“No, fully paid. Crazy thing... I went to see my husband to get him to finalize our divorce papers, and we ended up falling back in love instead. I don’t need a realtor, Miss Kimball. Hope you find another buyer!” Rhea hung up, elated.

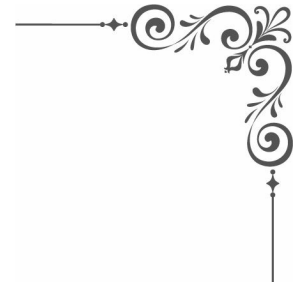
It was nice to feel like she was on top of the pile for a change.

“Did I hear you say you fell back in love with me?”

Rhea whirled so hard she almost capsized the office chair.

Manny was standing in the doorway, a big white bag in his hand and a cardboard container with two soft drinks in the other.

She hurried to take the drinks and pecked his lips. “It was my snotty realtor. I didn’t want to tell her our whole story. If I had, I would have told her that I never fell out of love with you in the first place.”



“It’s getting late.”

“It’s barely six. We had a long lunch.” Rhea giggled and ducked her head as she studied the parts catalog.

Manny chuckled next to her ear, holding her in his lap as he walked her through ordering a water pump for a Chevy Cruze. “I don’t know that we can consider all of the last three hours ‘lunch.’”

“You certainly ate out enough,” Rhea purred, squirming on his lap. “Most men don’t do that—so I hear.”

“Most men don’t listen to their wives and learn their bodies. I’m going to study you the way you’re studying the repair order system.”

“Mm, that’s right. I like it when you talk dirty to me,” Rhea teased, her slim white fingers tangling with his blackened tips.

“Okay.” Manny bit her earlobe softly. “Get this. I’m going to take you back to the Night Market. I’m going to take you to the stall that sells candles and soaps, and you’re going to pick some out. Then I’m going to get you some fudge and hot apple cider. And then,” Manny paused, squeezing her breasts with each “and then,” watching her head tilt in bliss, jaw slack, “I’m going to take you home and feed you fudge while you soak in the tub. Then, we’re going to make love by candlelight—but for fun this time, since we have electricity.”

“S-sounds so wonderful,” Rhea sighed with a little hitch in her breathing, her hips bouncing on his.

“But you have to stop tormenting me, you temptress. I can’t walk out of here like this.” Manny pointed to the visible erection that even his sturdy blue work pants couldn’t hide.

“We could go back and check inventory again.” Rhea’s hand found its way to his cock and massaged it through the fabric, her head tilting toward the long, narrow backroom where he kept parts and supplies.

It was so tempting—but Jan had promised to meet them at the mistletoe at 6:30, and there was no way Manny was going to blow one more thing with Rhea.

“The floor is too hard in there.” Manny hoped she wouldn’t mind his excuse—even though earlier they’d been standing, with Rhea in front of him, hanging onto a shelf of coolant and synthetic motor oil while he pounded her from behind, his hands adoring her squeezable bottom and his heavy sack slapping against her leaking pussy.

“I don’t mind standing,” Rhea hopped off his lap and bit her lip, giving a seductive smile that he couldn’t resist.

But he had to. “You know that I want to make love to you every second of every day. I’m going to take you away on a h— Hawaiian vacation so we have a couple of weeks to do just that.” He’d almost said honeymoon.

Fuck, how the hell am I going to get us to Hawaii?

Rhea squealed and flung herself into his arms. “Hawaii is gorgeous, but how about somewhere closer to home? I’ve traveled the whole world. I’d rather be within driving distance from your house.”

“Our house. And sure, not a Hawaiian vacation, but some sort of nice, long romantic trip. For now, I need to take you out and show you the sights. It’s a winter wonderland out there—and we can finally share it together.”

Rhea tucked herself under his arm as they bent to peer out the window.

The night sky was full of white stars, and the streets were full of white and rainbow-colored lights.

Rhea looked over at him, eyes shining and reflecting all the lights, heavenly and earthly.

“Okay. Take me home.”



“THEY PLAY CHRISTMAS music?” Rhea looked across the lots to the bustling Night Market.

“All the music, at least during December. Wait... Listen.”

Rhea paused. Something in Gaelic was rippling from the speakers. “What is that?”

“I think it’s a Yule or Solstice chant, ‘Bring Ye Now the Flame in Winter’ but we should probably ask Chloe. She’s a banshee. Or we could ask Ardy—he’s a Pooka.”

“And everyone is just cool with sharing all the holidays?”

“We have to be. We can only survive if we take care of each other. Everyone here tries their hardest.” Manny nodded, face somber.

Rhea couldn’t stop the smile from blossoming on hers. “I love this place.”

“It’s pretty sweet. You... You really meant it? About staying with me? About picking up where we left off, only better?” Manny’s hand tightened on her waist as they walked side by side, knitted together. His voice sounded strangled.

Rhea paused. She *had* meant that, but she didn't mean... She didn't mean they could pick up without *effort* or serious changes. She knew it would be hard to make room for each other in their lives, especially since they already had routines and preferences. Rhea was willing to work at it and believed Manny was, too.

How could she explain she wanted to be his wife in more than name? She wanted a dress, a wedding, a ring?

Frankenstein hadn't thought those things were necessary for his pet monsters.

"Rhea?"

"I want that, and so much more. I want you, Manny. I want a life with you. Love, marriage, a house, a family."

There. That was the start of a long, possibly difficult conversation that they could take in stages.

"I'm glad. Oh, honey. This is Jan Stilz. He lives on Pinecrest and owns a little store there. I'll take you there someday soon, you're going to love it."

"Hi, Manny. This must be the lovely wife I've been hearing about."

"Rhea. Hi. Nice to meet you." Rhea shook the man's hand, trying not to stare. There was something uncannily handsome about him, but she far preferred her lover's uneven smile and crooked, hulking frame.

True love, I guess.

"I have to go, I have a ton of wedding stuff to do before my big day—and before my bride-to-be kills me if I'm late helping her with the final arrangements. See you around, Manny. Good to meet you, Rhea." With a wave, Jan was gone—but he left a small black bag with an elegant golden S on the front behind him, sitting in the dusting of snow at the base of a wooden light pole.

"Oh! He forgot his bag." Rhea pointed to it and turned to look for their handsome neighbor—only to find he had vanished.

"I'll get it!" Manny dropped to his knees and fairly dove for it, reaching it before she could bend to retrieve it.

To her shock, he started rummaging in the bag, a look of determined concentration on his craggy face.

"Manny! Stop that!" Rhea hissed. "What are you doing?"

Manny did stop, staring up at her. A slow smile spread across his face. "Something I should have done a long, long time ago. Something I wanted to

do but didn't have the words for or the knowledge of. Rhea? Will you be my wife? Will you be my bride and marry me?"

For a second, Rhea thought she was hallucinating. One of the stars from the sky had dropped down and landed in a little velvet box pointed toward her in the palm of Manny's giant hand.

She blinked, and the star became a bright round diamond in a circlet of smaller oval diamonds resting on a dark gold band. It looked luxurious and ornate, something old European royalty would have had.

Something Manny would have wanted for me if he'd had his freedom back when we first met.

"Oh, Manny..."

"Please." One word, holding several lifetimes.

"Of course! Oh, yes, of course!" Rhea bent to kiss him and pull him up, dimly aware of cheers erupting around them.

"Everyone's watching!" Rhea gasped when Manny broke the kiss to straighten up fully.

"That's okay. We're under the mistletoe. I'm allowed to kiss my once and future bride anywhere—but this place is legally binding," Manny winked. "If I kiss you under the mistletoe, you're mine forever, you know."

"Is that a fact?" Rhea giggled, and then pounced on him, kissing him hard as the crowd cheered again.

He's mine. Forever.



Manny put the ring boxes down on the table. “Jan is a jeweler. He’s going out of town for his honeymoon, and I didn’t want to waste another minute. We can change them.”

“Don’t change a thing. They’re perfect.” Rhea couldn’t stop staring at the giant diamond on her finger. “This is beautiful. Incredible. Perfection.”

“Like you.”

Rhea paused, throat tight. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That I wanted you to ask me for real, with a ring and all the trimmings?”

“Because I wanted to. Because you’re important and you deserve ‘all the trimmings.’ That’s all I ever wanted to give you.”

Rhea came around the table and sat on Manny’s lap, her new favorite seat. “You can’t spoil me forever.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Okay, yes, you can spoil me forever, but don’t let it be out of guilt. We both tried to navigate a bad situation and find our way in the dark, and look—we finally found the light.”

“That’s you. You are my light.” Manny kissed the back of her hand, eyes closing with a contented sigh. “How soon would you like to get married? I know some weddings take a long, long time to plan.”

Rhea could tell by the tension in his face that Manny hoped she wanted something simple. Fortunately, she did.

“I have no family and only a few industry friends. I’m not close to anyone.”

Manny hugged her tight.

“Your friends seem wonderful.”

“They are! Oh, Rhea! Mr. Minegold can walk you down the aisle. Of course, I’ll have Jasper be my best man. We can just have a little ceremony at the church—it’s interfaith, and we can have any sort of traditional trappings that you want. Georgie can do the catering, and we can ask Claire—his cake designer and girlfriend—to do the cake. A small one. Or a big one.”

Rhea laughed. “You’re as excited to plan this wedding as I am.”

“Mhm.”

“That’s a little unusual for guys, you know? Maybe only one out of ten would be so helpful and interested.”

Manny gave a rueful look down at his body. “I might be made out of ten men, so... The odds are good that I’m that invested guy.”

“Well, Mr. Invested, I want a small, beautiful ceremony with all the people you care about. I want it soon. If I could marry you tomorrow, I would—but I’d like a little time to shop for a dress.”

“Hm. How about on New Year’s Eve? That’s three weeks away, and it means this year will be the last year that we’re alone. Next year, we’ll be Mr. and Mrs. Finklestein, newlyweds—and renew-ly weds.”

Rhea leaned to plant a kiss on his broad forehead. “I love that big brain of yours.”

Manny grinned, wide, square teeth holding something playful beyond the sincere sweetness of his smile.

She knew what it was. “I love that big cock of yours, too,” she whispered, sliding from his lap.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Upstairs. I have bubble bath, candles, fudge, and a brand new husband-to-be to try out.” Rhea darted past him, up the stairs, stopping to snag her camera bag from the coat rack in the hall.

“Why are you bringing your camera?”

“To commemorate the occasion, silly!”

“Engagement photos?”

“Well... We’ll definitely be *engaged* in all of them,” Rhea called, pausing on the stairs. “And remember, you promised to smile. I have some ideas that’ll make sure you do,” she winked.

With an echoing roar that made her hair stand on end in the very best way, Manny sprang out of his chair, knocking it to the floor, and chased after her.

Of course, she allowed herself to be caught.

“Got you,” Manny rasped in her ear. “And I’m never letting go.”

The End

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Pumpkin Spice and Speed Dating

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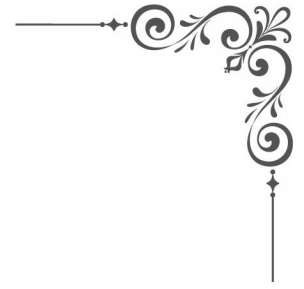
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Bestselling and award-winning author S.C. Principale believes in writing stories she wants to read, which is why she writes thrillers, mysteries, and steamy paranormal romances. Her stories are filled with strong, sassy heroines and the unique, often otherworldly men who love them. S.C. lives in historic Chester County, Pennsylvania, where haunted battlegrounds serve as never-ending inspiration. S.C. is a self-proclaimed history nerd, following old mysteries, baking, and leading theater and musical groups. Her home life consists of scrounging space for her laptop without tripping over two kids, two dogs, a mischievous chinchilla, and the most patient, sexy husband in the world. [Join her mailing list for a free gift!](#) Or join her [Patreon](#) for exclusive scenes, bonus content, NSFW art of your favorite couples, and so much more.

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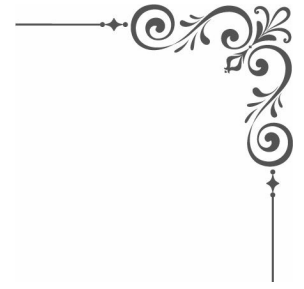
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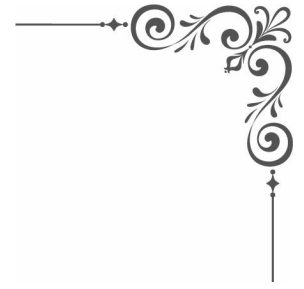
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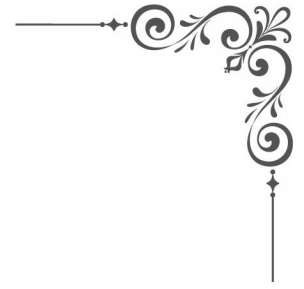


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*Keep Reading for excerpts from
the cozy-but-spicy paranormal romances
The Minotaur's Valentine, Haunted Hearts: A Monster Brides Romance,
and Nothing to Hyde: A Monster Brides Romance*



By S.C. Principale

Milo has finally met the girl of his dreams. She's funny, into 80's metal, loves animals, and wants to be a vet.

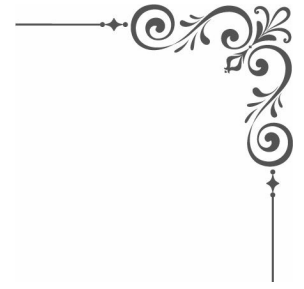
And that might come in handy since he's half-bull—a minotaur, to be exact.

But Libby is 100% human and not even aware of the monsters and magic that exist in her new town of Pine Ridge, New York. Everyone tells Milo to be patient and stay in the shadows. Libby's smart and she'll eventually figure out that something's different about this innocent-looking suburb...

Libby Ingersol loves Pine Ridge, but it's lonely being the new girl in town. As another Valentine's Day looms, single Libby is desperate to get out and mingle. When she tries the Pine Ridge club scene, things go wildly wrong.

Can a shy minotaur who wears his heart on his hoof make things go right and salvage Libby's Valentine's night?

The Minotaur's Valentine is a feel-good monster romance with a cinnamon roll hero. Just a warning... cinnamon isn't the only spice you'll find in this happily-ever-after tale of monster love!



The Night Market is exactly what it says it is. It's a market that's only open at night. It looks like one of those flea markets or farmers' markets that are set up in the civic center parking lot or a school gym during winter break. In the case of the Pine Ridge Night Market, there are about two dozen small stalls set up in the empty lot behind the Pine Loft Coffee Shop. We sell everything from homemade candy and potpourri to weapons for the discerning demon hunter and pre-made potions for nervous spellcasters.

Obviously, you have to know where to look. (And when to look. We're not open every night.)

And humans... humans aren't excluded, especially not humans who've lived in Pine Ridge for a long time, but most won't see the Night Market the way I do.

I don't have specially enhanced vision or anything. No superpowers. I'm just your average, twenty-something minotaur. I put on my jeans one hoof at a time, just like everyone else.

"Milo. Can you fix my watch fob?"

"What's the trouble, Mr. Minegold? Ooh, hey, J.J." I take the watch from the tall, thin, distinguished man wrapped in a black frock coat and bright tartan muffler. His adopted grandson, J.J., is strapped to his hip in one of those stretchy baby-sling contraptions. I look around for something to give the kid, something that won't kill him. I reach under the stall into my big red tackle box and take out several inches of silver chain. "Here you go, little man. Oh!" I draw back at the last second. "It's silver. Can he touch it?"

"Silver doesn't harm Jesse Jakob." Mr. Minegold savors the name, letting his accent become more pronounced as he caresses the curly little head. "Jesse Jakob, you naughty mite! You have tossed off your wooly hat. Your mama and papa won't like that. I must retrace my steps, Milo. I confess I was lingering too long at the fudge stand!"

"I can understand that, Mr. Minegold! I'll look at the watch fob, and you find J.J.'s hat." I wave them off. J.J. waggles his chubby fist, which is now curled around the silver chain.

Dang. Kids are cute. Even human kids. I know J.J. isn't fully human, but he looks human. His dad, Jesse, is a vamp (so is Mr. Minegold), and his mom is... something demon-y? I don't know the details, but she is gorgeous.

My brother, Bill, would tease me if he were still living in town. He'd call me out on my interest in interspecies couples. As soon as Bill turned twenty, he moved back to the family homestead in Greece. He has a beautiful wife

and two kids now. He'd also tell me that I'm running out of time to find a girl. I'm almost thirty. Minotaur women like their bulls young, that's what he'd say.

But I don't want to marry a person based on their outer shell, that's what I'd tell him.

And that's how the fight would start. That's how the same dumb argument always starts. And every time, my parents snort and exchange glances and go take their coffee into the kitchen.

I force my focus back to Minegold's watch. I press the fob on the thick, brassy case, careful to keep it pointing at the floor.

Plink.

A thin wooden stake clatters to the cement. It was only a quarter of an inch wide, tipped in silver, and reinforced with an iron core. It *should* have shot out with the force of a small, lightweight missile. "Ahh. The spring action is gone," I mutter, retrieving the stake from where it had landed between my hooves. It was supposed to spring out with a pretty hefty punch so that its razor-sharp tip and inner core (fully encased in wood) would penetrate deep enough to take out a vampire or a werewolf at close range.

Of course, I'm not advocating the killing of *all* vampires and werewolves. The established supernatural community of Pine Ridge is mostly peaceful and dedicated to keeping evil-doers out of our fair little city.

Mr. Minegold, who has been here since the end of World War II, organized a neighborhood patrol long, long ago to drive out or exterminate undesirables. My grandfather came over around the same time as Minegold. But since minotaurs in rural New York have a little trouble blending in, my family has always hung out in the shadows, worked nights, and made friends with other night-dwelling creatures, like Mr. Minegold. He can get around okay in the daytime as long as it's cloudy, but he prefers the night and stays inside during the day whenever he can.

Minotaurs protect. We guarded King Minos' wife and children against his insane rage by taking them into the labyrinth and pledging we would die before they were harmed. Greek history can say what it wants, but minotaurs have always been friends to the weakest among us. In the modern age, that usually means we make the firepower to hunt the *real* monsters.

I slip my headphones (the wireless kind so they don't get tangled around my horns) over my head and cue up Metallica on my phone. "Hey! Mr. Minegold?" I shout down the row of market stalls.

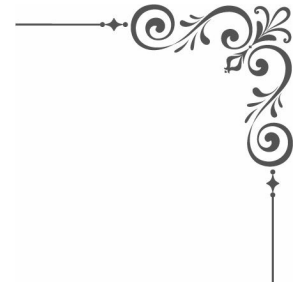
“Yes, Milo?” He turns at once. Vampires have amazing hearing.

“You need a new spring! Twenty bucks and twenty minutes?”

Mr. Minegold beams and waves back, earning smiles and curious looks from the people pushing past him. “You are a godsend! See you in twenty minutes!” He jiggles J.J. on his hip, unearthing a blue knitted cap with a fluffy white pom pom and ear flaps. “Ah! J.J.! There’s your hat! Did you have it stuffed in my pocket this whole time? You clever little dumpling!”

My God. Kids are adorable...

I turn up the volume.



Have you ever had coffee so good you want to take it back to bed with you? Maybe whisper in its ear and coo a few sweet nothings?
Why, yes. I am single, thank you.

But, that perfectly describes the cinnamon streusel coffee from The Pine Loft Coffee Shop. It was delicious and decadent, sweet and full of warm spices. And cheap. Criminally cheap.

Everything in my new town is ultra affordable. My godmother says that I should consider it a red flag.

“There’s nothing cheap about New York, Libby!” Aunt Karen had lectured a few months ago, her thin arms crossed over her bony chest, staring at me with her wild, not-all-there eyes before turning back to her blaring television.

My godmother is a lot like a feral cat, whereas me, I’m a stray. She didn’t want to take me in, and I didn’t want to stay with her. When she and my mother were best friends back in high school, “Aunt Karen” became my godmother. Then my mom went to work at a daycare where I could come for free, and Aunt Karen moved in with a way-older guy, discovered daytime television, and developed a taste for flavored vodkas. By the time my mom passed away when I was eighteen, Aunt Karen was all alone. Rich, lecherous “Uncle Amir” had been done in by a spectacular cardiac arrest in a strip joint while choking on a cigar and trying to get change from a five out of a neon bikini.

I didn’t want to live with Aunt Karen, even sans the not-so-dearly-departed Uncle Amir, so I was a stray. On my own, surviving on scraps of part-time jobs, and a few months of my mother’s Social Security benefits before they cut me off.

I went to a cheap college and lived on campus. Antonia College isn’t the jewel of the state education system, so they offer perks for coming back each semester, and bonuses when you take summer classes. I had no complaints. I think Antonia is kind of feral, too. It’s in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. It likes to hide from prying eyes, but if you show it a little love, it’s decent.

When I graduated with an animal science degree, I found a job as a vet tech. I found a cheap apartment in a cheap town.

Aunt Karen had lectured more when I made my dutiful pilgrimage to see her after graduation. She blew cigarette smoke at her enormous flat screen,

obscuring the evil face of a pseudo-psychologist who embarrassed people on television for money. “It’s a scam. You’ll see.”

“It’s not a scam. I know people from Pine Ridge. We were buddies in college.”

That was a stretch, but Aunt Karen didn’t need to know that. When I was a freshman, there was a gorgeous, adorable melanin-challenged couple, Sophie-Something and Jesse-Something Else. They were seniors, and already engaged. Because of the dismal size of Antonia’s enrollment, seniors and freshmen were often in the same electives. We ended up in Literature of Ancient Civilization together, sitting in the back row during evening classes. (I worked afternoons at a little taco joint in town.) When we were forced to introduce ourselves during one of the weekly “Pair-and-Share” events the professor had coordinated to discuss Aeschylus and Enheduanna, I told them I was from Allentown, Pennsylvania. It turned out Sophie was from Philadelphia, making us practically neighbors. Jesse was from Pine Ridge, New York, right over the state line.

Sophie and Jesse made his town sound like a dream come true—friendly, little, full of beautiful people and places. They never mentioned how affordable it was, but when you’re bored in class and you start looking up random crap on your phone... Well, I couldn’t believe my screen.

Sophie and Jesse were planning to get their own place after graduation. They showed me some of the houses they were looking at one night when the antiquated overhead projector overheated and the professor insisted we all sit and wait patiently for it to cool off enough to come back to life.

That’s right. I said two college seniors were buying a *house*. At first I figured one of them must’ve had money, but then a little more talking and a little more squinting at the phone revealed that Pine Ridge real estate seemed to be quite a bargain.

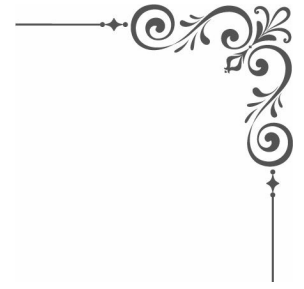
And if they could afford a mortgage, maybe I could afford to rent a room. Or even a whole apartment with a kitchen?

My other option was moving in with Aunt Karen, who had started telling me that I should try to find a “sugar daddy.” Uncle Amir 2.0, or a town that sounded too good to be true? I was going to gamble on something that at least sounded like it wouldn’t induce vomiting.

Aunt Karen was right there with me on the “too good to be true” part. While I packed the few items I had stashed in her spare room, she trailed after me, wailing in a voice that set off the neighbor’s chihuahua. “That little hick

town in the mountains sounds too good to be true. You've only been there for a weekend! This is a crazy risk, Lib-Lib. You should move in with me. You don't know *why* it's so cheap! I bet all the babies have birth defects! I bet it's near a nuclear testing site. A sewage station! A slaughterhouse!"

"I stuck around for the summer, Aunt Karen, but I have to go. My lease is signed. My job starts the second week of September. Look, if it's anything like you said, I'll move back. I promise." I may or may not have had my fingers crossed behind my back at the time.



Where was I?

Oh, right. Aunt Karen, She-Who-Is-Hysterical. Despite ear-splitting pleas and the arrival of Renaldo or Rudolpho (some swarthy guy with chest hair that resembled roadkill) in his red Boxster, I tore myself away from Allentown and started my new life.

I moved to Pine Ridge in September. It's now January and I haven't seen any babies with two heads, haven't been exposed to sewage or radiation, and the only unreasonable expense is my coffee addiction. The Pine Loft takes a tenth of my paycheck, but I blame that on my own weakness and the fact that I pass the place on my way home from the clinic. I don't get out much, but I think Pine Ridge is perfect.

The only thing that would make it better would be a social life.

Oh, I go out with friends—sort of. It really is a small little town. I asked Dr. Peterson, my boss, if he knew of a couple named Sophie and Jesse, and he did. I looked them up and we've had dinner a few times.

Everyone is friendly, really.

But people seem... guarded or oblivious. Is that mean to say? I don't care, it's true.

There seem to be two kinds of people in this town. Group One includes people who will smile and chat, always super interested in you, but revealing only little, vague basics about themselves. Group Two includes people who smile and chat, talking a ton about themselves, but asking very little about me, the new girl.

I've decided, whether I'm right or not, that this bi-oddity (new word, go me) is because I'm new here. This is a tight-knit town, according to Jesse. (His last name turned out to be Smith.) I figure that people don't want to invest in me too much in case I leave and break their little hearts.

Well, I've got nowhere else to go, so I'm staying.

Sophie, who has only been here a few years longer than me, already seems relaxed. I've seen her in the store showing off their little boy, surrounded by a gaggle of old granny-types, looking like a queen with the heir to the throne.

Jealousy is a bitch.

I'm not jealous of Sophie! I just... I want a family. I want to *fit in*. I've been a loner for a long time, ever since I started realizing that the poor kids on food stamps with single moms don't *quite* fit in, no matter what the teachers said.

So, using the new pastel blue planner my boss had given me for Christmas (stuffed with gift cards to the bookstore, the sushi place, and The Pine Loft), I decided to change that. I had a planner. I was going to plan.

One foggy night last week, with Metallica's *Whiskey in a Jar* blaring as I savored my on-the-way-home cup of coffee, I opened the planner and actually looked at it.

It was pretty straightforward. There were spaces for monthly, weekly, and daily notations. I flipped past the first two weeks of January and discovered a Goals and To-Do Lists section. Dr. Peterson had even left me another present. "Oh, my gosh. I love my boss." Two vinyl sticker collections, both full of metal band logos from the eighties! I would have to ask him where he got such a perfect gift.

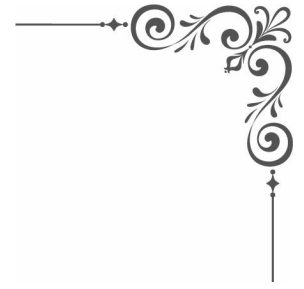
But back to the to-do list. I grabbed the matching baby blue gel pen that was stuck through a loop on the side of the planner and wrote:

Have a social life.

Stop living on coffee, cheese puffs, bananas, and sushi.

Find a club.

Get a date.



There aren't any other minotaur families in Pine Ridge. The only female minotaur in town is my mother. When we traveled to Greece for my brother's wedding, there were gorgeous girls everywhere. Girl minotaurs, I mean.

I wasn't into them.

After the reception, my dad sat me down on the back of the private yacht my new sister-in-law's family had chartered. My father was a little tipsy. (It takes a LOT of ouzo and champagne to make a minotaur tipsy, in case you're wondering.) He asked me if I was into bulls instead of cows, and I told him no. Then he asked if there was someone back in Pine Ridge that had my heart. I told him no. He asked if I was one of those aromantic types, only he was slurring so it sounded like he asked if I was *aromatic*. After I sniffed at my suit for a few minutes, I told him I didn't smell like I'd bathed in anise, which is what drinking too much ouzo makes you smell like.

By that time, my mom came back on deck, looking for us. My father got this completely unhinged, lustful look in his eyes and started chasing her around the boat.

I was severely tempted to jump overboard and swim ashore.

The truth is, I'm probably one of the most romantic people I know—but no one else knows it.

Minotaurs have a thing for protecting and serving. Acts of service are our love language. I dream about having a wife I can protect and help. She'll look up at me adoringly. She'll be so small next to me that every time I'm around her I'll feel like I'm her living shield, a proud warrior—not just the guy who makes poison rings and recalibrates weaponized watches.

Yes, I said she'd be small next to me. Small and possibly on the helpless side. I admit it. I have a damsel in distress thing, but I'm not some neanderthal brute.

I blame history.

Pull up a chair.

My people were not always called minotaurs. We existed before that whole King Minos crap. We have been around as long as anyone else, human or "monster." Humans feared us, the same way they feared other half-man, half-animals. The peaceable taurosapiens pulled back into the shadows, forming secret rural communities. Every community had an underground lair equipped with escape tunnels and traps to prevent violent humans from attacking the clan.

And then King Minos found out that his wife had become friendly with a local blacksmith (taurosapiens like metal). The way my mother tells it, Pasiphae was nothing more than a friend to the smith, who she had commissioned to make armor for her oldest son, the Prince.

Minos, who was already two hammers short of a forge, decided she was having an affair and went on a murderous rampage, killing one of his own children. My ancestors of course then urged the queen and surviving royal children to take refuge with us.

Well, you know how it is when you're thrown together with someone day after day...

Yeah. Eventually, Pasiphae and Aspro (the smith) were secretly married and had a bunch of little half-human, half-taurosapien babies. And we started being called minotaurs. (I think we should have been called *Pasitaurs*. Why give that murdering idiot any credit? But you can't change two thousand years of history overnight.)

Ever since I saw the picture in mom's old history book, I've been a hopeless romantic. The picture is an old ink illustration that shows Aspro blocking the labyrinth entrance. His eyes are glowing red, his horns are glinting, and his nostrils are flaring. One hand holds a huge broadsword. The other arm is pushing Queen Pasiphae behind him. She's looking up at him with such utter love and adoration.

I want that. I want a woman I would die for and a woman who would be by my side, adoring me as much as I adore her.

That isn't going to happen in Pine Ridge.

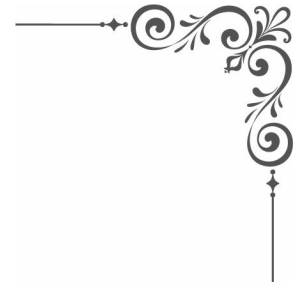
There are two kinds of people here. One, there are people who know about the magical energies and entities who live here. They play it cool. They know that everyone isn't what they seem. They're all (99% of them) nice, normal-ish folks. What about the second group?

They are incredibly, stubbornly blind. They walk around with witches, wolves, succubi, and whatever else we have on tap, thinking that everything is normal. According to those people (all human), some of their neighbors are just a bit "eccentric."

The people in the second group would all be dead by dinner time if Pine Ridge weren't such a safe place to live.

Either way, I'm not going to find a woman who needs me here. If she's a vampire, a werewolf, or a witch, she'll be able to take care of herself and probably won't want me being my overprotective self. If she's a normal,

oblivious human, she won't ever meet me. If she did, she'd run in terror, and that's no way to start a relationship.



The Night Market opens at dusk, but the stall owners who can tolerate sunlight tend to come a little before so they can set up and not waste a single second of selling time.

Stalls are set up in a grid between the light poles in the lot. There are three rows. The ones closest to the street are run by residents who are human or who can pass for human. They also tend to sell stuff human “tourists” would buy, like crystals, fudge, hand-embroidered clothing, and more run-of-the-mill stuff. It’s not any kind of “human-looking equals better” mentality, believe me. It was decided a long time ago, back in the fifties when the Night Market was first getting set up, that this arrangement would help the more “unique” vendors stay safe. After all, no matter how oblivious a human is, he or she will notice if you’re about seven-feet tall and have horns coming out of your head. My stall is in the back row, the corner spot. It’s a prime location.

Christmas, Hanukkah, Yule, Kwanzaa, and Solstice weren’t too long ago, so there are still a dozen strands of multi-colored lights strung up between the poles. I think we should leave them up all year. It gives the market a bustling, festive air, and that’s important in cold, foggy, mountain towns in January. Festive, fun places attract customers who want to browse. Otherwise, people go straight to the stall they need, buy their potion or bat wings, and get the heck back home to their nice cozy houses.

“Milo! Hey, man!”

“Leo! Good to see you! Back from touring, Mr. Big Shot?”

Leo is a werewolf who is also in a local band. (It’s a pretty big deal in the NYC club scene, but he never brags. Actually, he rarely talks at all.) His wife is a witch. They’re some of my best customers because they’re part of the “Neighborhood Watch.” It’s not a full moon, so I don’t hurry to put my silver-tipped goodies away.

The stocky, auburn-haired man grins at me. “Out again next weekend. We’ll be gone for a solid week.”

“Ah. Looking for something to fend off those city demons?” I start moving weaponry around, sliding choice pieces forward for Leo to see. Everyone knows violent demons love big cities. Their kills blend in and get blamed on drug dealers and gangs.

“Actually, no. I’m packing Robbie. What else do I need? Plus, Tessa and Charlotte will be with us.”

I nod. The two-man band usually travels as a foursome, two sets of best friends, two couples. My heart stabs me in a way I wasn’t expecting. “What

can I get you, then?" I ask in a gruff, clipped voice that shocks the hell out of me.

Leo doesn't seem to mind. "Can you make me something pretty?"

I take out one of my tackle boxes. Tackle boxes are great for holding tiny tools and metallic parts like springs and screws. My boxes are covered with all kinds of band stickers. Skin Deep, the band that Leo is in with Robbie, another local (and vampire), has a fair amount of signage on my boxes. Leo sees the stickers and smiles.

"I gotta tip you better," he mutters, hands in his pockets.

"Well, I'd never say no to that." I have a black velvet drape on my table every night. Just because I'm showcasing deadly weapons doesn't mean I can slack on presentation. Right now, I clear a space and put down a selection of poison rings and some of my "daintier" weapons.

Leo looks at a black leather band that has a shiny silver box in the center. From the filigreed box came a knitting-needle thin dagger of shining silver. From the other side was a wooden rod of the same length and thickness with a silver tip.

"Don't trip." My voice is just a rumble in the dark, protective instincts nudging up in my chest. "The silver makes for easy penetration. The wood will slip right through the heart. It'll kill a vamp or a werewolf."

"Hell, that'll kill a human," Leo points out, never losing the half-grin on his face. "Anything in the heart, dude, beating or still. How does it work?" He lightly taps the center of the metal box with its ornate design.

"Telescoping barbs controlled by a catch on the band. It has a safety. The barbs resist pressure, however. An effective weapon that I can demonstrate." I bend down to my insulated lunch box at my feet and pull out a cantaloupe. I'm a vegetarian, and I usually eat one melon per night during my "lunch" break. If I get to use it as a demo first, that's fine. "Let's say this represents a human head."

"Let's say it doesn't. I believe you without puncturing an innocent fruit. How much?"

"Fifty."

"A steal. I'll take it. But can you make me something else, too? Something that isn't a weapon. A necklace?"

I flex my thick fingers, fingers that have a light coating of hair, the same as any bull. These mitts are big, but not clumsy. Still, I wouldn't consider

myself adept at jewelry making. I've never really tried it unless it was to conceal a weapon. "There are two other stalls here that sell jewelry, Leo."

"Yeah, and they're both good places, but not what I want. I like your work. Your style. You put something of longing into the metal. Like a little piece of your soul, man."

I blink down at my wares. Really? My soul was in there? Maybe an occasional piece of hair, but... I shrug. Leo is a good customer and he doesn't talk much. That speech contained the most words I've ever heard him say at one time. If it means that much to him, I'll do it. "Sure, Leo. When do you want it and what did you have in mind?"

He hands me a drawing on a creased piece of staff paper. Two interlocking metal hearts, one covered with leaves and flowers, one covered with thorns and spikes. Leo and Tess.

Dang it. My eyes were instantly welling up. The wolf and his witch. My voice cracks, "Two weeks?"

"You're the best, Milo. You know, some woman's going to be so lucky when she finds you."

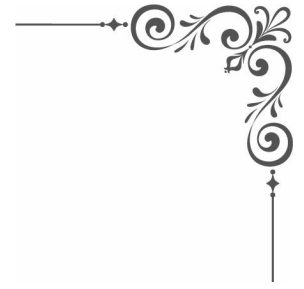
Leo walks off. I fold the paper carefully and hide it in my tackle box. I feel a tiny sliver of hope in my heart. When Leo speaks, it's important and he means it.

Lucky to find me.

I'll be lucky to find her, too...

Follow Milo and Libby as they find their way to a steamy happy ending!

Read [The Minotaur's Valentine](#) today!



A Monster Brides Romance

S.C. Principale

FRANKIE (ONLY HER MOTHER calls her Frances) can't believe she's won a "Non-Traditional Student" scholarship to NYU at Pine Ridge. While it will mean moving to the sticks, she doesn't really mind. She'll get out the frozen potato packing plant and hopefully have more time with Bella, her beautiful little girl. Most importantly, she's not going to screw her life up this time by falling for a dangerous bad boy who will derail her plans.

When she meets a private lab consultant on campus, Frankie knows he is the kind of man she wants to marry. Dr. Ellsworth is funny, kind, smart, stable, and single. Best of all, Bella loves him.

But then there's Eddie. Sure, he is something of a bad boy, but he makes her panties drip just by smiling at her. While Dr. Ellsworth may walk her to her apartment off-campus, Eddie Hyde is the one waiting at her door with pizza, tequila, and a teddy bear for her toddler. And once the baby is in bed, Eddie makes all of her wildest dreams come true.

If only there were a way a bad girl gone good could have her cake and eat it, too...

A SPICY-BUT-SWEET TWIST on Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde that features:

A Two-For-One Special ;)

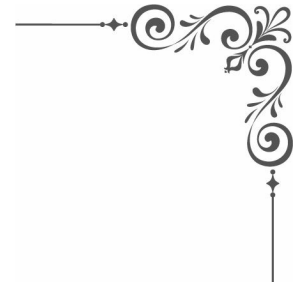
High steam

A strong single parent

Found family

Happily Ever After

Content advisory: Mentions of former addiction, a former manipulative partner, and a brief scene of a child in peril that is resolved with a Pine Ridge dose of heroism!



“There must be some mistake.” Frankie Watson looked around the pretty little two-bedroom apartment. It was on the second floor and had a view of the New York University at Pine Ridge sign, nestled against its riot of orange and red mums.

“Well, ordinarily students who receive a full scholarship are given free board at the dorms, but as you have a child, the housing stipend will cover this apartment for two years while you matriculate.”

For the millionth time in her daughter’s short life, Frankie gave thanks that she hadn’t listened to her useless ex. A married man with an opioid addiction, Burke had wanted Frankie to “get rid of it” more for his own sake than any consideration for her future. But even with all the struggles of single parenthood, Bella had never been anything but a blessing, and she was once again opening doors to better places.

“We’d love an apartment instead of a dorm. I did the dorm scene when I was at Offenburg.”

The lady showing her around gave a polite smile. She’d never heard of Offenburg, and Frankie wasn’t surprised. It was a tiny college that had a strong swimming program and not much else going for it.

“What was your major at Offenbach, dear?”

“Offenburg. I was majoring in physical education and swimming competitively for their NCAA Division III team. I decided I wanted to get into medical technology after witnessing some great athletes lose their dreams to pain medicine after injuries.” *And after my married head coach knocked me up while he was high out of his mind. While we both were.*

Frankie shook off bad memories. Four years clean and sober, three years and eight months of rocking this mommy thing even though it meant living with her mother and packing frozen potatoes for twelve-hour shifts at the Hash and Fries plant.

“Well, it was noble of you to turn your empathy into something that will make a difference. Now, I’m just the student housing liaison. If you need anything adjusted with your schedule, you’ll need to see the dean in charge of transfer students, Dr. Shaeffer.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“Mommy, can we go to that park? That park!” Bella, who had been quietly poking at her favorite busy book, was now standing on tiptoes in front of the window and pointing at the campus.

“That’s not a park, sweetie.”

“Oh, but there is one, not far from here. And there is a very nice preschool in Pine Ridge.”

“Just one?” Frankie’s stomach sank. What if they didn’t have openings? Her mother had offered to move in with her until she found childcare, but she was hoping to avoid that. Her mother meant well, but... They had never seen eye-to-eye on her taste in men, clothes, hair, tattoos, or careers. They had two things in common. They loved each other, and they would do anything for Bella.

“Oh, I’m sure there’s more than just one, but this one’s very popular and they give a discount for students and faculty. That’s how I got to hear about it. I sent my own children there when they were little.” The woman gave her an encouraging smile. “Judy Mcleoad runs it— Bright Stars Preschool. If you can’t find the number, I’ll be glad to help you.”

“No, I’ll look it up.” Frankie smiled and nodded, eager to conclude this discussion. She wasn’t used to personal service or such an abundance of attention from—well, anyone, actually.

Her mother said it was because Frankie gave off a tattooed biker chick vibe. Frankie said it was because people were dicks.

“Mommy! I *do* see a park! See the flowers?” Bella was insisting as Frankie showed the campus liaison out.

Bella’s words broke her heart. Her baby girl thought that anything green meant a park because she had only known concrete and apartments. Even their potted plants had failed to thrive and never made it to the flowering stage.

“That’s just Mommy’s school. Let’s go find the park, sweetie!” Frankie locked the new apartment with a feeling of pride and humble gratitude. This wasn’t a handout. She had applied for a scholarship for “Women in Medical Technology,” and she’d won it because of her kickass essay. The admissions officer had said they were impressed with Frankie’s “passionate reflections” about her personal experiences. Frankie could believe it. *Who wouldn’t* be passionate about wanting a career in medical technology after watching potential Olympians become drug addicts because insurance approved painkillers more than assistive technology, therapy, and rehabilitation?

Frankie was sure having three years of credits and being twenty-six helped, too. Compared to other students, she was probably old and boring. Old, boring, and a safe bet.

“Good. I want to be old and boring,” Frankie murmured as she re-tied Bella’s shoes.

“You’re not boring!” Bella pulled Frankie’s long, milk chocolate brown hair from its messy bun.

“Oh, yeah? What about old?” Frankie kissed her daughter’s chubby cheeks and then her button of a nose.

“So old!” Bella giggled madly and pulled out two more handfuls of hair.

“Bella-Boo, stop. You’re making Mommy look like a scarecrow.”

“Can we have a house with a garden and scarecrow?” Bella held up her book. It was about the four seasons, and the section about fall was a burst of oranges, yellows, reds, and pastoral life.

“Yes. Yes, we’re going to do that one day, honey.” Frankie set her jaw and held Bella’s hand, leading them toward the cute little town of Pine Ridge. Maybe they’d find a park on the way. She’d at least get bearings. Clear her mind.

Her mind needed to be cleared because it was a horrible tangle.

I want to get this degree. Good degree means a good job. Good job means a house. House means happy Bella with the things she deserves and the best life she could ever have.

Reality check. Good job means good money, but bills are real and houses aren’t cheap. It’ll take five to ten years before you, a single working mom, have the money for a down payment. Bella could be ten or even thirteen before she has a yard and flowers of her own.

“A pumpkin patch! A big one! Sunflowers!”

“So pretty, Bella.” Frankie’s mouth gave a guilty twitch, and her eyes refocused on their surroundings. Was Bella saying more things she wanted in her imaginary yard? Or was she pointing out something in someone else’s yard? Either way, it heightened her resolve.

Bella should grow up having those things, and not have to wait until she’s a teenager.

“Mama! And a dog? A puppy, please, Mama!”

It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have filled her head with all those stories about a new life. But that was the only way I could make her understand why we were moving away from my mother. What kid wants to leave their only home and their beloved grandma? A kid who thinks the new place will be bigger, better, and make their dreams come true.

“I’ll check and see what the lease says. Maybe not a puppy. Maybe a cat.”

“A kitten!”

“Maybe. If not, maybe a guinea pig.”

“A piggie!” Bella danced on the corner.

People smiled.

Frankie’s shoulders relaxed a little bit, and she started looking around in earnest. There were dozens of people walking around the town, enjoying the first Friday of cooler fall weather and looking forward to having Labor Day off on Monday. That meant a four-day weekend for her and Bella, since they’d taken a day to move.

It did seem nice. Not fake nice—real nice. People were calling out to each other and hurrying across the street to stop and have conversations. There were small shops with unique names, not big nationwide chains that felt predictable and sterile, even if they were convenient.

And there were kids. Kids with moms and dads pushing them in strollers, carrying them in baby backpacks, holding hands, and steering them away from the street.

My little girl deserves that. Frankie’s eyes fixed on a very handsome brunette, his gorgeous wife, and their twins.

Burke, Bella’s father, AKA Burke the Jerk, had other kids. Those other kids lived in his big McMansion, with a big yard, and attended a private school. They took vacations to Cancun and got cars for their sixteenth birthdays.

Burke didn’t pay any support for Bella, and Frankie was glad. It was part of their unspoken, unwritten agreement—she wouldn’t ask him for any money, and he wouldn’t ask her for any custody—not that he wanted any. Frankie didn’t want her daughter to grow up and find out what a skeezy slimeball her biological father was. She also didn’t trust Burke around her precious daughter. She shuddered inside at the very thought. Frankie and Burke had met while he was her coach. If he had started a relationship with one of the students on his team, who was to say that he wouldn’t cross other boundaries?

It didn’t bear thinking about.

Besides, other thoughts were assailing her.

I’m going to do better than getting Bella a dog. I’m going to get my baby a dad.

A clean-cut respectable dad. A fun, sweet, caring, straight-shooting dad. Two parents with two good jobs equal a house sooner. A big green lawn with

flowerbeds, scarecrows, and a swing set just for her. And maybe siblings. Okay, and dogs. Anything she wants that I can give her

“Mama?”

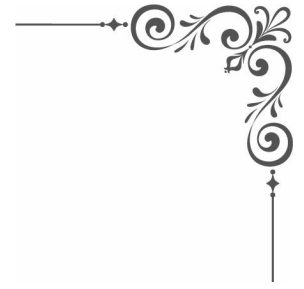
“Sorry. What is it?” Frankie snapped back to reality and realized that her little one had been speaking for a while and waiting for a response.

“Do you like it here?”

“I think so, Bella. Do you?”

“I think so. Mama! A park!”

Frankie looked where Bella was pointing, and this time, her little girl was right. There was a park full of kids, slides, and sandboxes. “Let’s go!”



“Mom, I promise, I’m okay. You don’t need to come up here to watch Bella. I’ve got daycare situated, and I even get a student discount.” Frankie swallowed the small lie. Daycare was situated—for the month of September. It had taken half of her savings to pay for it, even with a discount. She’d have to hope her on-campus job would cover food, gas, and childcare each month.

“What about a job? That stipend didn’t stretch to full room and board, did it?”

“No, it stretched to on-campus dining privileges and rent, though! I don’t need much. I already applied to work at the campus recreation center in the dorm three afternoons a week. It fits perfectly with my class schedule and still leaves me time to make it to the daycare center by 5:30. Bella’s going to love it there. I met a couple with twins at the park, and the lady’s sister teaches in the three-and-four-year-olds’ classroom. They have an actual curriculum and everything.”

Her mother’s anxious voice was silent.

Frankie looked overhead for signs of a lightning strike or wads of cash falling from the ceiling.

Nope. One miracle a day was enough.

“Mom?”

“Oh. Frances, I knew you’d turn it around and make a fresh start. I’m so proud of you, honey.”

Frankie smiled, revealing a deep dimple in her right cheek. “Thanks, Mom. I have to go. I need to run to the store. I’m going to use the slow cooker you gave me on Tuesday. We’ll have dinner ready when we get home from school.”

Her mother laughed with delight. “So proud of you. Love you, darling.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

Frankie hung up and wriggled her bare toes on the soft beige carpeting. She had to admit that it was nice, feeling like a “real” adult. She’d enjoyed meeting Harper and Alban Wymark and their twins. Conversation had flowed easily as they each pushed a swing at the park, listening to their children’s excited shrieks. They talked about parent stuff, like the curriculum at Bright Stars and the qualifications of Harper’s sister, Izzy. Izzy was just the kind of teacher she’d want for Bella. She was smart, had an education degree, and was going to marry the town’s policeman in late October.

Now, she was going to run to the supermarket with Bella before bath and bedtime and prep a healthy, responsible dinner that would translate into several meals. The Wymarks even invited her to the Labor Day cookout at White Pines on Monday afternoon (tomorrow). Well, it wasn't like a personal invitation. They were just informing her about a town event.

"But we can do those things now, Bella-Boo," Frankie muttered to herself as she rubbed the tattoos on her neck and shoulder, fingers slipping under the strap of her olive-green tank top. "We'll go to community things. Have play dates. Spend the weekends together making cookies and going to the park. No more tired, grumpy Mama with frostbitten fingers and blisters on her feet... I hope."

"Baby girl, put your shoes on, and let's go to the store. I'll need your help to pick out snacks for your lunchbox."

Bella scrambled up from in front of the television, her sandy brown hair escaping her little pigtails. Frankie laughed. Bella was 100% her baby. There was no trace of Burke in her appearance. Frankie's own wild brunette locks were always trying to escape whatever pins and twists she tried to force them into. "Like mother, like daughter. Come here, sweetpea. Let Mama fix your hair."

She scooped Bella up in her arms and carried her to the bathroom. Frankie paused in front of the mirror. Pretty face. Slender figure, but healthily slender, no longer the borderline skeletal figure Burke demanded from his swimmers. The tattoos were the only visible evidence that she'd once been a wild hellion, rebelling against college rules by sleeping with her coach, rebelling against her mother by spending her book money on tats, pills, and a fake ID.

"Mama? Are you sad?"

"No! No. I'm not sad. I was thinking about the grocery list, that's all." She crossed her fingers as she quickly collected Bella's hair back into two little tails above her ears.

I'm glad I'm going to live the kind of life that will be healthier and safer for both of us.

But I don't want to become a completely boring suburban mom with no personality—and no sex life. And I don't want to marry a completely boring suburban guy, just because he has a minivan and a fat salary.

Is there a happy medium, or does that only exist in fairytales?



“HEY, LET ME HELP YOU.”

Frankie startled, whirling with Bella on her shoulder and two reusable grocery bags over her arm. Late-night shopping might be a necessity while getting established in Pine Ridge, but it was lousy, logistically. Bella fell asleep on the car ride home, and the town seemed strange after dark. Hundreds of miles from home and help made Frankie’s stomach twist.

And now there was a man next to her car in the dark parking lot next to her apartment building. Why hadn’t she parked under the single lamppost that shed meager light on the faded white lines that made up the spaces?

“I’m fine.” Her voice was shrill as she fumbled her keys into a point between her fingers.

The man looked right at her hand, a brazen smile spreading slowly across his face. “It’d take a lot more than that to stop someone like me—which is why I offered to help. Pine Ridge is a nice place. We try to keep it that way, especially close to campus. There are lots of easy targets.”

Frankie’s chest tightened and her breathing sped up. Was he threatening her? Calling her an easy target? Why wasn’t she running? “I’m fine, and I’m a professional swimmer. I’ve got muscles that would make any mugger sorry.” She put one foot backward, ready to slide back into the car and run this scumbag over. He wasn’t going to lay a hand on Bella.

“I’m not a mugger. I’m your neighbor, and you’ve got a sleeping kid and groceries. So, I repeat, can I help?”

“No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” The man strolled off ahead of her, and sure enough, he went into the lobby, a key dangling from his hand. From the back, Frankie studied his appearance and made mental notes.

On the shorter side and stocky. His face was a brutish square, the kind with thick lips and hooded eyes. Swarthy, they called it.

Or maybe sexy. Dark hair, and devilish eyebrows that arched in a knowing way. A leather jacket and—was that his car? It was a vintage crimson Thunderbird.

Wouldn’t I love to be spread out over the backseat of that, Frankie thought without warning.

Get. Your. Ass. Inside.

And bring your brain with you, before you think incredibly dumb thoughts about how his easy, smartass voice was very... pleasant.

Frankie beeped the car remote in her palm, locking the door of her dented compact. Bella shifted on her shoulder and snuggled her warm pudgy cheek into her neck. “It’s okay, baby.” Frankie breathed through her nose, trying to bring herself down.

She walked into the apartment lobby, eyes scanning every corner. No sign of the creep from the parking lot.

He probably wasn’t a creep. Was he? He offered to help. He might have been awkward but sincere. A campus full of teenagers and young adults was an easy target. She *did* have her hands full.

If I ever see him again—in daylight—I’m going to tell him that he has to learn how to talk to women, especially a lone woman with a child. What kind of idiot is he? Doesn’t he know how many monsters there are on the streets?

Frankie huffed her way up the stairs, Bella seeming to gain a few pounds on each step. “Man, I’m out of shape.”

“I thought you had swimmer’s muscles that would make any mugger sorry.”

Frankie smothered a scream. Creep was standing at the top of the stairs, holding the door for her. “You—I—”

“Rotten terms for a conversation. I’m Eddie and you’re new here. I live in 2-D. You live in 2-A.”

“Stalker much?”

“The only vacant apartment in the building is suddenly not vacant. Call me a psychic, but...” Eddie bowed and smirked, letting her pass.

“Just so you know, you should never, ever sneak up on a woman in a parking lot at night. She could pepper spray the hell out of you,” she hissed, voice lowest on the curse word.

Eddie’s face twitched, thick lips curling in a half-smirk. “You’re right in most cases.”

“No, in *all* cases.”

“Not in the case when a man is—actually just trying to be a gentleman but screwing it up pretty badly.” Eddie’s face twitched again, and he turned abruptly. “Just so you know, there’s a Night Watch in the town. A few dozen citizens, mostly guys. If anyone ever hassles you, scream. You’ll have more help than you can handle in five seconds flat. Night.”

Frankie stared at the door at the end of the hall, watching it swallow up the stocky figure.

Again, she didn’t know whether to be creeped out or comforted.

He puzzled her, and she didn't like that.

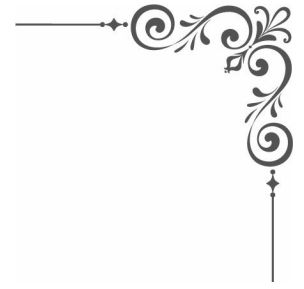
No, she liked that too much. Puzzles were fun. Puzzles kept her from stagnating and turning into a boring woman talking about how to remove stubborn stains and cutting coupons.

And in the light of their shared hallway, she could see him much more clearly. Yes, he still had something that made her think of primitive, brutish men, the kind with clubs and animal skins. Something animalistic.

Like the wolfish glint in his eye when he disappeared into his apartment.

The fact that he seemed to have way too many teeth when he flashed a smile.

Wolves, sharks, and bad boys, oh my...



A Monster Brides Romance



TAKE ONE GRUMPY MILLIONAIRE determined to shut himself away from the rest of the world.

Add one lonely ghost who's thrilled to have company.

What do you get?

The worst stand-off the supernatural-friendly town of Pine Ridge has ever seen—and a grumpy-sunshine romance that no one expected.



WESLEY CREIGHTON HAD it all—and it all backfired. Now, the Wall Street Wonder Kid has nothing but millions, a bad attitude, and a permanently damaged heart. Shutting himself away in a country mansion where he can be miserable and alone seems like the perfect ironic ending to a life that was too good to last.

Wesley buys White Pines, an estate in secluded Pine Ridge, intending to lock the doors and throw away the key. But the real estate agent failed to mention that the property came with a sitting tenant... well, a *floating* tenant. Gloria White, once a notorious heiress and now a beautiful ghost, haunts the halls of White Pines. Even a century after her tragic death, she remains the afterlife of the party.

Gloria won't leave without a fight. Wesley won't go now that he's invested.

When these two begin to battle for control of White Pines, they discover they have much more in common than just stubbornness. Could Wesley and Gloria be meant for one another—even though they're separated by death and time?



IN THIS GHOSTLY PARANORMAL romance, you'll find:

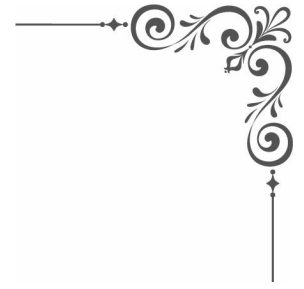
Forced proximity

Grumpy-sunshine

Amazing supernatural steam

Quirky, cozy side characters

A to-die for happily ever after!



“Thank God for e-readers.” Gloria used the stylus to flip through the epilogue of this week’s read. How time had gotten away from her was laughable. Aside from some volunteer work and freelance articles, she really didn’t work. She didn’t have a husband or children to look after. True, her home did require extensive upkeep... but her friends had always been willing to help.

“Glooo-ria!”

“Georgia!” Gloria skimmed the last page and prayed no one would ask any detailed questions about the epilogue. “Come on in!” Even though White Pines was filled with beautiful antiques and was preserved like a 1920s showpiece, Gloria seldom locked her doors.

“I have all the cookies and sandwiches.”

“Put it on my tab!”

“No, you always host, the least the rest of the girls can do is shell out for the food. Besides,” Georgia’s blue eyes sparkled under her curly mop of blonde hair, “staff discount.”

Gloria’s blue eyes twinkled back as she patted a lock of her own black, wavy hair back into place—not that it was ever out of place. It sat in a smooth bob that hugged her pale face.

“What does the boss man say about that?” she laughed. “Is Georgie going to sulk at me during the Christmas party because of your insistence on catering book club? You know these ladies can eat!”

“I don’t think so. He’s a little preoccupied right now. My ‘sister senses’ are tingling—I think Mr. Green and Grumpy has got a lady friend in the wings.”

“No!” Gloria gasped, powder-white hand fluttering to rest on her powder-white cheek. “*Finally!* If it weren’t for Wednesdays, I would know what was going on in the world!”

“You have the internet. You just wouldn’t know what was going on in Pine Ridge.”

Gloria and Georgia giggled as they set out the food on a table set in the wide, opulent library.

“I brought pumpkins and mums! Let’s get this place ready for autumn!” Gray-haired Madge was the next to arrive, thin arms full of bright yellow flowers and mini orange pumpkins.

“You doll! Thanks, Madge!”

“Chloe’s parking the car. She has some gooseneck gourds and some blue salvia from the garden.”

“J.J.! No running in Miss White’s house!” Sophie Smith, almost as pale and raven-haired as her hostess, barrelled into the library after her two-year-old tornado. “Jesse and Mr. Minegold had a committee meeting about the Halloween Parade. Jesse’s mother is helping plan a choir fundraiser. I had to bring J.J., but he’s overtired. I think he’ll take his sippy and go right to sleep. Gloria, can I put him down on the sofa in the old study?”

“Daddy’d flip his wig to find a ‘sticky child’ in his sacred sanctum, but the old coot is long gone and I don’t mind. He can watch cartoons on my tablet while he falls asleep.” Gloria blew a kiss to the toddler who had halted in front of her, cheeks puffed up around part of a banana by the looks of it.

“My gosh, you’re an angel.” Sophie scooped up her son and pushed her way into the study as the entryway of White Pines began to fill.

Gloria floated over to meet her guests, a semi-transparent body in a beautiful white evening gown with blue accents trailing eerily behind feet that only skimmed the floor. “Angel? Nope. But I’m the *soul* of hospitality!”

Gloria’s friends laughed and started piling plates high with pastries and sandwiches.

She smiled. People who thought ghosts were miserable, lonely, evil beings had never been to Pine Ridge.



“PINE RIDGE. PINE RIDGE... You’re sure it’s in New York?” Wesley Creighton squinted at his laptop, trying to ignore the flashing on his wrist.

“I’m sure. It’s close to the Pennsylvania border, at the beginning of the Catskills and the tail end of the Endless Mountains. Ha. Guess they end someplace!”

Creighton had no patience for fools and people who made puns. Puns were jokes for people too lazy to think of punchlines. “I see it now. Is it some hick town? Banjos and plaid? Am I going to have to buy a satellite just to check my email?”

Not that I’m supposed to spend my remaining years shackled to a desk...

“I don’t think so. There’s a branch of New York University there. The Chamber of Commerce website makes it look pretty idyllic. Looks like they have a big fall festival, some kind of ongoing street fair, a Halloween Parade, a Christmas Bazaar, and some little shops on a cute main street. They’ve kept

the big box stores and supermarkets out of town. I wouldn't call it a one-horse town, but it has a Norman Rockwell vibe."

"A who?"

"A Twentieth Century American painter known for his depictions of small-town life in America."

Wesley rubbed his temples. He had a headache, but he didn't want to take anything that would raise his hair-trigger blood pressure. "Thank you, Mr. Art Professor. Is the estate in my price range this time? Does it have everything I want?" His realtor had shown him everything from broken-down fixer-uppers to the mini-palaces Middle Eastern royals were letting go in favor of buying an island.

"Yes, it's definitely in your price range—even on the lower end. It's secluded, there's access to nature, minimal landscaping required, an indoor pool, a study, and a library that has an impressive collection. There's an ensuite bathroom in the master bedroom, a conservatory, a ballroom, plenty of bedrooms for entertaining houseguests, a beautiful dining room with—"

"Whoa. That's enough." Wesley chewed the inside of his lower lip in a scowl before replying. He didn't need a garden or greenhouse... although his doctor had been after him to get a "stress-reducing" hobby. But the ballroom and extra bedrooms... "Business conferences," he murmured to himself and then winced.

No. No more business anything. Not if I want this heart to last for a couple more years.

This whole house is a bad investment. What's the point of throwing money away on something I'll barely get to use?

Anger and stubbornness at the ugly fate he'd created for himself welled up. His wrist monitor flashed red and beeped. "Buy it. Make the offer."

"Ah. Well, see, there's one catch."

"I don't have time for catches," Wesley growled through gritted teeth.

"White Pines is held in trust to the White family, but there are no surviving members. The bank is considered the trust's manager, and for some reason, they've—"

"What bank?"

"Silverman First Fiduciary."

"Small and privately traded?"

"Uh..."

Wesley rolled his eyes, happy his realtor couldn't see him. The man was good at property acquisition, but he had definite deficits in other areas. "Never mind. I'll buy the bank and its assets if I have to. What else am I going to do with the money? Save it for a rainy day?" He snorted. "I'm moving to White Pines by next week. I have to get out of Manhattan. Doctor's orders." He hung up the phone with a mumbled curse.

His office would have to be packed... but what would he take?

"Wesley! You're not supposed to be in the building!"

Wesley looked down the considerable expanse of carpeting until his eyes rested on the door. Josh Price was standing in it, two printer boxes full of photos, potted plants, and who knew what else cradled in his arms.

"Josh. Hey." Wesley didn't hate his vice president and former CFO. Right now, he just couldn't bear to look at him.

"Wes, I'm serious. I can handle the company. I'll do everything just like you taught me, I swear." Josh put the boxes on the edge of the desk and pulled up a chair. "You have to let someone else handle the day-to-day right now."

"I know. I know. Um. This is hard." Wesley stood up and looked around the office. "You keep the putting green. I hate golf. I only did it for the sake of signing deals on the links. I'll take the laptop, that's mine. Hm. The Scotch... Damn. I love a good Scotch. You're not supposed to drink when you're on this much heart medicine."

Wesley froze, hand absently fondling the keys to his desk and the liquor cabinet.

What was left to live for? At thirty-five, he was in his prime. His business was booming. His millions were close to turning into billions. Business was his life. His hobbies included building the business, writing about business, giving occasional lectures at Columbia (his Alma Mater) about business, and excellent, expensive Scotch.

No wife. No kids. No pets. No genuine hobbies.

He'd been on the cover of *Fortune* five times in ten years.

What did he have to show for it? A massive heart attack at thirty-five and permanent heart damage. His heart couldn't take any strain. His cardiologist warned him that the next "cardiac event" would be "The One."

"You know what you said, Josh? That you'll run it just like I would?" Wesley dropped the keys into Josh's palm, dark blue-black eyes meeting surprised hazel ones staring out of a fair, peachy face. "Don't. It's bad for

business if we have to change CEOs every couple of years. In the words of my doctor, ‘Find life-work balance. Eat the Mediterranean Diet. Spend precious time with your family.’” Wesley snorted as he stood, surprised at how weak he seemed these days. A month ago, he could walk the trading floor for hours without anything more than a dozen cups of coffee.

Price had kids. Two pretty little girls. “Spend time with those kids on the weekends.”

What was *he* going to do? Who was Mr. Big Bucks Creighton going to spend time with?

“Wes, can I help you to the elevator? Should you be walking? Did you phone for a car?” Josh followed him out of the office, anxiously trotting at his side even though Wesley wasn’t running. Eager types like Price always seemed to trot.

“Just keep it afloat. I’m not going to take a salary anymore. Just my retirement package, 401 Ks and IRAs. I’m living on dividends, buddy.”

That was partially a lie. He hadn’t taken vacations, only business trips. He didn’t drive fast cars, he’d always driven one of the company’s. He had plenty left to live on, especially since the doctor told him patients with his type of heart attack usually only lived until their next cardiac event. With his terrible temper and his penchant for obsessively worrying and working on his business, the critical moments should be in about... a week?

“The girl at the front will call a car. I’m having my P.A. handle the move.”

“The move?”

“I’m going into hibernation to try to squeeze a couple more months out of the old ticker,” Wesley sneered as said the phrases that should be reserved for old men. “I’m leaving the city. Heading to the sticks. I’ll learn meditation and start an herb garden. Maybe I’ll grow a beard. No one will even recognize me at my own funeral.”

Josh blinked rapidly, mouth in a stunned “O.” “Don’t say that, Wesley.”

“I never bullshit you before. I won’t do it now.”

“I—I’ll come and visit.” Josh offered as the elevator doors opened.

Wesley put a single finger on Price’s shoulder and made him step back, out of the glassy box with its rows of gleaming buttons. “Don’t bother. I don’t want company. People only had one purpose to me before, and you know that. You have to have people to have customers. You have to have customers to have a business. I don’t have a business anymore. Not one that I

can have a hand in. So, no offense, but I don't need your visits. Stay here and make Creighton and Co. look good, okay?"

Price gave him a brave smile. "Okay."

"Okay." Wesley pushed the button that would close the doors, shutting out Josh's surprised face.

Wesley leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes so he couldn't see his reflection in the steel ceiling. His skin was gray, and his under eyes were permanently bruised from lack of sleep and blood thinners.

He had to admit that Price wasn't the only one who was surprised.

Why was he moving to the country and buying a big, rambling vacant place that was too large for one man? Why try to prolong a life he wouldn't even enjoy?

Because out of retirement and death, retirement was slightly more familiar. If he knew for sure that death would be more entertaining, he might have opted to stay in Manhattan.



Mr. Minegold never had to be invited in as her house was technically “vacant,” but he always waited politely for her answer to his courtly, “May I enter, Miss White?”

As always, Gloria smiled at the courteous vampire and concentrated hard, pushing her front door open wide. “Indeed, Mr. Minegold. What brings you over so late?” It was almost dawn on Saturday morning. Although Gloria didn’t have pressing errands to attend, Mr. Minegold was the unofficial mayor of Pine Ridge and a leader in the supernatural community—a community that blended seamlessly with the humans in town. Most humans were terribly oblivious to things that they categorized as fictional or unexplainable, and the “monsters” of Pine Ridge were peaceful. They gave no reason for humans to investigate. And if any supernatural entity *did* cause trouble... Mr. Minegold and several other residents of the Night Watch paid a visit.

Gloria thought rapidly. She hadn’t done anything unusual to attract attention. She couldn’t even leave the property of White Pines without assistance from someone well-versed in magic and spiritual matters. White Pines had been her entire world for decades.

Mr. Minegold was alone and twisting his fedora nervously in the September breeze. That meant something was wrong—but nothing could be wrong with her. She’d been making her home here for 123 years. She didn’t go out and rabble rouse or create trouble.

“Jakob?” she used her old friend’s given name despite his stiff, formal manner. “What is it?”

“Sit?”

She pursed her lips. “I’ll try.” She could hover over a chair, but it was hard to force her noncorporeal essence to connect with a solid object and not go through it.

“No, never mind. There is no easy way to say this... Have you heard that Old Mr. Silverman passed away a few weeks ago?”

“The nice old man from the bank with whiskers in his ears?”

“The same.”

“I hadn’t heard. I haven’t... *seen* him, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Gloria was used to people asking if she could pass a message to their departed loved ones.

“I believe he has passed peacefully and is in the arms of his beloved Myrtle. No, the problem is with the bank. Mr. Silverman, who owned the

bank, made sure White Pines was always kept in trust to the White Family. As some of us know, that account can be managed by you. But to the world..."

"I don't exist. I know, dear." Gloria gave Minegold a brave smile. It had been a century. It still hurt. For him, she thought, the pain must be worse. Minegold had lost his family in much more horrible circumstances, and his condition kept him from joining them.

"The bank is—was—managed by a board of directors until a new president could be installed. In the interim, a businessman from the city has bought the bank and all its assets. He's going to place Mr. Silverman's son as president. Ahem. But he... He claimed White Pines for its market value and put the proceeds back in the trust. There's some legal mumbo jumbo that allowed it. I have been up all night with Jesse Smith and Alban Wymark, trying to see if we have any recourse. If *you* have any recourse."

Gloria stared at the man across from her, his lean, sympathetic face and soulful eyes filled with worry.

"Wh-what will he do with it, this businessman?"

"He intends to live in it, according to Mr. Silverman. The *younger* Mr. Silverman, that is. He tried to dissuade the realtor acting for Mr. Creighton, but the realtor was most insistent. He said Mr. Creighton absolutely must have this house and would not take no for an answer. Alban looked up the man in question. He's very wealthy and well-connected."

"Hm. A tycoon like my daddy." Gloria forced a smile. She had loved her father dearly... except for his meddling in her love life and his clear preference for money over her and Mama. "Well. Lots of folks live in haunted houses."

"Most without ever knowing it!" Mr. Minegold said excitedly. "I'm sure he'll be no bother. Perhaps he'll be a sympathetic sort and allow the book club and the flower show to continue here. And the All Hallow's Ball."

Gloria nodded. "Perhaps. Or perhaps..." She swallowed, throat somehow still tight even though it wasn't made of flesh and bone any longer. "Perhaps he'll be the sort to summon an exorcist."

"You know perfectly well that won't work in Pine Ridge. The only priest here who could perform an exorcism is not going to throw out an innocent woman from her home! You won't harm the man or his family."

"Family?" Gloria's eyes suddenly glimmered with hope. "Has he a family?"

“I imagine he must. What man would buy such a spacious property for one person?”

Gloria didn't comment. Her daddy built White Pines for three people. Well, three people and a dozen servants. Most families didn't have servants now, from what she understood.

But a family! Now that put a different coat of paint on the picture! People in Pine Ridge treated her like family, as a dear friend. They helped her and supported her, but she was forced to admit that they weren't truly her kin. But if the Creightons moved in with a bunch of little ones... Why, she could be their guardian ghost! They could call her Auntie Gloria! She could watch them open presents on Christmas morning and help them inspect their haul after Trick-or-Treat. Maybe they'd even get married on the grounds or in the ballroom, and she could watch it happen.

Life. Life with movement and love. Not a shadowy half-existence like hers, where things changed around her but she stayed the same, where she was forced to relive one night over and over each year. “Perhaps we'll get on well together,” she said at last.

“I fervently hope so. Once they've settled in, Georgia can come up and ask to ‘rent’ the library for book club so you can still attend. And we'll talk to him about the other events as they come up.” Minegold's taut face relaxed. “You are such a brave spirit, Gloria. Ahhh. If I were but twenty years younger...”

“Don't you mean twenty older, sweetie?” Gloria flirted back.

“You are ageless.” Minegold bowed.

“As are you.”

Minegold cleared his throat. “With the right maneuvers, it is possible to remove a spirit to a safe earthly location other than its home or the location of uh—expiration. I know Madge can do it with Tessa's help.”

Gloria hesitated. Tessa Roscommon was an incredibly powerful witch, and Madge at the magic shop was an impressive magic user, as well. But if something went wrong... Fear gripped where her heart used to beat. Leaving home? Maybe she should.

But leaving this place would mean she'd never understand what happened the night she died. Although a large part of her was tempted to ignore the mystery, some little piece of her soul was curious. For a century, she had tried and failed to see past her own perspective and the terror that forced her

to relieve that horrible night once a year. So far, she had failed. So far, she hadn't given in to the temptation to quit.

"Where would I go?" Gloria murmured with a reluctant smile.

"Well... there are other houses in town. None so grand as this, but much closer to the center of things! Your friends could access you more easily. My home... You know that technically I'm the nearest neighbor."

"It is tempting," Gloria conceded with what she called her "demure" smile. It was a smile she'd often put into use with her daddy's business partners who made uncalled-for comments about her youth and beauty as well as with the young beaus who tried to take her onto the veranda and make time with her. The smile was hard to read, but it was still a smile, and it typically made men be quiet.

Mr. Minegold wasn't that sort of insincere, selfish man, though. "It's so much to think about, my dear friend. You could always stay with me for a time. We would all help you find something permanent, posthaste."

"I'll remember that, Jakob. But I will plan to stay here and hope for the best!" She gave him a real smile. "The house is big. The Creightons probably won't notice me. If they don't bother me, I won't bother them. We're borrowing trouble, aren't we?"

Minegold's eyes suddenly flashed a deep ruby red. "Trouble sometimes comes in unexpected forms. If they try to drive you out—we'll drive *them* out. And we'll get the property placed in the town's name and we'll... put up some sort of historical marker out front and have tours on Sundays."

Gloria laughed. She felt warm suddenly, instead of her normal room temperature. "Thank you, Jakob. I'm not too worried."

They locked eyes for a moment.

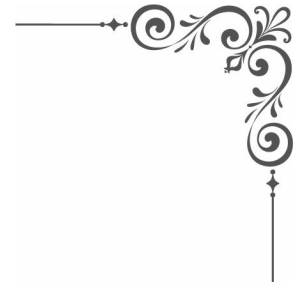
Gloria knew what his long, silent look meant.

The worst we could imagine has already occurred. A sudden searing pain hit her in the back, just where her spine met her hips.

She rose and pushed the phantom pain away. Her birthday wasn't for another month. She could forget about it. The Creightons would distract her.

Minegold tipped his hat as he rose. "Good day, Gloria."

"Good night, Jakob."



Wesley sat in the back of the chauffeured town car, staring at the list of dos and don'ts.

The don'ts exceeded the dos by three pages. Ever efficient, he tossed those pages on the seat and focused on the activities still accessible to him.

Light exercise such as modified yoga. Walking with a heart rate below 100 bpm. Gentle water exercises. Swimming in a pool with a temperature between 80 and 98 degrees. Modified dance that uses slow movement. Monitor heart rate.

“Picky, picky. An awful lot of trouble to keep Scrooge’s reincarnation alive,” Wesley mumbled as he tossed another page on the seat.

Cooking healthy meals

Sewing and handicrafts that do not involve lifting heavy weights or using power tools with strong magnetic components.

Sexual activity—use caution. Pick positions that do not put strain on the heart or constrict blood flow.

Wesley rubbed his temples, where gray hairs had sprung up overnight. *Well. No kinky bondage for me. I can get a call girl to give me a sponge bath, I guess.*

“Ten miles away, Mr. Creighton.”

“Thanks.” He would have to revive his manners. Right after his heart attack—the sudden, violent type known as a widow maker—he had found himself feeling grateful. Everything was “please” and “thank you.” It wasn’t that he was rude—

No. Rudeness was part of it. Arrogance.

Thinking about his shortcomings made him wince. Wesley had been in a comfortable position where he had avoided those thoughts, secure that he paid well and got results. People tended to overlook blunt words and a minimum of social niceties when you were handing out five-figure bonuses.

Can’t pay off your heart, smartass. Can’t sweet talk it, either. “Step on it,” Wesley barked and sank back in the seat.



“THIS IS VERY *Brideshead Revisited*.” Wesley looked at the small assemblage of people standing in front of the mansion’s wide double doors.

“I would say more 1920s Art Deco, sir. You can see some clear evidence of Gothic revival and definite European influence.” The chauffeur pointed through the windshield. “Look at the balconies and that domed cupola.”

“I’m not talking about the house, and I didn’t ask for a lecture.” Wesley peered out the window of the car as it worked its way up the long drive that curved in a wide semi-circle. The original builders obviously had money and a desire to impress. Why the hell his realtor thought he wanted this showpiece in a secluded mountain town... “Guess it’s not that secluded after all. Those can’t all be the staff of this place. I didn’t hire any staff. I’m not paying them.”

The chauffeur was silent, presumably still stung by the curt remark about his architectural assessment.

The car stopped, and the driver sprang out, heading to the trunk and stacking Wesley’s suitcases by the hedges flanking the house.

“Let me grab those.” A uniformed police officer took three heavy bags as if they weighed nothing.

“Thank you, officer.” Wesley felt like a weak old man. It had taken him three trips and a borrowed baggage cart just to get those bags from his bedroom to the elevator. “Is there a problem?”

“No, indeed. We are your welcoming committee.” A tall, slender man with a long fawn-colored coat and a dark gray fedora with a red feather in the band bowed to him from the shadows cast by the balcony above the front door. “I’m Mr. Minegold, these two gentlemen are Officer Walsh and Mr. Silverman, the bank president, and this is Georgia Fenclan, the owner of The Pine Loft Coffee Shop.”

“Baked goods and some of our favorite roasts, and tickets to a Lumberjacks game. Go ‘Jacks!” A cute, bubbly blonde woman smiled and held out a picnic basket the size of a small Porsche.

Wesley didn’t take it. “No caffeine for me. No heavy lifting, either. Would you put it inside? You have the key?” Wesley looked at the young man in a suit. “Silverman. We talked on the phone. You’re young to be a bank president, aren’t you?”

“I’m the oldest son. We—uh—age well.” Silverman smiled and handed him a ring of keys with a keychain stamped with the Silverman First Fiduciary logo. “Mountain air and good living. You’ll love it here, Mr. Crighton.”

“I hope so. Well. Nice to meet you all. I’ll—”

“No heavy lifting? Let’s help you inside.” Mr. Minegold seized another suitcase. “May we?”

Wesley forced a smile. “Thanks. Come in.” He moved forward to put the key in the lock, but the front door popped open before he touched it. The banker must have opened it while they were waiting, he rationalized.

The little committee of do-gooders swarmed in as if they owned the place. Wesley tipped the driver and received a grunted farewell. He walked slowly inside, clutching his phone and his shoulder satchel that held a wealth of papers and his laptop.

“—must have a bad back.”

“No caffeine? That’s heart.”

“Shh!”

Muffled voices drifted through the open doorway as he drew near. Wesley felt a rush of anger. How dare these strangers come into *his* home and gossip and conjecture about him?

People used to talk about his money. His business. He didn’t mind hearing people guess how much he was worth or how much he spent on his suits. But guessing what was wrong with him? That made him feel so... human.

Wesley slammed the door shut—and it swung closed gently. God damn it. His strength was ebbing by the day! Maybe he would have to take up some form of exercise. Swimming. There was a pool, after all.

Everyone was looking at him with amused smiles. His wrist flashed as his blood pressure rose, pushing his heart rate along with it. “Well. Thanks for carrying that in. Have a—”

“So, Mr. Creighton, your realtor said you intend to use this as a personal residence. Are you familiar with the area?”

“No. But I heard it was quiet and that’s all I want. Quiet and *solitude*. So, if you—”

“You didn’t come and tour the house. Let me show you around. If you’re not supposed to do any heavy lifting, Ardy can carry those bags to your room. Right, Ardy?” The woman stepped in and started organizing things.

Wesley tried to tamp down the annoyance. After all, she had a point. “My realtor gave me a guided tour of the photos on the website. There’s a room that has a big balcony and French windows opening onto it. The one facing the grounds. Nice view of the woods. Put those bags there, officer. And again, thank you.”

“No trouble. We’re very neighborly.” The cop trotted away.

“Ah, yes. I’m one of your closest neighbors. Jakob Minegold.”

Wesley nodded and noted that the man pronounced the name like “Yay-cob.” “I noticed your accent. Austrian?”

Jakob shook his head. “Polish. Ah, let me show you the ballroom.”

“There’s a library.”

“The pool.”

Wesley’s head bounced back and forth between the three remaining tour guides. Before he could even speak, he was being shunted away from the main entranceway and the ornate single staircase that split into two curving columns at the second floor.

Calm down. It’s not like they’re going to steal from you. There’s nothing of yours in the place, yet. Not like anyone can take a house from you.



“GLORIA, PLEASE CALM down,” Ardy whispered as he stood in front of her bedroom door.

“No! I will not have a man in my room! It’s undignified! It’s unseemly. I don’t care if I’m dead, I have my reputation to think about!”

“Honey, listen—”

“Don’t you ‘honey’ me! Aren’t you getting married to Izzy in a month?” Gloria knew her voice was shrill.

“Gloria, I just meant that you don’t need to worry. If he takes this room, there are a dozen more! Sleep in any one you want.”

“I want this one. This one has been mine since I moved out of the nursery!” Gloria didn’t fully understand how her tears worked, but she knew that she could still cry. “I love it! It’s one thing that has never changed. I won’t let him have it!”

“What are you going to do? Scare him out of it?”

Gloria hesitated. She’d always been a friendly ghost, a kind spirit—literally. “If I have to. Oh, nothing much, Ardy, don’t look at me like that.” Gloria put a hand on her chin. “Just little things like banging in the night and a little moaning.”

“And if moaning and banging in the bedroom doesn’t work?” A spasm passed over Ardy’s face, and he covered his mouth with his fist.

“I’ll... I’ll think of something. Something spooky. Enough to make him leave the room. But if he tries to touch the furniture, I’ll show him what Gloria White is really made of!”

Ardy stared at her in silence. “Um.”

Gloria surveyed her floating form with a sigh. “Yes, I know. I don’t know exactly what I’m made of, not in the scientific sense, but I know it’s strong stuff. And after a century of using this form, I’m a lot more powerful than some other ghosts I could mention!”

“I bet,” Ardy soothed. “So, please, let me put the guy’s bag in here? You’ll have him room-hopping in a week.”

“I hope so. Did Georgia ask him about book club?”

“Not by the time I left. I bet she’s softening him up right now.”



“NOT THAT I’M COMPLAINING, but who cleaned up this place and prepped it? They did a fabulous job.” Wesley admitted that a spark of satisfaction was being fanned into a contented flame. This house was a rich man’s period piece. He had never spoiled himself, but since strenuous travel was out of the picture, why not indulge in luxuries here at home?

And this was a *beautiful* home. Even though his apartment building boasted a pool, sauna, and recreation center, he’d never used them. Too busy. Too many people sweating on machines and glaring at him for talking loudly to investors and brokers in different time zones.

“Actually, the bank contracted with various community members to keep the home in mint condition,” Silverman said with a slight tremble in his voice.

Georgia, the blonde with baked goods, piped up, “Yes. You see, the White Pines estate is just a perfect place for so many things. It’s close to town but still secluded. There’s plenty of space. We hold the spring flower show on the back lawn every year, and our weekly book club uses a few downstairs rooms and the kitchen.”

“The All Hallow’s Ball—sometimes called the Halloween Ball these days, is held in the ballroom. It’s an excellent exchange. Free upkeep and landscaping for minimal use.”

“You should really consider it.” Georgia beamed sweetly. “And of course, you’re a member of the community, so you should join in the fun!”

Ah-ha. No such thing as a free lunch. That’s why they’re all being so cavity-inducingly sweet, Wesley thought with a scowl. *They want me to keep letting them use my house and my grounds! Well, nothing doing.*

But how much would maid service, gardening, pool care, and routine maintenance cost? Thousands of dollars annually, if not more. A few days a year of avoiding the locals would keep more money in my pocket.

Wesley knew enough about business to know when he should make people sweat. He was sure he'd get the best service if his agreement was reluctantly given. "I'll have to think about it. Do you happen to know when the pool was last serviced? Is it ready to be filled?" He nonchalantly walked around the pool which was located in the rear of the building on the ground floor. It had those ugly old whales that came straight out of ancient Greece painted on the bottom. A dozen Ionian columns supported arches and caught the gold flecks in the marble floor that surrounded it. As far as swimming pools went, it wasn't terribly large or even that deep. Carved numbers on the floor showed the starting depth was three feet and it went up to six feet at the steepest end.

"Ah. It was..." Minegold stared off into space for answers. "Just a few months ago. The Lumberjacks used it to practice for their upcoming charity water polo match."

"You can't play water polo in this dinky thing, can you?" Why would hockey people be playing water polo? Why would they choose this pool? Sure it had enough space for the teams, but where would the spectators sit?

There was a stunned silence. All of his tour guides were looking anywhere but at him. In fact, most of them seemed to be looking at the ceiling again. Wesley followed their upturned gaze. It was pretty, with a fresco of clouds and cherubs. He didn't know why his comments had earned a sudden fascination with it, however.

"Ahem. It was just practice for a charity match. Just for fun." The police officer was back. "I carried up the rest of your bags."

"Yes, and to answer your question, it can be filled whenever you like. The architect Mr. White hired to build this place was certainly innovative—for the time." Minegold walked over to a crouching lion sculpture that stuck out over the surface of the pool.

At first, Wesley had assumed the lions—one at either far corner—were just more attestations to the original owner's wealth. Who else would have carved lion diving boards? But, no. Minegold pointed to the mouth of one statue.

"These conceal the water pipes. Simply open the mouth and turn the handle. But Glo— But those in the know suggest you wait until you're ready

to use the pool to fill it. It will take most of the day to fill, of course, but then it will last for weeks if treated with the right chemicals.”

Wesley studied the floor and noticed that the ugly whales had drains built into their blowholes. And just as the lions had a crank on the wall between them to turn on the water, at the opposite end of the pool was another wheel, presumably to get the whales to open their blowholes and drain it out. “This is like a giant bathtub!”

“Many early private pools were.” Minegold gave a gentle smile.

“Well. It’s a strange old place, but it’ll do. I think I can explore the rest of the place on my own.” Wesley turned pointedly toward the door.

His guests left with many calls of “We’ll be in touch!” and “We’re here if you need us.”

He had the strangest feeling they weren’t talking to him.