



CASSIE MINT

A Baby FOR
THE
OUTCAST

BE ♥ MY ♥ BABY

CASSIE MINT

A Baby For The Outcast

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One

Helen



It takes nine hours and three separate buses to reach Sky High Hotel from the nearest train station. A long, baffling journey for my brand new, baffling job.

The first is a sleek city bus, crammed full of bored travelers staring at their phones; the second is smaller and shabbier, half-empty with threadbare seats, chugging through forgotten towns. By the third and final bus, I'm so desperate to get there already, I don't even care that this vehicle looks like it was hammered from tin. We wind higher and higher into the mountains, engine sputtering asthmatically, and I grip my duffel bag until my fingertips go white.

Nearly there.

Outside the grubby windows, it's nothing but bare rock and wispy plants in the cracks. Sometimes—if we're lucky—a cloud skids across the blue sky.

I'd be bored if I weren't so terrified.

My fingers tremble as I dig out the sheath of papers from my coat pocket, the whole stack folded and read and refolded so many times on this journey that I'm surprised it hasn't disintegrated. The edges of the papers have curled; the sheets flop around in my hands.

On top is the cut-out newspaper advert. The whole reason I'm here.

Wanted: Live-in artist's assistant. Room & board.

Then, underneath, as casual as can be, a salary which made my eyebrows leap into my hairline the first time I read it. And it's too good to be true, right? No one offers dream money for an assistant job unless there's a huge catch.

Back at home when I showed her, my sister Fran said, "Human trafficking. Definitely. Or maybe you'll get there and find it's a porn shoot. Or maybe it's a crazy old man who'll march you at gunpoint down the nearest church aisle. Or maybe—"

"I'll look it up," I told her weakly, patting her on the wrist. "I'll do my research first, I promise."

And I did. Sky High Hotel is a real place, though it's now a private home, and my employer, Rufus Grangemoor, is real too.

Notorious, maybe, but real. A famous artist.

But I still made copies of everything for Fran and told her to call the cops if I don't check in by tomorrow.

The bus lurches to one side, rounding a hairpin bend, and I glance out of the window—then choke. Below us is nothing but dead air, and further down, sharp rocks. Mist clings to the mountainside, and patches of scrubby grass are the only signs of life.

The engine roars. I whimper.

And by the time the mountain road levels off, weaving through narrow passes cut in the rock, I'm sweating and clammy under my layers.

Maybe this is a mistake. If there's anything *off* about this job, anything at all, I'll be completely isolated. The bus only comes on this final route once a week, and if I tried to hike back the way we came, I'd fall down the cliff face in three seconds flat.

What if this *is* an elaborate trick? A wife-hunter or a porno. Or what if Rufus Grangemoor steals my organs? I *need* those.

“Idiot,” I whisper to myself, brain whirring as I try to remember all my contingency plans. I dug out the local emergency numbers before I came and wrote them down in my stack of papers. There’s enough cash in my duffel bag to pay for a week or so in a dive motel. Will a local show me the way?

I’m still panicking when we curve around a final bend and the road widens into a small, dusty town square. There are buildings, suddenly, made of wooden slats and painted in cheerful pastel shades. A post office; a general store; a bakery. The paint peels in places, the clock is frozen in time on the town hall, and the whole place looks tired, but I appreciate the effort.

Those bursts of soothing color are what get me moving, fumbling my bag and coat together as the bus driver says, “Well, folks. Sky High Outpost. This is the last stop.”

No kidding.

An elderly woman leaves first, leaping into action with surprising sprightliness, followed by a teenage boy. The only other passengers. I trail after them both, but it’s too late for misgivings now.

I’m here. This is happening.

And I came all this way, didn’t I? I need to meet Rufus Grangemoor for at least five minutes. This is my dream job, so long as it’s real. And sure, you’d be stretching to call this tiny town shabby chic, but there are *people* here. Signs of life.

Never thought I’d be so glad to see a bunch of strangers.

Twin clouds of dirt kick up as I hop off the lowest bus step. The sun burns hot up here in the mountains, but the air is thin and the wind is cool. I swallow hard, mouth dry, as I scan the small crowd of greeters, but there are no photos of Rufus Grangemoor online so I’m flying blind.

A chattering family huddles around the elderly woman, speaking over one another and fighting to take her bags. My chest warms at the sight, and I move on. The teenage boy stands with a middle aged man, staring at the ground and answering all questions with grunts, but there's a family resemblance there, too. The same tawny hair; the same sloping nose. That leaves...

My employer stands apart from the rest of the townsfolk, and they shoot him nervous glances. As soon as my eyes land on him, my heart thumps harder; my breaths quicken. The breeze brushes against my overheated cheeks, and I stare, rooted in place.

Because Rufus Grangemoor looks terrifying. He's huge, for starters, towering head and shoulders above everyone else, and he looks as harsh and unforgiving as the landscape. Thick, dark hair tugged by the wind; eyebrows lowered in a permanent frown. A weathered, scarred face and a short beard, peppered with silver, and those *eyes*.

Those eyes pierce right to the core of me in one glance. I'm skewered to the spot, trembling.

Rufus Grangemoor raises one eyebrow, as if to say: "Well?"

I stumble forward, boots scraping against the gritty stone. My duffel bag bounces off my shins. The other greeters are drifting away, truck doors slamming as laughter echoes in the air, and I wish I could snag one of them by the sleeve. Maybe beg them to stay with me for five more minutes.

"Mr Grangemoor?" I ask instead, my voice hoarse. *Be brave, Helen. He won't bite you. Probably.*

Although there is something beastly about my new employer. He'd be at home surrounded by panthers or grizzly bears; with brawn like that, he could probably take them in a fight, too. Wrestle them bare-handed onto the ground.

Rufus Grangemoor nods: a severe dip of his chin. "Come on," he rumbles, "before the light fades. We've still got a way to drive."

More driving? Oh, god. And my employer must see me sag with despair, because his beard shifts. It's not quite a smile, but he *is* amused.

When I reach him, he takes my duffel in a callused hand and loads it into the backseat of his truck, and I feel like a giant idiot because I only realize now that Mr Grangemoor walks with a cane. It's solid as an oak tree—it'd need to be, to support *him*—and it's as scarred and beat-up as its owner.

"Thank you," I say. Mr Grangemoor nods, slamming the truck door and limping around to the driver's side. It's a banger of a truck, dented and scratched with peeling blue paint.

"And thank you for collecting me." The truck cab is silent once I'm settled, engine rumbling as we pull into the road, and I've always had a thing about silence. It's like scratching an itch. I *need* to fill it. "I hope this isn't too far out of your way, Mr Grangemoor. I'd have brought my own car if I could, but I don't drive."

He sighs and guides us around a corner.

"God, that last bus was crazy. I swear, it was held together with paper clips and string. Every time we rounded a bend, I thought bits might fly off and go crashing down a crevasse."

Silence. The truck swings back out onto the mountain path, continuing the endless journey past the rock face.

I wince, stealing a glance at the harsh scars on his face. Is that what happened to this man? An accident in the mountains? Is that why the townsfolk all kept their distance?

"It's nice to meet you. I've never met an artist before—a famous one, I mean. I went to an arts college after high school, but I'm sure you know that's a one-way ticket into retail."

More silence.

"I sketch, mostly," I say, panic rising up the back of my throat, but short of pinching my own tongue, I don't know if I can stop. I've always been a chatterbox, especially when I'm nervous, and

this man makes me near-hysterical with nerves. A dark mood has settled over his shoulders like thunderclouds.

“And I like charcoals. They get so messy, though, and I always find out hours later that I’ve been walking around with a giant gray smudge on my nose. Do you ever use charcoals, Mr Grangemoor?”

“No.”

I melt back against the seat, weak with relief that I got a reply. And I know I should quit while I’m ahead, but god damn me, I go on.

“Sky High Outpost. That’s a funny name, isn’t it?” I sound shrill, and I watch in horror as my hand reaches out, fiddling with the air con dials. What the hell am I doing? “I mean, I guess I see where they got it from. We *are* pretty high up. Earlier, when we were driving higher and higher, I looked down and saw white mist clinging to the rock face, but I suppose that could have been a low-hanging cloud. Crazy, right?”

“It’s broken,” Mr Grangemoor mutters.

“Hm? What?”

“The air con.” When I steal a glance, his jaw is rock hard with irritation. “No point fiddling with it, because it won’t work.”

“Oh. Sorry.” My hand drops back into my lap, and I’m so on edge my stomach aches. Outside the truck, the sun sinks below the horizon, painting the sky with lavender hues. I’ve been traveling non-stop all day, and I’m thirsty and aching and tired. My clothes are rubbing against me, and I smell musty as hell.

Mr Grangemoor flicks on the truck headlights. Chewing on my bottom lip, I watch the ghostly beams swoop over endless rock.

“I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Nothing.

“I know I shouldn’t fiddle. I just get so nervous, you know, and then it’s like I’m possessed by some manic imp, because—”

“We don’t need to talk.” Mr Grangemoor cuts across me, his deep voice quiet but commanding. This man’s word is law, and he hath ruled: shut up, Helen.

“S-sorry,” I start to say, but he gives me a warning look. Knotting my fingers together, I sink down in my seat.

Jerk.

Guess those fancy wages make more sense now. The way everyone avoided him, too, huddling together in the town square and leaving him on the outskirts. And that thought helps, because you know what? I’ll take an asshole boss over a surprise porno any day.

So long as I wake up with all my organs in the right place, I can handle a rude employer.

* * *

Sky High Hotel might look better in the daylight. That’s the most charitable thought I can muster. It slumps against the rock face, four stories tall, and even in the evening gloom, it looks dilapidated.

Several windows are boarded over. The cheery white paint has peeled. There’s an ancient hotel sign, hanging from rusty chains and creaking in the breeze, but the letters are faded so it reads: *Sk igh ote*

There’s no warm welcome in these mountains. Not here, anyway. Not anymore.

“Watch your step,” Mr Grangemoor says as he shuts the truck engine off. It ticks quietly, cooling in the thin evening air, and I gather my courage, wrapping it around my shoulders like a shawl before I follow him out there. Stars are scattered across the sky.

His cane clacks against the rocky driveway. Mr Grangemoor grabs my duffel before I can offer, swinging it easily onto one

broad shoulder before he limps to the front door.

Two electric lanterns offer feeble light on either side of the hotel entrance. And that's good, because I half expected my grumpy boss to turn to me and declare that we have no electricity or running water.

We're isolated. In the middle of nowhere.

"It's so quiet," I whisper, forgetting the no-speaking rule for a moment.

No reply.

Floorboards creak under our weight as Mr Grangemoor leads me into the hotel lobby, with no rugs to muffle our steps. The door swings shut behind me, and the *boom* makes me jump. Like a prison cell banging closed.

My boss flicks on the lights. Wall sconces give off a yellow glow, casting a sickly hue over the pinstriped green wallpaper. It doesn't help.

"Nothing down here except the kitchen," he says, each word gruff. He barely looks at me before limping toward the staircase. It used to be grand, clearly—the steps are still covered with a faded purple runner—but as we climb, we kick up so much dust that my nose itches.

"Do you have a cleaner?" I ask, scrubbing at my tickly nose with the back of my wrist. There's no way he could keep up with this big, dusty hotel all alone. Not if he ever wants to paint as well.

There's a brief pause. "Not exactly." And I open my mouth to ask what that means, conversation ban be damned, but Mr Grangemoor goes on without prompting. "Sometimes a few women from the outpost come here to clean, when they need the money badly enough. But they don't like spending too much time here. Haven't been for months. They think I'm..."

He trails off. Steps groan as we climb, my hand whispering along the polished banister. They think he's what? Rude as hell?

A secret murderer? *What?*

“There’s a bathroom on this floor that works,” he says, jerking his chin at the second floor hallway. We keep climbing. “And a library that you can use so long as you put everything back where you found it.”

Duh. I’m not an animal.

I glare at my boss’s broad back as we climb, watching his shoulder blades shift beneath his faded gray shirt, and it’s my turn to be silent. His cane leaves little divots in the purple runner.

At the third floor, we come to a sudden halt. I wobble on the top step, then edge away from the stairs.

“Your quarters are on this floor. There’s a bedroom and a bathroom, and a small sitting room that can be yours too. Is that enough?”

My boss scowls at me, like he expects a diva tantrum over these arrangements. Three whole rooms to myself and no rent? In this faded but once-grand hotel? Is he crazy? Sure, the wallpaper is ugly and the whole place needs a wipe with a damp cloth, but I’m not an idiot. Back in the city, most of my bartending money went on renting a shitty studio with a foldaway bed.

“Of course.” I take a faltering step down the corridor. “Will you show me...?”

A large hand waves, dismissing my question, then we’re back on the staircase, slogging all the way to the top floor. He’s still carrying my duffel bag, and it shifts against his shoulder with each lurching step. I get the bizarre urge to reach out and spread a hand over his back.

Not to steady him. To *feel* him. Bet his skin is warm under that shirt; bet his muscles feel good as they flex.

“You’ll figure it out. It’s not rocket science. But you need to see the top floor for your work tomorrow.”

Right. Work. As an artist's assistant. *This* artist's assistant.

What are the chances he's more patient when his paintings are on the line?

"Supplies are in here, mostly." Mr Grangemoor raps on the first door frame we come to. "You'll need to keep them well stocked. Make sure you order supplies weeks in advance, because deliveries are slow in the mountains."

I nod quickly.

"I draw in here sometimes." A door swings open under his palm, but the room is too dim to see properly. My employer limps further down the corridor. "And I work in here sometimes... or in here... the light is best in *here* in the afternoons..."

Apparently every room on the top floor is some kind of studio. I stumble after my new boss in a daze, groggy with tiredness after my long day. The air is clogged with dust, even up here. Job number one for tomorrow? Find a cleaning service—or failing that, a vacuum cleaner.

"This," Mr Grangemoor says, spreading a scarred hand over the final door in the corridor, "leads to my private quarters. Never, ever go in here. If I'm in these rooms, I'm not to be disturbed. Do you understand?"

I bite my tongue and nod. Like he said, it's not rocket science. Besides, what does he think I'm gonna do? Run into his bedroom on a Sunday morning and bounce on the bed to wake him up? Demand a walk like a puppy?

My duffel is pushed into my arms. I blink up at my new boss, and he glowers back down at me.

With clear reluctance, he says, "I'm glad you're here, Miss..."

"Turner. Helen Turner."

And he's a big ol' liar. Those words might as well have been forced out of him at knife point. But hey, he's the one who put

the advert in the paper; he's the one who needs an assistant. Me, I just want space and time to draw without worrying about making rent, and this job is perfect for that. Cranky employer or not, this is the dream.

“Okay. Night, boss.”

Rufus Grangemoor grimaces as I spin on one heel, heading back along the creaky corridor.

His eyes follow me all the way out of view. The weight of them makes the back of my neck tingle.

Two

Rufus



I wake just after dawn to the muffled scream of the vacuum cleaner. It bellows along the corridor outside my room, getting louder as it comes close. The door rattles as it thumps against the wood.

“Oops,” someone says out there, then bashes the door once more.

Jesus.

She’s cleaning already. Helen, or whatever her name is. Miss Turner. She’s only been here for one night, and already she’s digging out the cleaning equipment, probably dusting bookshelves and laundering curtains, like she’s the lady of the house and not some overreaching assistant. Houseproud after one night.

Hasn’t she realized there’s no point? It’s not like we’ll get any visitors out here.

“Fuck,” I mutter, mashing my head against the pillow and yanking the covers over my head. “*Fuck.*”

I’ve slept for two hours, maybe. Three at a stretch. My leg ached so badly in the night, I had to bite down on my pillow not to howl.

It's no comfort, but I did this to myself. Hired some busybody without bothering to take references, too relieved that someone accepted the job; set her up in my home rather than in town. Why didn't I rent her a room and drive to collect her each day?

Because I'm not a goddamn nanny, that's why. The mattress springs *plunk* as I roll to one side with a groan, swinging my feet down to the drafty floor. My bad leg's extra stiff this morning, the thigh muscle knotted harder than bone, and I shouldn't have tried to hide my limp yesterday. Who exactly was I trying to fool? Or even worse: to impress?

The vacuum roars out in the corridor. It jars the door one final time, then retreats back the way it came.

She can clean if she really must, I suppose. Saves me haranguing the locals, trying to bribe the bravest of them to come to the big, scary hotel with their mops and buckets. To risk the dreaded curse. But I brought Miss Turner here to be an artist's assistant, not to meddle with my life.

A hiss escapes between my teeth as I rub my leg. Should stretch it out. Should do the stupid exercises more often. Should clean my own dust.

Should do a lot of things.

Snatching my cane from where it leans against the wall, I limp bare chested into my bathroom, glaring at myself in the cabinet mirror as I pass. Grumpy bastard. The pipes moan as I run a bath, the water heating as it fills—and as I stand uselessly, waiting in the steam, an image flickers across my brain.

Helen.

Helen Turner, my new vacuum-happy assistant. Helen of the glossy dark hair and toffee-colored eyes. In my mind's eye, she's stretched on her back, sprawled across my bed covers, her bare chest heaving. Rosy nipples point at the ceiling.

A memory. Not of real life, obviously—I've barely met the girl. Of a dream.

Last night's dream.

I dig the heel of one palm into my eye, but the image doesn't fade. I'm trapped in my own brain, watching a shameful movie reel as Helen gasps and squirms, my big, scarred hands running over her body. I may have barely slept last night, but apparently my unconscious brain got busy.

What the hell is wrong with me?

She's my employee. And a stranger, and too young for me anyway. Not to mention her nonstop chatter. That young woman is the last person on earth I should be fantasizing about, and I shove the dream fragment from my brain.

No. Not doing that. I will *not* be that cliched older man, lusting after his pretty assistant. I will not be the monster everyone thinks I am.

The town outcast. The scarred recluse. The walking magnet for ugly rumors. Yeah, the last thing I need is to chase after my employee like an animal—then I'll *really* deserve their censure.

It's a joke, anyway. Beautiful creatures like Helen want a handsome prince, not a ruined old wretch who lords over an inch-thick layer of dust.

The water sears my bare skin as I sink into the bath, my body scalding pink, and I aim a long groan at the ceiling.

* * *

"Helen!"

A week later, my voice echoes through the derelict hotel, sinking through the floors. I daub yellow paint onto my canvas, eyes fixed on the table of fruit by the studio window.

The light's good today. Clear and pale.

"Yes, Mr Grangemoor?" She slips through the door, her blue dress whispering around her thighs. Helen's hair is piled in a

messy bun on top of her head, speared in place by an old paintbrush.

There's a smear of charcoal on the side of her neck. She's been working too in her breaks. What does she draw?

"I'll need more fruit." I jerk my chin at the table. It's laid out with an artfully draped tablecloth, a vase of yellow flowers, and a milk jug. Grapes spill over the rim of the fruit bowl, and one clementine is half peeled. "Flowers, too. Get replacements for everything. It spoils quickly when the sun shines through that window."

"Um." A phone appears from nowhere, thumbs racing across the screen. She frowns slightly as she types. "Got it."

"Thank you." Glaring at my canvas, I wait for her to leave. I called her in here, obviously—Christ, I've been finding excuses to call her in here all week—but now that she's in front of me, I want her gone again.

She's too distracting. Bright, somehow, like she's glowing from the inside, and it's too much. Makes me want to shield my eyes.

"Go on, then," I mutter, and my assistant scurries from the room.

I'm an ass. There's no need to bark at her like that.

But... students paint fucking fruit bowls. They teach this shit in schools, and I'm supposed to be some genius? I raise my paintbrush, hold it quivering in the air, then lower it.

What a waste of paint.

And you know what? This whole painting is garbage. There's only one thing it's good for, and I'm already grinning.

The paintbrush snaps easily in my hands. Like breaking a twig. The pieces bounce off the nearest wall, splattering yellow before they fall, and I'm a thousand times lighter as I grip the canvas. It's mounted on wood, but it might as well have been

made of wet tissue paper, it comes apart so easily. I tear it clean down the center, then fling both halves at the wall.

Crash.

Thump.

A glass jar judders off a nearby table and smashes to the floor. Turpentine spreads, and now I'm laughing, tearing, wrenching. As mad as everyone says. The tablecloth lands in a puddle of spilled liquid; I grip the flowers in one fist.

"Oh my god," a voice says in the doorway, and I pause, heart thundering.

This is the problem with offering room and board: whoever you hire gets a front row seat to your bullshit. You can't destroy your own studio without raising eyebrows. Not even if your awful painting deserves it.

"Forget the fruit," I say after a beat, placing the flowers gingerly in their vase.

Will she tell the locals about this? Will they warn her about my so-called curse? Is Helen Turner afraid of me now too?

I turn slowly, dreading what I'll find.

But my assistant beams at me, toffee eyes sparkling with humor. "That looked so therapeutic," she says. "I've always wanted to smash up a room."

Well, fuck. I can help with that. This whole building could use a friendly sledgehammer.

Wordlessly, I pick up the vase and hold it out. And my miraculous assistant puffs out a laugh then picks her way through the carnage, coming *toward* me, not running away.

I don't understand.

Broken glass crunches under her shoes. "Be careful," I warn, far too late. For some reason, the thought of Helen Turner cut and bleeding, hurt because of *me*, makes me want to slam my head on the heavy oak table.

Our fingers brush as she takes the flowers in their vase, and I hate that I stand up straighter. What am I, a blushing schoolboy?

Though I'm probably just shocked that she would willingly come so close. After all, I'm used to being judged for my scars and gruff words. Judged and avoided on sight.

But Helen clearly missed that memo. "Are you sure?" she asks, spinning the vase slowly between her palms. She hefts it carefully, judging the weight like an athlete, and squints at the far wall.

Christ. This woman.

"Do it."

There's a whistle of disturbed air, then the vase shatters against the wall. Flowers explode in a flurry of yellow petals; stems patter against the floor. *Yes.*

Helen's breathing hard, and the pleased flush on her cheeks makes me want a fresh canvas, to really paint this time. She laughs and clutches her throat.

"That felt *so* good, Mr Grangemoor."

Damn.

I turn away, hiding my own heated face. It's too stuffy in this building. We need to open more windows, because I—I can't think like this with her so near.

"Leave me, please."

There's a huff of air. Shoes crunch over broken glass, and I stare out of the window at the low-lying mist until she's gone. The door thumps closed, and I'm alone in my mess.

The air is too still in here, echoing with ghostly crashes. I draw in a ragged breath, then scratch my chin.

It's fine. This is fine.

Alone is good. Alone is for the best.

My leg throbs like hell as I limp back to my dropped cane.
There must be a dustpan and brush around here somewhere.

Three

Helen



It's not so bad working for a notorious grump. Rufus Grangemoor is renowned in the art world as a devil, impossible to please and even harder to impress, but after a month in his topple-down hotel, I'm used to him.

Okay, not just used to him. I *like* him. I'm pulled to the man, like he's a magnet and I'm a giggly iron filing.

Whenever I see him, my heart thumps extra fast. It's the altitude, probably. I've heard it makes your heart work harder, being up so high.

When he bellows my name from whichever studio he's chosen for the day, I can judge his mood before I've even hit the stairs. I know how he likes his paintbrushes set up; which color paints he needs mixed fresh each day. I make his coffee exactly the way he likes it.

We suit each other. It's nice.

More often than not, when Mr Grangemoor calls for me, he wants something small. A glass of water or a note taken down. If I didn't know better, I'd think he just wanted company for a few minutes, but maybe that's wishful thinking. After a few hours apart, I sure miss *him*.

Well. He must have been lonely up here for all these years, in the mountains all by himself. It makes my chest ache whenever I think about it.

Why won't the townspeople come here to clean? Why do they fall quiet whenever we come into the post office for deliveries? I catch them whispering sometimes behind cupped hands, and one old woman in a shawl even drew the sign of the cross when my boss looked her way yesterday.

Idiots.

Yes, he's grouchy. Yes, he's scarred. But Rufus Grangemoor is also noble and funny and *charming* underneath all that. Can't they see?

But there are people like that everywhere; people who refuse to look past the surface. In my last apartment building, I had a neighbor who kept sliding printed out Bible verses under my door after she saw me come home in my tight black bartending t-shirt one night, smelling of other people's booze and cigarette smoke. None of it was *my* funk, and even if it was, who cares? But she made that snap decision about me.

Well, I don't judge. And to me it's clear as day: Rufus Grangemoor is a teddy bear.

"We need a model for next week."

Lately, he's started talking about *our* supplies. We need this, we need that, for *our* projects. Giving me credit while he does all the work. It's nonsense, of course, but sweet too.

See? Teddy bear.

My pen hovers over my notepad, my knees tucked under me in an armchair. It's late, a fire crackling in the sitting room grate, and all around us are the ghostly silhouettes of hotel chairs covered in dust sheets. The chandelier overhead is draped in cobwebs, but I caught the boss fixing the sign last week—he's been sneaking in renovations when he thinks I'm not looking.

Re-tiling bathrooms and painting cupboards. Trying to make the Sky High Hotel more homey.

And the wind moans over the mountains here at night, and the hotel gets freezing, but sitting together by the fire is the best part of my day. We chat or read in comfy silence, maybe tease each other or talk about art, and the whole time, butterflies careen around my stomach.

He's *right there*.

Does my boss notice me the way I notice him? Is he hyper aware too, his nerve endings prickling under his skin whenever I get near? Or am I all alone with this mammoth-sized crush?

"Man or woman?" I ask, dragging my brain back on task. He wants me to find an artist's model. Fine. "Age range? Any specific physical features?"

I'm all business, ignoring the pinch of jealousy in my gut. It's normal for artists to use models. And what, would I rather my boss saw *me* naked?

...Maybe. Okay, definitely.

Ugh.

"Female. Twenties. Long dark hair." Mr Grangemoor's eyes flick over me, then away. They stare unblinking into the fire. "Slender build. Light brown eyes."

That is very specific for a few day's notice. I nibble on my bottom lip, and I can barely sit still, my stomach is so fluttery. It's like I'm going to take flight and hover above the ancient armchair.

Does he mean me? Or someone who looks like me? Is he trying to tell me something? I mean, he might as well have ticked my features off a checklist, so... does the famous artist want to paint me?

God. This may be the perfect job, but part of me wishes I'd met Rufus Grangemoor literally any other way. If he weren't so

off limits, maybe things would be different.

“I’ll ask around in town.” My voice is hoarse. I scratch at the notepad with my pen. “And I’ll post listings online. But it’s short notice, boss.” Especially with the way the townspeople avoid him.

“I know.” His scowl deepens, and the firelight casts deep shadows across his face.

The fire pops. My heart’s thrumming like a trapped hummingbird. “If I can’t find anyone in time,” I hear myself say, and Mr Grangemoor goes extra still. His lips part, and though he won’t look at me, I *know* he’s straining to hear my next words. “Shall—shall I do it? Shall I model for you?”

Silence stretches between us, taut and heavy. Embarrassment heats my cheeks. And what was I thinking? Of course he doesn’t want to paint *me*. I’m the girl who talks his ear off when she’s nervous and who wanders around with charcoal smudges on her nose.

But after a long pause he sighs, shoulders relaxing. And the smile he throws me is barely there; nothing more than a twitch of his beard. “I’d be grateful, Helen.”

Oof.

Would I survive a day spent with Rufus Grangemoor’s dark eyes on my bare body? Just the two of us alone in a room for hours on end, not staring at the fire but at each other? I might incinerate on the spot, burning to a crisp.

He’s just so... so *manly*. Tall and bearded and broody, limping around in his paint-splattered workman’s boots and thick, faded shirts, the sleeves rolled up his corded forearms. Mr Grangemoor looks like he could lift me up in one palm and perch me on his shoulder, and wow, that thought turns me to jelly.

Maybe I won’t even try to find another model.

No. Bad Helen.

“I’m sure I’ll find someone,” I say, and the thought of his heated gaze on my nude body is making my head spin. “It’s good money, right? And all they have to do is lie there without bathroom breaks for a few hours. Those buses trained me for that, haha. But I’ll find someone else, probably. Um.”

Stop. Talking.

“I modeled a few times in art college, but it wasn’t, you know, all the way. I covered over the main bits with an artsy bit of cloth.” My cheeks are on fire. “Do you want anything from the kitchen, Mr Grangemoor?”

Springing out of my armchair, I flee the room.

It’s new, this routine. Spending the evenings together in the warmth, sipping mugs of cocoa. Sometimes I worry that I’m bothering him, but he could leave, right? He’s a grown man and my boss. If anyone could escape my disastrous company, it’s him.

“Whiskey,” Mr Grangemoor calls, his deep voice rumbling through the walls. I shiver.

And as I take refuge in the shadowy kitchen, pressing my hands against my flushed cheeks, I can’t help grinning into the darkness. A faucet drips into the sink, and the tiles are cold beneath my fluffy socks. Modeling. Modeling for *him*. I can’t believe the conversation I just had.

It’s not *that* bad of an idea, is it?

I’m an artist’s assistant. He’s an artist. It’s a way to assist. And I might be naked, but there’d be nothing wrong with it, because it’s art. Nothing to see here; no reason to second guess.

And let’s be honest. I snatch up the empty kettle and shuffle to the sink, the kitchen tiles chilling my toes. There are *plenty* more shameless ways that I’d love to help out my boss.

If he’d ever let me, that is.

* * *

The next night, we meet after midnight on the staircase. The lights are all out, the inside of the hotel lit by the moon, and outside, rain lashes the scrubby mountainside. Lightning flashes now and then, spearing out of the clouds, and every rumble of thunder makes me wince.

I hate storms. God, I'm such a big baby, but whenever there's a storm I just want to crawl under the bed and hide there with the dust bunnies until dawn.

"Helen?" Mr Grangemoor is a large patch of shadow, looming over me on the stairs. A calloused hand takes my elbow, steadying me, and I see the glint of moonlight in his eyes. "What are you doing still up?"

It's a fair question. I go to bed before eleven most nights, taking a hot water bottle with me like an old lady.

"Th-the storm," I say, teeth chattering, inching toward my boss's body heat. The wind whistles clean through this old wreck of a building, ruffling the curtains and banging the front door in its frame. I swear, standing this close to the window, I can feel specks of rain dot my face.

"Ah." The shadow shifts closer. His scent comes with it: soap and the faint tang of turpentine. "You couldn't sleep?"

"No." The place where Mr Grangemoor's hand touches my elbow is the only warm point on my whole body. I can't help nudging closer, moving so he's gripping my upper arm instead. "I'm a wimp about storms."

"This is nothing," he warns, but he's not bragging. That deep voice is rueful. "It gets far worse in these parts. Some nights it's like the walls might shake apart. The old ladies in town think the local spirits are trying to smite me to hell."

Whew. Bigger storms. Okay, I can handle that idea. *I can.*

Though my chest feels tight already, and I'm dancing from foot to foot on the moonlit purple runner. My flannel pajama

bottoms swish around my calves, and I burrow deeper into my gray woolen sweater.

“You’re panicking,” Mr Grangemoor observes. “It’s just superstitious bullshit, Helen. You don’t really think I’m cursed, do you?”

I shake my head, because that *is* bullshit. Sure, he’s grouchy and bad-tempered and he stomps around like Heathcliff on the moors, but he’s also repainted three rooms since I moved here, and yesterday he washed the ground floor windows until they sparkled. In Mr Grangemoor terms, that’s like throwing a welcome parade.

“Come down to the kitchen for a hot drink.”

Because that’s his answer to everything—hardly a demonic trait. Though a mug of steaming, sweet cocoa *does* sound sinfully good.

We trail through the hotel in silence, two shadows in the night. And my boss fixes me a hot chocolate in easy quiet, limping around the kitchen and gathering supplies from the cupboards. He doesn’t switch a light on and neither do I, listening to him feel his way by memory around the gloom.

I like being in the dark with this man. It’s intimate.

Like anything could happen. Like we’re two different people, without a bunch of lines we can’t cross.

A spoon clinks against the mug. His clothes rustle as he moves. Is he still in those faded dark jeans and that red shirt from earlier, or is he in nightwear? What does the famous painter wear to sleep?

“Here.”

The mug thumps softly on the counter by my elbow. I lift it up and take a sip, cradling the heat between my palms.

Mr Grangemoor sighs softly. Or maybe he’s blowing on his own drink to cool it. Did he make two? I can’t tell.

I should switch on a light—should bring a harsh dose of reality. *One* of us ought to do it, since it's surely wrong to linger this way with your employer in the shadows, but I can't force myself to move.

Lightning flashes outside the kitchen window, strobing the room with silvery light. Mr Grangemoor is there for a split second then gone, and I'm left with the memory of him staring down at me with hungry eyes. There were gray speckles in his dark beard.

When I press my lips together, I taste chocolate.

Watch if I touched him? Just a palm against his chest? I might feel his heartbeat thudding beneath my hand, slow and strong. Might feel his muscles go taut, shifting under the cotton of that red shirt. Would he let me?

I know it's late at night, and after midnight everyone's sense of reason goes all wonky, but right now I'd trade a kidney to touch Rufus Grangemoor. Hey, I could wake up organ-free after all.

When I speak, my hushed voice is swallowed up by the silent kitchen. "Why is everyone in town so scared of you?"

He laughs once, grim and scornful. "Because I'm rude and bad-tempered and worst of all, I had a bad fall while hiking in the mountains a few years ago—fucked up my face and my leg. Had to crawl into town on my hands and knees, covered in blood. And in a place like Sky High Outpost, something like that is an omen, Helen. Can't be too careful when you're clinging to survival in the mountains. They think I'm marked. That I'm bad luck."

It's a long speech by my boss's standards, and I'm simmering with anger before he's even finished speaking. There's a furious buzzing noise in my ears.

"That's bullshit. It's *such* a load of bullshit. Sure, you're grumpy," I say, voice climbing as he snorts, "but you changed my whole life around, and you're good company and, like, the

opposite of a bad omen. You're my lucky penny, Mr Grangemoor."

Lightning flashes outside, lighting him up for another split second, and he looks oddly touched before he plunges back into darkness. The lines at the corner of his eyes had softened.

"It's late, Helen. You should try to sleep." Gruff humor laces his words as he says, "If you fall asleep and start snoring tomorrow, be warned: I'll paint you with your mouth open."

Ah, yeah. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, but for once there's something even more stressful in the calendar. *Modeling*.

...Crap.

It seemed like such a genius idea. The perfect way to feel this man's eyes on me. Besides, once Rufus Grangemoor paints me, I'll live forever on his canvas. Art historians hundreds of years from now will wonder about the painter's mysterious muse.

Will they think he loved me? Will they sense our special connection through the canvas? I hope so.

And yet I'm rigid with nerves already. No wonder I couldn't sleep; even before the storm started, I was already climbing the walls.

I did ask around town, for the record. I *tried* to find another model—but not very hard. They don't deserve to spend time with him anyway, those jerks.

"I promise I'll nap quietly."

Rufus breathes a laugh. "See that you do." Then his cane clicks against the tiled floor, the darker patch of shadow coming closer, and my heart just about explodes through my ribs as a bristly mouth brushes my forehead. It *hurts*, my insides are going so wild.

When he steps back, cool air washes over my skin. Did he just...?

Did that really happen? Did Rufus Grangemoor kiss my forehead?

I gape open-mouthed as he leaves, his footsteps heavy and uneven. And by the time I remember the half-drunk cocoa on the counter, the drink has gone stone cold.

Four

Rufus



The dreams are getting worse. Every night, now, Helen visits me as I sleep, so sweet and smiling as I lay her body down beneath mine. It's a disgrace, the way I dream of her like this—moaning and begging, her hair wild. But what can I do?

There's no stopping an unconscious brain.

Even if I wanted to.

And—alright. No bullshit; not to myself. I'll admit, these dreams are like sustenance to me. Even though they're not real, even though our relationship is strictly assistant and boss, I've never felt so inspired.

Colors are brighter; lines crisp. Ideas for new projects crackle in my brain like electricity, and I've painted more in the last few weeks than I have in months. *Years*, even.

It's all Helen. My little muse.

When she steps into the studio, she's blushing already. Is that because of the roses I left for her in the kitchen? Is it wrong to give my assistant a Valentine's Day gift?

She can pretend it's purely professional if she likes. I don't mind.

Just wanted to give her something.

“Hi, Mr Grangemoor. Thank you for the flowers,” she says. “They’re beautiful.”

And those toffee-colored eyes are nervous, but Helen smiles as she plucks at the belt that holds her robe shut. It’s one of mine, an old toweling robe that’s far too big for her, slipping off her bare shoulders as she hovers in the doorway.

Shouldn’t like that sight so much. Shouldn’t give her roses. Shouldn’t do any of this, really.

But I could sooner flatten one of those mountain peaks than stop now.

“Is it warm enough?” I ask. I dragged three electric heaters in here an hour ago, and they’ve been humming away, scenting the air with burning dust. They’re grouped around the green velvet chaise lounge, turned perfectly in a shaft of sunlight from the window.

“Yes,” she whispers. Helen walks closer, her pulse thudding beneath her jaw. “Should I just—?”

“Please.” The word scrapes out of me, and I cough, embarrassed. “Get yourself comfortable, and then I’ll arrange you in position.”

Arrange her. It sounds so innocent, so boring, when I put it like that. Like my beautiful assistant is simply a doll to be posed, and not all my fantasies rolled into one person.

She unties the robe. I look out of the window.

Two crows play together above the scrubland, dipping and whirling in the thin air.

“Okay. Um, I’m ready,” Helen says.

That makes one of us. There’s a serious risk here that I’ll turn and look, then enter cardiac arrest. I chance a peek out of the corner of my eye, as though that will protect my battered old heart somehow.

No. No such luck. Helen's bare, slender body, draped across the chaise lounge—put that down as my cause of death. My chest aches so badly I can hardly breathe, and I stagger toward my canvas.

Jesus Christ.

The canvas helps. It gives me a point of focus, you know? I look at the canvas, then at her. At the sunlight, then at her. Shift the easel forward a few inches, then back again.

I gust out a sigh.

“Raise your left arm.” Helen does as I say, her eyes fixed on the wall behind me. Is she uncomfortable? Fuck, does she hate this? Am I doing something unforgivable here? “Lean your head on it like a pillow. Yeah, like that.”

The room is filled with soft rustling noises, then silence. She must hear my thudding heartbeat, but I can't tell. She won't stop staring at the wall.

“We don't have to—if you've changed your mind, Helen—”

“No!” Just like that, her eyes are on me, wide with alarm. “No, I haven't changed my mind.” The flush on her cheekbones deepens as she talks. “I want to do this. It's, um. It's fun, Mr Grangemoor.”

I hope that's true. Scrubbing a hand over my chin, I ask: “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Helen says firmly, and as she shifts position, she seems more relaxed. Her tan limbs melt against the green cushions, and her pouty mouth quirks up in a smile. “You'd better paint me after all this, boss. I've gotten naked and everything.”

Yes, she has. Lord help me, she has.

And as I limp closer, I chafe my hands together to warm them. Once I stand over her, I raise both palms in question. “May I?”

Helen wets her bottom lip and nods.

Her mouth is shiny as I add a slight bend to one leg, then tilt her knee this way and that. I arrange her, just like I said, with Helen muttering her own quiet suggestions, and with a task to focus on, it's easier to keep my eyes moving, gaze clinical, not lingering where I shouldn't.

Fuck, she's beautiful, though. I could paint this woman a thousand times and never do her justice.

"Could you hold that?" I ask eventually, stepping back to get the full view. She lounges across the chaise lounge, sensual and brave. "For a few hours?"

"Sure." Helen's smile for me is shy, and it's like a punch to the ribs. I limp back to my canvas, ragged breaths drawing in air. "Let me know if I start snoring, Mr Grangemoor."

Ha. I will.

If I can ever unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth, anyway.

* * *

If I were a religious man, I'd pray on my knees this evening. I'd clasp a crucifix to my lips, and confess my sins to the windy night.

Because today, I watched her. Drew her. *Painted* her, each stroke of my brush against the canvas as intimate as a physical touch, and I know Helen felt it too. The longer she lay there, displayed and bare, the harder her nipples got, and the further a flush crept up her neck. By the time we broke for coffee after three hours, she was practically panting, thighs clenched together, and I can't blame her.

I was just as bad. Hard as goddamn granite, hiding like a coward behind my easel, my throat tight with all the words I choked back.

"Was that okay, Mr Grangemoor?" she asked me, slipping my robe around her shoulders, and all I could do was nod.

Okay?

Was it *okay*?

From this day on, my life is divided into two eras: Before Helen and After Helen.

I didn't touch her, though. Not in the way I wanted to. I didn't kiss her or stroke her or climb on top of her on the chaise lounge, and I cling to that fact as I wash up before bed. We crossed a hundred lines today, but it could have been worse. *I* could have been worse.

It's no defense at all, really.

Helen deserves so much better from her employer.

My room is cold as I limp out of the bathroom, droplets of icy water still clinging to my beard. They drip onto my shirt, speckling the cotton, and my leg throbs like a bastard as I cross to the bed. It's a monster of a four-poster, carved from scratched oak, and the frame creaks as I shuck my clothes and lower myself down.

The bedsheets are cool, whispering over my heated skin. My cock aches, angry and demanding, but I don't take myself in hand.

Helen.

She'd probably be horrified if she knew. I won't do it. I won't.

It takes hours to fall asleep, the wind moaning and rattling the window panes, and the whole time my heart pounds loud enough to hear through the walls.

* * *

Lightning flashes. Rain lashes the windows, and thunder rumbles loud enough to shake the mountains. A shy hand taps at my shoulder, and Helen's voice is soft.

"Mr Grangemoor?"

The dreams start like this, sometimes. My beautiful assistant comes to me in the dark, begging for my touch, and I roll her beneath me in the bed and work her body into a lather. Tonight's dream is extra vivid, her touch cool on my shoulder.

Christ. It's torture after wanting her so badly all day. Like pressing on a bruise.

Still, I know the drill.

"The storm," Helen whispers, but already I'm taking her wrist and pulling her down, gathering her into the warm cocoon of the bed covers. I know why she's here. In my dreams, she's always here for the same reason.

"Mmph!" my dream-assistant squeaks as I kiss her, pressing her head back against the pillows, and she's stiff for one long moment before melting in my arms.

Here we go.

This dream is *so* vivid, her body warm and pliant, her legs twining around mine. Maybe today filled in more details in my brain; maybe I can dream her better now. She's more realistic, that's for sure.

"Oh my god," Helen murmurs, her breath hot on my ear, and I screw my eyes shut as I kiss down her throat.

So realistic. It's torture.

It's everything I can never have; everything that my gorgeous assistant would probably be horrified to know that I want. Getting flustered together while painting is one thing, but *this*?

"Helen," I say under my breath, uttering her name over and over like a prayer. "Helen. Helen. Helen."

She arches up, fingers twisting in my hair.

She's wearing a set of old fashioned pajamas, with a collared shirt and a fussy row of buttons down the front. That makes sense. I've seen her wear these before, so of course my unconscious brain made note of them.

I take note of everything this girl does.

Stripping her quickly, I toss the clothes over my shoulder. Why wait? These dreams always go the same way, and the least I can do is not try to drag them out.

“M-Mr Grangemoor—”

I hush her with a fierce kiss, then rub my cheek against hers. Bristly beard against satin skin.

“Tell me you want me, Helen.”

I know it’s not real, but I like to hear it.

“I…” She gasps as I pinch a nipple, rolling the bead between finger and thumb. “I… I want you.”

My grin is fierce in the gloom. Love that part. And though I’m hazy with sleep, though none of this is real, I always take care of her in my dreams. I do now, too, coaxing her thighs apart and settling above her, one hand smoothing down her stomach. My fingertips seek out her seam.

Soaked.

Like always.

She’s slick and swollen and perfect, bucking up into my hand. And Helen pants like in all the other dreams, squirming under my touch, her body burning up like a hot little ember in the center of my bed.

I press the first finger in slowly, and it’s tighter than usual. That’s odd. But her nails scrabble against my back, and she’s begging so sweetly, so I keep going, pushing to the second knuckle.

A second finger, knuckles crooking.

My thumb swirls over her clit.

Helen moans, breathless and wild, and Christ. These dreams will be the death of me.

“That’s it,” I tell her, my teeth bared as I work my fingers deeper, stretching her ready. So slick and tight. “That’s it. Good girl.”

And I’ve dreamed this dozens of times by now, but my heart still lurches when I position my length at her entrance. If only. If only.

I’d give anything for this to be true.

“Are you ready for me, sweet girl? Do you want all of me?”

The dream-Helen nods frantically, clawing at my shoulders. And it’s like heaven, sinking into her wet heat; it cleanses me from the inside out. Makes me brand new.

“Oh,” she says, her breaths ragged against my throat. I go slowly, rolling my hips to press deeper inside, because even in my dreams I can’t bear hurting her. “Oh, wow.”

So sweet. So perfect.

Fuck.

Lightning flashes, strobing the room with light, and Helen’s dark hair lays in tangles over my pillows. Toffee eyes stare up at me, so wide and trusting, and every night that I dream of her this way, my bruised old heart breaks a little more. Tonight is worse than ever, a deep fissure cracking through my chest.

No more. After tonight, no more.

I can’t bear it.

No more modeling or longing glances. No more dreaming of a woman I can’t have. This is *my* brain, damn it, and I will wrangle it under control.

The bed creaks with each thrust. The storm rages outside, gusting out its rage against the mountain, and safe here in the warm, I’m storming too.

“Helen.” Can’t stop kissing her. Stroking her hair. I lick her neck. “My Helen. Sweetheart.”

She whimpers, and I die a little more.

My leg hurts, and that's what keeps me anchored. So long as I can focus on that knotted pain, I can keep my head, working my body into hers in a steady rhythm. Dimly, I remember to cram a hand between us and rub the bundle of nerves between her legs.

The shudders come slowly, then take over her body like a maelstrom.

Helen cries out, her chin tipping back, and I scrape my teeth over her throat before burrowing home. Wedged as deep as I can go, I empty myself inside her.

My heart. My soul. All of it.

And sleep nudges at me before I've even finished, while I'm still holding myself above her, muscles tensed. As I collapse onto the pillows beside my little apparition, my vision is blurry. Everything aches, my chest worst of all.

Sleep drags me under in less than ten seconds.

Thank god.

Five

Helen



I wake up so happy.

Don't get me wrong: life has been good since I came to the Sky High Hotel, but this is next level. I wake up *glowing*. Who knew sex would make me feel like this?

It's early morning, blue-tinged light spilling through Mr Grangemoor—through *Rufus's*—open curtains. The storm has died down, and an unearthly hush has wrapped around the building.

The covers rustle as I sit up, rubbing at my neck. The skin feels extra sensitive, rubbed raw by my boss's beard last night. He kissed me there so hungrily, like what he *really* wanted was to swallow me whole. Like he's been craving me as badly as I've wanted him.

And... he's here. Sleeping like the dead, crashed face-down on the pillows, one arm slung out like he's reaching for me. Dark hair ruffled, his body tanned and brawny.

Did he hurt his leg last night? I hope not. Everything that happened... it was such a dream.

Although I can't believe he fell asleep right after we had sex for the first time. You can bet your ass I'll tease him for that, just as soon as we're both awake.

The bed frame creaks as I swing my legs off the mattress. The air is cold, and I swipe one of Rufus's faded plaid shirts from a nearby chair. Buttoning it slowly, I wander to the window sill.

Holy crap.

The wreckage outside is insane. Last night's storm has left huge pools of dark, mirrored water, and broken tree limbs lie strewn across the landscape though there are no trees nearby. A strange white tablecloth lies in the hotel driveway, muddied and twisted. Guess it was snatched from one of the town's washing lines.

Not far away, where the rocky slope rises above the hotel, a huge scorch mark blackens the earth. A lightning strike? Must have been.

The storm came so freaking *close*. Could it have hit the hotel?

Turning away from the window, I shiver.

Coffee. That's what I need. Coffee and a shower and some fresh clothes, so that when I face my boss-turned-lover, I can be cool about this. Don't want to put him off already by being a giant weirdo about it.

So we had sex. Uh-huh. So everything's changed. *Whatever, man.*

I'm cool; not bursting with happiness at all. I'm *so* cool, and I can handle dating a godly painter with a grumpy demeanor. No problem.

My footsteps are light as I slip out of the bedroom. I leave my boss behind, snoring into his pillows.

* * *

"Morning."

I perk up when Rufus limps into the kitchen, two coffees already steaming in front of me on the counter. My hair's damp from the shower, coiled in a messy bun on top of my head, and

I'm dressed in a cream shirt dress. It's lame, I know, but I took extra care making myself look pretty this morning.

And I spin around, grinning... but my boss won't look my way. He bangs and rifles through the cupboards, back stubbornly turned, and the longer he won't look at me, the more my stomach sinks.

Huh.

"Did you see the storm damage?" My voice is hoarse, strained with false cheer. "It looks like a war zone outside."

Mr Grangemoor grunts. He swipes a mug from the cupboard, then sets about making a fresh coffee.

My chest hurts. "I already made you one," I say, and finally, *finally*, he glances over his shoulder. His gaze lands on the kitchen tiles by my feet.

Another grunt. "Thanks."

...Oh god.

He regrets it. He regrets what we did.

The realization tastes sour in my mouth, and I swallow hard, gripping the counter where I'm suddenly dizzy. Last night was a one time thing, clearly, and he doesn't want to discuss it. No, scratch that: he doesn't even want to *look* at me.

Ow. Ow, ow, ow.

I squeeze the counter edge tighter, forcing myself to take long, slow breaths. The hurt presses on me like a heavy weight, squeezing the air from my chest.

Does Mr Grangemoor realize that last night was my first time doing—doing *that*? That I gave him everything? Does he even care?

God, do I mean anything to this man; anything at all?

His cane clacks against the kitchen tiles, and the painter takes the nearest coffee mug. "Thanks," he mutters again, then limps

from the room. I watch his back muscles shifting beneath his shirt, then he's gone.

I cling to the counter until my drink is cold. When I finally blink again, my eyes are bone dry.

* * *

The day is soft and quiet after the storm, with every closing door and gurgling pipe echoing through the hotel. For hours, I drift around like a ghost, clearing up Mr Grangemoor's various studios and ordering new supplies, and the whole time it's like I'm detached from my body. Floating up above my head, watching my numb self bumble around. When I knock my elbow on a door frame, I feel nothing.

He doesn't ask me to model for him again, even though yesterday's painting is only part-way done. I don't offer.

God. What was I thinking?

A dull ache pulses between my legs as I move through the haze, a cruel reminder of what I've done. I gave myself to a man who doesn't want me. Who won't even look at me the next day.

And I fell in love with a complete bastard.

White static fills my brain for most of the day, but by the time we're sitting in our armchairs by the fire after dinner, my sense of logic is creeping back. There's only one real path when you fall in love with your boss, and he sleeps with you then discards you.

I need to leave or get over it. And I *love* this job; where else will I get free room and board and tons of time to draw, and the chance to learn from one of the world's greatest artists?

Damn this man.

"We'll go down to town on Thursday." Mr Grangemoor frowns at the hearth, firelight dancing over his craggy face. His beard looks blacker, thicker, in the glow. He's talking to me like everything's normal, but he still won't meet my eye.

Strong fingers drum against his arm rest. His chin is propped on one fist.

“For deliveries?” I ask, as if it matters.

My voice is thin. Since the icy cold slap of reality in the kitchen, I’ve struggled to breathe. Everything hurts. This won’t last forever, will it?

“Yes. Order yourself something for your own work, Helen. Charcoals or paints. As a treat.”

I press my lips together to keep from crying. “Okay.”

Finally, after a full day of distance, my boss glances over. Dark eyes rake over me, then narrow in on my exhausted face. His concern is palpable, and I hate that. “Helen? Are you alright?”

How dare he act like he cares? It’s just guilt.

Ugh.

“I’m going to bed.” The armchair screeches against the floor as I lunge to my feet, half-drunk cocoa sloshing in my mug. Why the hell did I come in here after dinner? Playing along like nothing’s changed?

Well. I wasn’t thinking. Just drifting along on horrified autopilot.

“Is something—?”

His gruff voice makes me ache. Such a bastard.

“*Goodnight*, Mr Grangemoor.” I flee.

Because maybe I’ve been the biggest dumbass alive—but I won’t play along. I’m no good at these games.

And when I reach my own room, the first thing I do is snatch the Valentine’s Day roses from my nightstand, yank open the nearest window—and toss them into the night.

Six

Rufus



It's almost a relief when Helen pulls away. When my sweet assistant stops laughing with me in the kitchen; when she no longer sits by the fire with me in the evenings. Almost a relief. Almost.

Sure, it's like someone sawed off my limb, but at least I'm not constantly on the verge of crowding her against the nearest wall and kissing her. She'd hate that. I always knew she would, but this new distance—it's a good reminder.

Because for a while there, I wondered...

But no. Helen is not interested, and she's quite right too. Those dreams got me muddled, hoping when I shouldn't. Chasing wishful thinking.

I'm an old fool.

"You have a call scheduled with a journalist at twelve thirty." We're in today's favored studio, a few feet of frozen air between us. She hovers near the doorway. "And two contracts need your signature, Mr Grangemoor, so I left them on the kitchen counter."

These days, Helen is all business. She's even wearing a fussy pink blouse, the hem tucked into a pair of dark pants, and I don't know how I offended her exactly, don't know which part of me

pushed her away, but it's for the best. Over the weeks apart, a chill has settled into my bones, but at least I'm not fooling myself anymore.

I could've gone to my grave craving this woman. Lord help me, I still might.

"Alright. Order me some sculptor's clay, will you?"

Feel like smashing something against a table. Working my frustrations out with my hands. And she nods, polite as ever, but there's nothing behind her quick smile. Zero warmth as she scribbles a note on her notepad.

I scowl at the half-painted canvas in front of me, and stab at it with my brush.

Golden limbs and twisted sheets. Dark hair tangled like seaweed, and the night sky smoldering outside a window pane. This is nothing like my usual work, but I need to get the dreams out of my head somehow. Need to exorcise my demons.

My gut clenches as Helen drifts nearer, peering over my shoulder, but she doesn't react. There's no recognition that they're *her* limbs.

"Beautiful," she murmurs. "Is it a memory?"

If only. "No. A dream."

Helen hums, gazing at my work in progress.

And I should probably be embarrassed, admitting to these sorts of dreams in front of a flawless young woman, but Helen's always been so easy to talk to. Nonjudgmental, with a keen artist's eye. I value her opinion above all others.

She points at the top corner of the canvas. "Will you add anything here? It's a little unbalanced."

I tilt my head, considering. She's right.

Fuck, this girl is always right.

And she's standing beside me, but Christ, I miss her.

* * *

Weeks become months. We're close, but so far apart. Moving in the same space, leaving trails of mugs and scrap paper through the same rooms, but never quite seeing eye to eye. Two moons on separate orbits.

"Cocoa, Helen?"

It's my great pleasure these days: fetching her drinks. Taking care of her. Maybe it's the dark winter nights drawing in, or maybe it's the thin mountain air. Either way, my assistant seems tired.

Not just tired; worn down. Exhausted by life.

And fuck, I hate it. If I could strike some cosmic bargain, give some of my life force to her, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Anything to make her feel better. This afternoon, she's sitting on the hotel staircase, her toes scrunching into the purple runner. Like she started to climb then got so worn out she had to sit down.

Those knee-high socks. Jesus Christ. Her green sweater dress, too. All of it.

How's a man supposed to mend his broken heart in these conditions?

"Yes, please." She smiles at me, but her face is drawn. Her knees knock together, her palms sandwiched between, and if I could, I'd toss my cane away and gather her into my arms; lift her up and crush her against my chest. "I'll get going again in a sec, I promise."

I nod. "Take your time."

And though I just offered a drink, though she's gone to such pains to avoid me in the last few months, I limp to her side and lower myself down to her step with a groan. I'll bring her cocoa in a moment. First, I want to feel her warmth at my side, and I want her to feel mine.

It gets lonely up here in the mountains. I should know. Before Helen, I had only my paintings for company.

This is better. Painful, but better.

“You could go home for a visit with Fran if you wanted.” I talk to a spot on the lobby floorboards below us. “If that would make you happy, I mean. I’d buy your tickets.”

There’s a long pause, then Helen breathes out. She slumps against me, soft cheek on my shoulder, her body heat seeping through my shirtsleeve.

Don’t move. Don’t you move a fucking inch, you old fool.

Heart thudding, I turn and press a kiss against her hair.

Jesus Christ, I want her so badly. It’s agony, and yet I can’t bear to move away.

“Thank you,” she whispers at last, “but no. I think I’ll stay.” And when she sits up, she sniffles quietly, wiping her eyes and giving me a wobbly smile.

...Cocoa. Right. I snatch up my cane.

“Don’t move,” I warn, heading back down the steps for the kitchen. “Folks go missing in this hotel. Whole gaggles of ‘em.”

Behind me, Helen snorts, and it’s the sweetest sound I ever heard. Has she laughed at all in the last few months? I don’t think so.

We went wrong somewhere along the line, but maybe...

Maybe we can fix it. Maybe I can make her happy, as a boss if nothing more.

Seven

Helen



Pregnant.
Pregnant.

Holy crap.

I stare at the little white stick, but my eyes are fuzzy. The evening sky is pink and purple through the frosted bathroom window, and wave after wave of emotion crashes over me, dragging me under so I can't breathe.

Joy, fear, sorrow. So much love for this budding life inside me. So much heartbreak.

And so many questions.

What if I'm a terrible mom? What if I suck at this? What I'm not cut out to do this parent thing alone? And oh god, how will I pay for everything? Should I tell Rufus? I have to, right? What will Fran think? Will I be able to keep drawing?

On and on and on the thoughts whirl, a storm in my skull, and the whole while I'm hunched over, perched on the edge of the bathtub like a gargoyle in a red sweater dress. My neck aches. Will Rufus hate me?

Plink. Plink. Plink.

The faucet drips into the bathtub. Blindly, I reach back and smack it off.

I can't believe this is happening.

I mean—I know it's happening, obviously, and I know how. The birds and the bees, and all that. Idiot that I am, I made my mistakes with my eyes wide open.

But it's like some huge cosmic joke, that I should fall in love with a man, sleep with him once—*once*—and months later, rejected and still so lonely, find out that I'm carrying his baby.

Rufus Junior.

My strangled laugh echoes around the bathroom.

Not real. This doesn't feel real.

But that little plus sign says otherwise, and let's be honest... deep down I knew. The tiredness, the morning sickness. The mood swings and the swelling hardness of my belly. Giving up alcohol and coffee 'just because'. And my periods have often skipped months, but I knew.

Oh, I knew. And I want to keep this baby.

The test clatters to the floor as I cup my small bump. The room swims, and I breathe in, breathe out. In, out. Slow and steady.

...In.

...Out.

Maybe it will be okay. Rufus Grangemoor didn't want *me*, that's true, but maybe he'll feel differently about our child. Maybe he'll feel this overwhelming rush of love for our baby too.

We could be one of those ultra modern families, co-parenting together on good terms. As friends.

Ignoring the slice of longing in my chest, I force myself up onto wobbly legs. Turning sideways, I frown at the bathroom mirror, but in this loose red dress, you could never tell my whole

life is changing. When I drag the fabric taut against my body, *then* you can see it. It's so obvious now that I'm ready to admit it.

And... he can't be *too* surprised, right? I mean, he was there. An eager participant, if only for that one night.

So I'll tell Rufus the truth...

But not tonight.

* * *

"Helen." Rufus straightens in his armchair by the fire, visibly shocked when I join him in the sitting room. It's been months since we sat together in the evenings, but maybe it's time to bring a few traditions back.

Hey, maybe one day there'll be a snuffling baby here with us too. Sounds so cute! And so terrifying.

Gah.

"Hey, boss." I weave a path between dust-sheet covered furniture, the warmth of the fire already spreading over my cheeks. Above us, the chandelier casts shadows on the ceiling. How do you baby-proof a hotel? Well, I'd better find out. "Mind if I join you?"

He stands up so fast, his cane clatters to the floorboards. Rufus bends down, red-faced, and snatches it up, and wow, I've never seen him this flustered. "Of course," he mutters, limping toward the spare armchair and plumping its cushions. "That would be—of course." He smacks the fabric like he's clearing away dust, though the hotel is sparkly clean these days, then retreats as I reach him.

I hide a smile as we both settle in our chairs. Yeah, I've stayed away for far too long. Maybe we can't be lovers, but friends are important too.

The flames dance and flicker. This whole room is drenched in golden warmth, and you'd never guess that outside, it's a bitter winter. For the first time in ages, I'm cozy. Relaxed.

This will be fine. It *will*.

Rufus Grangemoor is a good man. And even though he broke my heart, I trust him to be there for our baby.

“What are you working on tomorrow?” I ask.

He’s been restless lately, starting projects then tossing them out, never settling on a single painting. It’s fun to hear him wrecking his rejects, but for his sake I hope he starts something he likes soon.

But Rufus frowns at the fire, and says: “Actually, I thought maybe...”

My chest rises and falls as I wait. It’s so quiet in here, I can hear my own soft breaths, and when the painter turns to me, there’s a rawness to his eyes. So much longing.

“I thought maybe you could sit for me again. If you’re willing, of course.”

Model again? My hands twitch automatically for my bump, but Rufus keeps talking quickly. I bury my hands in the armchair cushions.

“Only if you want to. I never want you to feel uncomfortable, swee—Helen. But that’s the only painting worth a damn that I’ve started for months, and I thought...”

“I’ll do it.” My words take me by surprise, so confident and bright. What the hell? If I take my clothes off, this man will see *everything*.

No hiding our baby then. My bump is so obvious when you look, *really* look, at my body, and that’s exactly what he’ll be doing. Seeing. Judging.

But I’m no good with words, and maybe this is the best way. It’s direct, that’s for sure. As honest as it gets.

“Oh. Good. That’s—good. Excellent. Thank you.”

He’s as surprised by my agreement as I am, glancing over to me then back to the fire. Over, then back to the fire. Has he

always been this handsome? This rugged and weathered, like someone carved him out of stone, his eyes crinkling at the corners? Filling the armchair with those broad shoulders and strong thighs?

I want to pet his salt and pepper beard.

God, I miss him so much.

“Tomorrow, then,” Rufus says, deep voice cautious.

“Tomorrow,” I agree.

Time to face the future.

Eight

Rufus



The next day, I'm more nervous than a teenage boy at prom. I slept badly all night; kept waking up all flushed and twisted in my sheets, Helen's name on my lips. I skip my morning coffee since I'm already jittery.

She's going to sit for me again. She really agreed.

Maybe there's hope for us. A thaw in our frozen friendship.

I head to the studio early to set up, floorboards groaning beneath my uneven steps. The heaters hum to life; glass jars fill with turpentine. Pale winter sunshine spills through the window onto the chaise lounge, and the light is different today, but we'll make do.

My hands shake as I place the half-begun canvas on the easel. There's no excuse for this nonsense. I'm a grown man, far too old to be felled by a schoolboy crush, and yet I'm wrecked already before we've even begun.

It's just...

It's *Helen*. We haven't spent hours together in the same room for so long, let alone with her body bare. She's the woman I love, and I'm afraid to be in the same room as her. Ridiculous.

But I keep thinking she'll *know*. She'll take one look at me, gazing at her with undisguised longing from my easel, and she'll know everything. Will she be disgusted? Will she leave?

And even if she can't tell from my expression, this painting says it all. Already, each brush stroke, each curve, each pool of shadow spells out my infatuation. I've held nothing back.

"Hi, boss."

No time to back out now, and she's so sweet and shy, slipping through the doorway and shutting us in together. Her dark hair tumbles over her shoulders, and she's bundled in my blue robe again. Helen tiptoes to my side, like if we make too much noise, we might disturb the humming heaters.

"Feels like forever ago," she says, examining her pose in the painting. She half lifts one arm, like she's rehearsing the position in her brain.

"Yes." It's been forever for me, too; an endless purgatory apart. "Is it warm enough with the heaters?"

"Mhm." Helen crosses to the chaise lounge and hovers there, gripping the ties for her robe. Her cheeks are pale; her lips press together. She shifts her weight from foot to foot, and looks like she wants to say something.

Has she changed her mind?

"We don't have to do this," I say quickly, just as Helen says, "I need to show you something."

"I know," she says.

"Okay."

There's an awkward beat. Two crows call to each other outside the window, circling playfully in the pale winter sky. Sunshine spears through puffs of white cloud.

Helen blows out a short breath and unties the robe. "I don't know how to say it, so I'll just... I'll just show you."

Show me what?

The robe slides off her shoulders, puddling on the floor, and I frown at her body. Show me *what*? Is she injured? I can't see any scars or bruises.

Then Helen turns to the side slightly, one hand cupping the swell between her hips, and my whole body goes cold. I'm icing over. Inside my aching chest, my heartbeat slows down until I can barely feel it.

Thump, thump, thump...

...Thump...

"You're pregnant?" I sound wrecked. I *am* wrecked. I've never felt despair like this. "Whose is it?"

The question comes out unbidden, and immediately, I wish I could stuff it back between my teeth. Because Helen flinches, wide-eyed, and it's none of my goddamn business anyway.

What does it matter whose it is? I'll still love her. Still take care of her and the baby. I'm just torturing myself, rubbing salt in the wound by picturing Helen, *my* Helen, with one of the familiar faces in town, but God knows it doesn't matter. Not really.

"How..." My assistant is winded, gasping for breath. Her bare chest rises and falls. "How *dare* you?"

She crouches and scrabbles for the robe, yanking it back on. One of the sleeves is inside out, and it takes her a few tries to punch her fist through the fabric, grunting between harsh breaths. When Helen glares at me again, knotting the robe belt, her cheeks are wet with tears.

I limp around my easel, so hollow. "I'm sorry. You're right, it doesn't matter—"

"It matters to *me*, you ass!"

Fuck. Do I need to drag some deadbeat for DNA tests? I'll do it if that's what Helen wants, but I'd much rather she'd take *me* as the father. What kind of idiot would blow his chance with this girl?

Palms raised, I try again. “Whatever you need, sweetheart, I’ll support you.”

“You’re damn right you will.” Helen raises her chin, eyes flashing, and she’s so fucking beautiful in her fury. An avenging angel. “You might treat *me* like dirt, Rufus Grangemoor, but you will not do that with our child. I won’t allow it.”

And I am... confused.

“Our child?”

Helen huffs, wringing the fabric belt like she’d rather wring my neck.

“*Our* child? How is that—what do you mean? You’ll let me be the stepfather?”

I won’t let her down. God, I never dreamed I’d have this much of her. And hope rises in me, a warm, golden bubble—that explodes into mist when I see Helen’s glare.

If looks could kill, I’d be a pile of ashes on the floor. But fuck, I’m trying here!

“I mean,” Helen says, each word chipped out of ice, “that you are the biological father, Mr Grangemoor. You are the only man I have ever slept with; the only possible candidate. But if you insist on a DNA test—”

“Wait a second.” I grip a fistful of hair, and the room is spinning. How can any of this be happening? And it comes to me, dripping down my spine like freezing melt water off the mountains.

...Those dreams. Those fucking dreams. One of them must have been real.

Christ.

She and I—

And all this time, we—

Then I said—

Fuck.

“Helen,” I say, reaching for her arm as she marches past. She shrugs me off and keeps moving, yanking the studio door open so hard it bangs off the wall, then she’s gone, her footsteps stomping down the corridor. “Helen!”

My leg aches like a motherfucker as I limp to the doorway, my thigh hot and throbbing. I grip the wood frame, chest tight with panic, and yell: “Helen, you know I can’t chase you!”

The steps slow... then stop. There’s a distant growl.

My eyes slam shut with relief as she stomps back. Her scent brushes past me and I follow her back inside the studio, pointing at the chaise lounge. “I can explain. Sit.”

“You have exactly one minute, Mr Grangemoor.”

Okay. That’s plenty.

After all, I’ve been confessing my love for this woman in my head for months. I have it down to a fine art.

“The first night you came here, I had this dream...”

She doesn’t believe me at first, I can tell. My assistant sits there with her arms folded tight over her chest, her jaw hard, and glares like I’m her least favorite person on earth. That’s fair. But as it all comes tumbling out in a rush—the dreams, the longing, the despair when she pulled away—Helen begins to soften.

She blinks a few times, eyes damp. Her mouth softens and twists, and I keep going, dredging every last scrap of truth so she can hear it all.

“It hurt when you backed away, but it made sense to me, too. Why would you want a grouchy old man, Helen? You’re the most perfect creature I’d ever seen.”

Her breath hitches and she stares at her lap. Those arms unfold, fingers tangling on her legs, and her cheeks are pink. I limp closer, heart in my throat.

“I meant it when I said it didn’t matter who the father is.” She jerks her chin up, eyes flashing again, but I hold up a palm. “I know it’s me. I know that. But I was ready either way, sweetheart. Any part of you that was on offer, I’d take. Any chance to be a family with you. Don’t you know that by now?”

Her chin wobbles.

And lord, I’ve been the biggest idiot, but Helen lets me come closer; she lets me kneel before her with a groan. When her arms loop around my neck, I gust out a ragged sigh.

“Don’t give up on me now,” I mutter, our foreheads pressed together. “I may be a disaster, but I’ve never once given up on you.”

Her tiny noise splinters through my chest. And when Helen kisses me, *really* kisses me, in daylight this time—I lose my goddamn mind. This is happening, and she’s...

Mine.

The word roars through me, my heart slamming back to life, and I kiss her so hard that her head bows back; I lick into her mouth, eager to taste.

Mine. Mine. This woman is mine.

She’s been mine all along.

And I’ve been hers. Fuck.

We have so much lost time to make up for. So many conversations to redo; so many things that will change moving forward. But this is the main thing, the *only* thing that matters right now: Helen, in my arms.

Kissing me back just as hungrily, her fingernails scratching at my beard. Opening up for me so sweetly, that robe sliding apart, and Christ, I’ll never be able to paint this moment properly. Will spend my life trying to capture the magic.

The chaise lounge creaks as I brace one hand on the green velvet arm.

“Sweetheart,” I say against her lips between kisses. “Which dream was it? Which night?”

Was I any good? That’s what I really want to know, but I’m almost too afraid to ask.

Can’t have been terrible, right? Or she wouldn’t want me now. If I’d known, though, I’d have pulled out all the stops. Given the performance of a lifetime, trying to persuade her to be mine.

But: “The storm,” Helen murmurs, yanking me closer by the arm, “the one where lightning struck nearby,” and I bury a groan in her neck. Her fingers trail down the front of my shirt, flicking the buttons open.

I remember that night. Didn’t I fall asleep on top of her?

“Jesus,” I mutter.

Helen snorts. “You did say never to go into your private rooms. But the storm freaked me out so badly, and I—”

“Got flattened for your trouble.”

She laughs again, so delighted, and it’s worth the humiliation to see her glowing like this. “Well, now you have a do-over, Mr Grangemoor.”

“Rufus,” I tell her, drawing her belt undone. Teasing the knot loose as slowly as possible, trying to drag out this moment. I’m unwrapping the ultimate gift, after all. “I think we’re past all that, don’t you?”

The robe falls away. Her bare skin is smooth, practically glowing in the sunshine. There’s a mole on her left hip, and her nipples are rosy and firm. Perfection.

“Lie back. The same pose as our painting.”

“*Your* painting,” Helen murmurs, but she does it, arranging herself on the cushions. “You give me way too much credit.”

“Impossible.” I draw a lock of hair over her shoulder, draping it like before. So glossy. “You’re my muse.”

And there's only one way to treat a muse: with my head between her thighs. As I kiss along Helen's small bump, my eyes grow damp, but I duck my head and blink it away.

One heart-shattering emotion at a time, damn it. I'm already losing my mind with how lucky I am.

Her fingers sift through my hair, tugging idly on the strands. I trace a circle around her belly button with my tongue.

"You can't take this back," Helen says softly above me, and my eyes burn again. Never. I would never. And I grip her thigh tight enough to show her how desperate I feel; I move down her body and claim her with my mouth.

"Oh," Helen sighs.

Yeah. Oh.

Take this back? I'd rather die.

She's sweet and salty, already slick between her legs. Her thighs part wider, and there's a warm flush spreading over her skin, climbing her whole body from toes to throat, and I *will* paint that one day. One day soon.

Each lick makes her shiver, her body rolling in a wave. Pressing my whole face against her pussy, I rub her clit with my nose and lick inside at the same time. My jaw clicks.

Perfect.

So perfect.

And she tugs on my hair harder, hard enough to sting, her hips rising to meet my mouth. Helen rides my face from below, eyes closed with bliss, lips parted, and her moans echo around the studio. So free. We're drenched in sunlight.

I press one finger inside. It's a tight squeeze, even with her so slick, and I saw in and out, ready to spend hours working her open if that's what it takes. God knows this could never be a chore. She's a miracle.

“Oh,” Helen says, bucking up harder, her movements getting sloppy. She’s adorable like this. “*Oh*, yeah. Okay. Like that.”

Bossy, too. I love it. Love hearing what she prefers, and when I add a second finger, she groans in approval. My girl isn’t shy with her noises; she doesn’t try to muffle the sounds of her pleasure, and I’m so grateful for that.

This hotel has one hell of an echo. Let’s make sure they hear us all the way down in town.

Nine

Helen



My stoic, grumpy boss is hunkered between my thighs, feasting on my pussy like he hasn't eaten in weeks. Rufus's eyes are closed, his forehead creased in concentration, and his beard tickles my inner thighs.

God. I cup his cheek, heart swelling, then buck off the chaise lounge with a moan as he sucks my clit. We've been such idiots, both of us. He wanted me all this time? Since the very first day?

It's too much. I'm so happy it *hurts*.

"Keep going," I gasp, and Rufus growls in approval. He's squeezing my legs hard enough to leave fingerprint bruises, and there's a crick in my neck, but I don't care.

Does he really want this baby? Does he really want *me*?

Dark eyes flick open, and the painter scowls like he can hear me doubting.

"This is mine," he rumbles, claiming my slit with one long lick. "And so is this..." A broad hand travels over my swollen belly. "And so is this." His palm spreads over my heart. "Never doubt it, Helen."

I nod, dazed, and inhale sharply as his thick fingers crook inside me. He's been dragging this out, working me into a sweaty

mess, but now I'm climbing, climbing, *climbing*, up to the clouds and the crows and the thin mountain air.

My body arches off the cushions, rigid and trembling.

Rufus grunts. Teeth graze over my clit.

"Oh."

"That's my girl," he says, deep voice rough, fingers working me as shudders wrack my limbs. "Fuck, look at you. So goddamn perfect when you come. So perfect every minute of the day. Jesus Christ."

My head is tipped back, neck straining. Every atom in my body pulses, and when I finally slump back on the chaise lounge, my heartbeat thumps in my ears.

So damp and sticky.

So freaking thrilled.

And I want more.

"Can we—?"

"God, yes." Rufus staggers to one side as he launches to his feet, his bad leg buckling. I reach for him, but he's already waving me away. "Leave that. I don't give a shit if my leg drops off, sweetheart, I'm getting inside you right now. Stop giggling, you imp."

I help him out, sort of. Mostly I yank on his shirtsleeve, weak with laughter, until Rufus shrugs the whole thing off and stands before me in only dark pants.

His chest is hard, dusted with dark hair. Ancient scars criss-cross his ribs from that horrible fall.

"Next time," he says, working his belt buckle open with a clink, "I'll do it properly. Get us both fully naked; lay you out on a bed. Next time, I swear I'll do this right, but Helen, if I don't feel you stretch around me in the next thirty seconds, I swear to God —"

“This *is* right,” I interrupt as Rufus sits on the cushions beside me, strong thighs spread. “And it’s probably better for the baby if I’m on top, anyway.”

His pants are open, and I watch, dry-mouthed, as he draws his length from his boxers. It’s as thick and no-nonsense as the rest of him, with a ruddy head and a thatch of dark hair at the base. My lower belly clenches with want.

Need that inside me ASAP. Like, yesterday.

“Think this sofa will hold us?” I ask, swinging a leg over the painter’s lap. The chaise lounge groans beneath us, floorboards creaking, because Rufus Grangemoor is a big, brawny man, and I’m a tall woman, no tiny handful either. Especially with my new hitchhiker.

My hands brace on his shoulders. His bare skin is burning hot. And he’s just so *huge*, so stern, and every touch from him feels like worship. This is the best.

“It had better,” Rufus says, staring between my thighs as I line us up. His rigid shaft jerks against my palm. “Otherwise this whole hotel is firewood.”

Ha. “You wouldn’t dare. I want to raise our family here, Rufus Grangemoor, so you’d better get baby-proofing.”

He snorts. “Yes, ma’am. Maybe you’ll marry me, too.”

My heart sings, and I fight the biggest, cheesiest smile. “Maybe. If you’re lucky.”

“The luckiest.”

And everything goes still and quiet as I sink down on his length. The heaters rattle. A breeze whistles past the windows, and the sunshine is warm on my bare skin. Rufus stares at the place where our bodies join, his jaw slack as I take him inside, inch by inch, and when he remembers to breathe, chest jerking, I give a wobbly smile.

I’m overwhelmed too.

It's so good. But so *much*.

How is one person supposed to feel all this and survive it? If I get one more tiny spark of joy, I'm going to explode into a thousand glittering pieces.

I shift my weight, knees throbbing where they dig into the cushions, and okay, *that's* what will keep me sane. These little details.

Like: the stretch and burn as my body fights to let in his cock, my muscles aching.

Like: the bead of sweat rolling down my spine.

Like Rufus's string of muttered curse words, and the way he winces as I shift position, moving an inch closer.

"Am I hurting your leg?"

"Doesn't matter. Keep going."

"We could try it a different way—"

"*Helen*. Forget my leg."

"But—"

The spank is light, playful, but heat roars through my body all the same. The spot stings on my ass cheek, and Rufus rubs it as he watches my reaction. God, I can *feel* the flush spreading up my throat; I can sense the extra wetness dripping between my thighs.

"Interesting," he says.

And now I'm riding him, heedless of the groaning chaise lounge and the slick noises where our bodies meet. Don't care about looking good or sounding cool or any of that other stuff, because all that matters is the way my nerves sing each time he stuffs me full. In my mind's eye, there's a hand print glowing on my ass.

"You liked that, Helen."

“Shut up,” I gasp, nails sinking into his shoulders. My hips rise and fall over his lap, and I ride him faster, harder, bolder.

“Shall I do it again?” Rufus traces featherlight circles over my ass cheek, and the growl that escapes me—it’s feral.

Should he do it again? Yes. Damn it, yes.

“I—Fine. Yes. *Please*. God, you’re unbearable sometimes.”

But I don’t mean that, and as his palm cracks over my bare ass, as I ride him harder and we both let out twin sighs, we’re grinning at each other like we share this delicious secret.

Feels so good with him. So fun.

I hope it’s like this forever.

The floor creaks. The windows fog. My thigh muscles burn, and I’m panting, groaning, reaching for my peak, and Rufus urges me along with possessive hands and his mouth at my throat. A hot tongue; the scrape of teeth. His breath tickles my jaw, and my belly clenches, tightening.

“That’s it.” His ragged voice in my ear—it’s everything. And when he mutters, “Come for me,” his command is the easiest thing in the world to follow. Way ahead of him.

I stiffen, pulse throbbing. My skin flushes hot, sweat cooling on my back, and every nerve ending in my body crackles with life. *God*.

So good. So good.

And Rufus groans his approval, then grips my hips and holds me still, the aftershocks rippling through me in waves.

Wet. Warm. His cock swells inside me and pulses, over and over, and our eyes lock and hold. As he fills me. As he *claims* me.

I can’t look away—I’m falling. Breathless. His dark eyes soften.

And then it’s done. Properly this time, though as Rufus strokes one reverent palm over my belly... well. We did some

things right last time, too.

“Stains on green velvet,” I say at last, climbing off his lap with shaky legs. “That might be a lost cause.”

And Rufus laughs, loud and carefree. “Sweetheart, there’s no such thing.”

Ten

Rufus



O *ne year later*
“Look to the left by an inch.”

Heaving a sigh, I move my chin.

“Okay, now by another inch.”

I oblige.

“Huh.”

Grinning at the studio wall, I jiggle my baby son against my chest. He giggles wetly, his general stickiness soaking into my gray shirt. Worth it.

“Time to admit it, darling wife.” The light of my life huffs by her easel as I say, “*You* are the looker in this family. We’re the muscle, aren’t we, Freddie?”

He blows a bubble. I kiss his head.

“Oh, like that! Stay like that,” Helen says, pointing at me with one hand and sketching quickly with the other. “The light’s perfect when you tilt your head that way. It brings out the silver in your beard.”

“Oh, good,” I say flatly. Wonderful news.

Her mouth twitches, but she's too busy drawing to laugh. "Shut up and hold still. God, you're a terrible model, did you know that? You fidget more than the baby."

It's true. I'm an impatient man, too restless to sit still for hours. I'm used to prowling back and forth behind the canvas, not sitting quietly in front of it.

But Helen asked me nicely, and I can't bear telling her no. Not even when it means looking—and feeling—like a prick.

And it's not so bad lounging here in the pink evening light, holding my baby in the armchair we dragged from the sitting room. The studio walls are plain white, and the only furniture is the armchair I'm sitting in and Helen's easel, plus her paints balanced on a three-legged wooden stool. My cane leans against my knee.

"No one knows what you look like," my wife says, chatting idly as she paints. "Isn't that funny? You're this huge deal in the art scene, and they could all pass you in the street and not realize."

"Good." I blow softly on Freddie's mop of baby hair. "Don't want to meet them anyway."

"You are such a grump, Rufus."

"I'm *your* grump."

She tries, and fails, to hide her smile. And what I didn't realize before, what I'm learning now, is that the person modeling is just as free to stare as the person with the paintbrush. And stare I do.

Helen is beautiful in this light. I mean, she's always beautiful, even first thing in the morning with puffy eyes and pillow creases on her cheek, but in the evening glow, she's... unearthly. Her long, dark hair is twisted into a low bun, stray locks falling around her face, and her lips are pink and bee-stung.

Toffee eyes glance at me, then down at the canvas. Up at me, then at the canvas, and every time her eyes find me, my heart

lurches against my ribs. For the first month or two we were together, I expected that feeling to fade, but I know better now.

It's never going away. It's *Helen*. Living with her is like being struck by lightning dozens of times a day.

"In a good way," I tell the baby, as though he could hear my thoughts.

"What's that?" says Helen.

"Nothing. Boy talk."

She scoffs, but her gaze is soft when she looks up from her painting. A smile curves her mouth, and she's teasing me when she says, "So. Do you think we should have another?"

Oh, she'll have to try harder than that to freak me out. I shift the now sleeping baby in my arms and check my watch. "Definitely. Think I can fit you in before dinner."

"Rufus!" A paint-splattered rag sails through the air and bounces off my shoulder, and I raise an eyebrow at my wife. She dances back a few steps, grinning.

The paintbrush hangs forgotten by her side. We'll come back to this canvas another time, but for now...

"Come on," I tell the baby, pushing to my feet with a groan. I snatch up my cane before it topples to the floorboards. "Let's get our revenge on your mother."

Helen shrieks, already clattering from the room. And I limp after her steadily, warm in the knowledge that she'll never run so far or so fast that I can't catch up. She's a soft touch, our girl.

"We're lucky," I tell Freddie, my lips pressed against his warm head, prowling along the corridor, brass sconces buffed to a bright shine on the walls. "But don't worry. I won't let us forget it."

Not for a single moment.

Not even in my dreams.

* * *

Thanks for reading A Baby for the Outcast! I hope you liked it. :)

For another reclusive hero, check out [Iron Giant](#). *He's older and off limits. A village outcast. And when he looks at me, I burn up hotter than his forge.*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

Teaser: Iron Giant

Watching the farmer's daughter tumble down the hillside, I've never felt so wretched. What's the use of these hands, these muscles, this whole useless body if when I hear Gwendoline's terrified squeak outside, I can do nothing except stare through the window in horror?

I'm not close enough to catch her. I knew she was out there of course, knew she was tip-toeing around like a little pixie again. Lord knows what keeps tempting her all the way out here, but whenever I sense Gwendoline outside my forge, I make sure to stay inside. Hoping that she'll linger a while longer.

I won't scare her away. Won't do anything to risk her never coming close again. But that means when she slips and falls down the muddy green slope, I've trapped myself inside, too far away to help.

"Gwendoline!"

My boots slam into the dirt, vibrations buzzing up my shins from the impact as I lumber outside to her, always so huge and ungainly. She's a wet heap on the ground, mud-stained and blinking, all cuts and scrapes and soaked blonde hair.

"Rhys Evans." She murmurs my name as I bend down, scooping her gingerly into my arms. How many times have I dreamed about this? Lifting her plump, perfect body against my chest? "I knew you'd save me."

Well, that makes one of us. Fuck. Seeing little Gwendoline wince in pain, seeing her eyelids flutter shut as she passes out in my arms—this is my nightmare. This is the worst day of my lonely life.

"Hold on." She can't hear me, but I talk to her anyway, carrying her to my forge and barging the door open with my shoulder. "Hold on, cariad. Let me get a look at you."

It's dim in here, spots floating in front of my eyes as my vision adjusts. Flames dance and glow in the corner, my work left abandoned on the bench beside my anvil, and I carry Gwendoline there, laying her down on the blackened wood. It's searing hot here beside the furnace, hot enough that sweat beads on my hairline, and hopefully that'll warm her. That'll help dry her clothes.

"Gwendoline?" She doesn't stir as I brush the sodden hair off her forehead. Even soaked, her pale blonde hair is frizzy and rebellious. She matches the springtime lambs on her family's farm. "Gwendoline. Shit."

Do I call the doctor? In a storm like this, there'll be no service. And if the river has burst, it could take hours for an ambulance to get through anyway. Farmer Roberts might have better luck in one of his big trucks, but I know from bitter observation that his daughter is not his first priority. If the weather's wreaking havoc on his farm, he won't spare a thought for Gwendoline until every last sheep is accounted for first.

Besides, what will he do for her that I can't? I can watch her. Care for her.

Since moving to this valley two years ago, it's *all* I've wanted to do.

"Easy. Easy, now." I murmur nonsense to her as I check her over, sliding my soot-stained fingers into her hair and probing gently at her scalp. I can't find any cuts, can't find any massive lumps, and the sick pounding in my chest eases as I check her over slowly.

Her body lies limp on my workbench, the firelight dancing over her pale cheeks, and her wet clothes are plastered close to her curves. I notice her tempting body—I'd have to be blind not to—but it registers in the distant recesses of my brain. There are more urgent concerns, like how the hell I'm supposed to play doctor with these big, dirty hands.

It's okay. Gwendoline's banged up, yes. She'll have some killer bruises from that fall, but I think she passed out from shock more than anything else. And as I check her limbs one by one, squeezing gently for broken bones, her breathing changes. Gets quicker and more shallow, until I'm sure as day that she's lying there awake, letting me run my hands all over her.

Jesus. I can't think too hard about that.

"Who are you fooling, cariad?" My voice is a quiet rumble between us. If she were really asleep, there's no chance she would wake.

But Gwendoline's mouth twitches. She peeks up at me from one eye, a bright flash of periwinkle blue in the darkness. "No one, apparently."

She's got that right. I know this girl by heart, even though I've kept my distance, and I can read all of her moods. I know how she looks when she's bored or wistful or hungry, and I know when she's truly passed out and when she's awake.

"You took quite a fall." Since she's not moaning in pain, I've got no more excuses. I take my hands off her thigh and fold my arms over my chest. "Are you dizzy? Should I call a doctor? Or your father?"

Gwendoline wrinkles her nose and shakes her head, fair hair shifting over my workbench. "No. Sorry. It's all a fuss over nothing. I'll get out of your way in a second, Mr Evans, I promise." As she speaks, she pushes up onto her elbows; starts to struggle upright.

"Don't." I'm touching her again before I can think, pressing down on one shoulder. "Lay there for a second. Catch your breath in the warm."

Gwendoline scoffs but she settles back, and my mouth twitches in turn. 'Warm' is an understatement. It's so hot here by the furnace that her cheeks are flushed bright red and beads of sweat are sliding down my spine. The air shimmers with heat.

You could chew on it. I'm used to it, but it must be a shock to little Gwendoline's system.

"It'll be a wet walk home." I squint out of the nearest window. The afternoon light was already fading when the storm clouds came, and now it's nearly as dark as night. "If you're even up to it." An image of her stumbling through the gloom drifts through my mind, bruised and soaked and dazed, and I clear my throat. Absolutely not. "Which you're clearly not, so. You'll stay here until it's safe to drive you home. That's that."

Pink lips curve and blue eyes twinkle up at me. Gwendoline knits her fingers together over her stomach, visibly pleased, and I try not to notice the way her skirt's rucked up her thighs. "You're awfully bossy, Mr Evans."

"Rhys." She's just showing respect, acknowledging the decade or two between us, but she called me by my first name earlier. I don't want her taking it back now. "And it's not bossiness. It's care."

Gwendoline's breath catches, but she shrugs one shoulder, so casual. "I wouldn't know."

Shit. I knew that, knew she has a rough time at home, but hearing it plain as day makes my hands ball into fists. What are her parents thinking, trampling her spirit the way they do? Even though she's a grown woman, it clearly bothers her. So why doesn't she leave?

Maybe she's too loyal. Or maybe Gwendoline thinks she has nowhere to go, but that's not true. Not at all. Though we've barely exchanged ten sentences in the last two years, though I'm nothing but the gruff, surly blacksmith to her, she could come here. She could run to me.

She could *always* run to me. She certainly does often enough in my dreams.

"Lie there a little while longer." Gwendoline blinks up at me from my workbench, hot-cheeked and shy, and I tell myself sternly not to get used to it. I'll drive her home in a few hours,

and then I'll barely see her again. As it should be. "You took a real tumble back there. Warm up while I brew us some tea."

* * *

Check out [Iron Giant!](#)

xxx



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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