



RED AND WOLFE: PART TWO

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An Erotic Fairytale

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Chapter One

RED

I'm really here. I'm at the island. The mythical place I've imagined for years sways, bumps, and waves around me—real life; technicolor.

The rain is slick and warm and tastes a little salty. It melds my hair to my head, coats my face, makes my lips and skin feel soft. My drenched clothes cling to me, weighing me down. When Race leans down to pick me up, I wrap my arms around his neck and hook my legs around his waist, clinging to him as the ocean knocks the boat against the beach.

It's foolish. Reckless. Senseless. I know it is. I keep waiting for my conscience to kick in—that little voice that sometimes shouts when deep down, I know I'm way off course. So far: silence.

He wraps his arm around my back, his big hand spreading out just over my ass. I feel a brimming heat between my legs, the urge to rock myself against his hip.

He leans down and nips my neck, just under my ear, and I can't hold back. I push my pussy against him and he finds me with his fingers, stroking through my jeans. "I'm not finished with you yet, Red. I'm going to make you come so hard you won't know your own damn name."

"Asshole," I breathe.

But I want it. I want this.

He dips a hand into my jeans, his fingertips brushing the top of my mound. I'm shivering. I just can't seem to stop. His finger dips between my folds. I'm wet there. So fucking wet for him. He slides inside me, burying his finger, and I see stars.

"Oh God..."

He leans me up against the steering console, lifts me up a little, so my butt's cupped by the wheel, and covers my nipple with his mouth, sucking me through my shirt and sports bra. Warmth spreads through me, leaving me lust-drunk and weak. His thumb drags over my swollen clit. The finger inside me curls—so deep, in just the right spot. I clench around him, panting...

"Oh God..."

"I'm gonna fuck you, Red. I'm gonna make you come so hard."

I moan as he pushes my unzipped jeans aside and drags his tongue down the skin around my panties. His eyes flick up to mine. He holds my gaze as he rips my panties at the waistline, then leans down and presses his lips over my clit. His tongue flicks against it. I buck.

"Red... So sweet."

And, Jesus Christ, he's tasting me. Sucking me. Pushing his tongue against me. Flicking the moist tip of it up and down. Then lighter; feather-light; teasing...

"Yes!" My fingers dig into the thick muscle of his shoulders. His tongue spreads flat against me,

wet and slick, it's everything. His wet tongue is the end and the beginning. Up and down he drags it, killing me. His fingers inside me pump in time with my pounding heart. I spread my legs out, taking him deeper. Trying to take him deeper, but—

My eyes fly open as he slides his fingers out.

"Oh, fuck. Please!" I rock my hips, surprised by how helpless, how breathless my own voice sounds, even as I grab his bicep and sink my nails in.

His eyes are dark and hard, framed by strands of wet, black hair. "Do you want this, Red?" He drags a finger over my sensitive, swollen flesh and I gasp. "Tell me that you want this."

I pant, "I want this."

Without his fingers inside me and his mouth on my clit, my cunt is raging.

"You look like you need a good fucking. Is that true, Red? Even from a stranger. You'll accept a thorough fucking. Take the pleasure that I give you." His fingertip plays at my entrance, sliding in. I clench and unclench, ready, but he doesn't come farther.

"You're ready to be fucked?"

"Yes! Please!" In this moment, all I need is an orgasm. He's an asshole but he's hot as hell, and he has magic fingers and a magic tongue.

He grins, but it's a dark thing—more like the baring of teeth. "Okay, Red."

He shifts me off the steering wheel and into his arms, hefts my bags onto his shoulder. I'm thrown off-balance when he leans down to open a small cabinet in the boat's outer wall. He hefts an anchor in the arm that's not wrapped around me.

He steps over to the boat's side and drops it into the roiling sea. I hear a low *thunk* as it submerges, followed by the rattling of the chain as it clinks over the side. Then we're moving toward the nose of the boat. Race steps down into the waves then strides across the beach, toward the forest. We don't make it that far before he lays me under a palm tree and starts peeling off my clothes.

His hands work deftly, relieving me of my shirt and then my bra. My breasts bounce free, tantalized by raindrops, cupped by his big palm. His other hand begins to work my jeans off. "You will come for me, Red. More than once."

I nod. I know how shameful it is; I'm disturbed by the degree of departure from my usual self, but I'm doing this. I want to feel pleasure. Need to, after what this last month has been like. Maybe Race is the wrong place to get that pleasure—hell, he definitely is—but he's here. He's offering this now. And now is the time I've lost my mind.

He fondles my breasts, sending sparks of pleasure through my belly; the sparks fall down between my legs and leave me dim and drugged. He sits up and pulls his shirt over his head, revealing a bulky, deep-tanned chest. From shoulders to happy trail, he's lickably flawless. My pussy pulses in appreciation.

He pulls his slacks off, and...*his hips*. Dear God, those chiseled hips. Those abs. They're so cut

they don't look real. You could bounce a penny off them.

I follow his happy trail down to the elastic of his black cotton boxer-briefs. Below that is a sinful bulge. I reach for him, aching to touch it. I can't help myself. Before my fingers make their mark, he pulls away.

"Not yet, Red."

He pushes me into the sand and peels my jeans off, then my torn rainbow underwear. He slides his button-up under my ass and pulls down his boxer-briefs, freeing an enormous, vein-striped, purple-headed fuck machine.

My pussy creams. My fingers twitch. I reach for him, and he moves his hips. His cock, pumped up and pointed toward his navel, is the biggest I've ever seen. If I wasn't out of my mind with lust, I might be scared of it. The balls below are similarly impressive: drawn up tight, they're still weighty—the definition of well hung.

"Not yet." He holds a finger up. "I need to make sure you're still ready."

He plants a palm on my shoulder, pinning me against the sand. Then he climbs on top of me and slides one of his fingers into my pussy.

I'm swollen and dripping wet. My cunt spasms around his finger, aching for more. I grab at his arm. "Now. *Please*."

His eyes flicker to mine, and then back down. "I want to be sure..." He glides his finger in and out of me, and when my knees are clenching around his thighs, he curls his finger, bends down, and starts to tongue-kiss my pussy. I writhe. "Oh God! Fuck!"

"Patience, Red." He licks me once more luxuriously, and moves his mouth off my throbbing flesh. He gives me a smile that's pure male dominance. "Try to exercise some patience. You're going to come. I promise."

I'm barely holding onto sanity. He pulls his finger out and slides two more in. I'm so full. Almost painful but it feels amazing. I rock against him, forcing his fingers deeper. He smiles and bends back over me, licking me gently... I clench and unclench, needing more.

"I need you...inside me."

"I'll say what you need." His dark eyes rove up my naked body. A wide grin spreads across his face, and then he does it: He turns his hand a little, pulls his fingers out of me, painting me with my slickness. He rubs his thumb over my taint. He lifts his head to watch my face and gently pushes in.

"Oh fuck!" It hurts at first.

I don't know what to do. Grunting. I think I'm grunting. My hips jerk as he sinks his thumb in all the way. I can feel it through the walls of my pussy, but my senses are overwhelmed, because his fingers are inside there—pushed into my dripping pussy as far as they can go, twirling slowly as he presses his thumb just slightly upward. Pleasure ripples through me.

And then he lowers his mouth back to my clit. All it takes is three slow strokes of his soft tongue.

My body convulses as my mind shorts out.

Somewhere far away, I feel his thumb leave me; he draws his fingers out. I try to curl over on my side, but he's pushing my legs open.

I can't breathe. "I can't breathe!" Tears stream down my cheeks.

"Yes you can." His fingers are on my cheek, and I can smell the sweetness of myself. His hands are in my hair. Somewhere, thunder claps.

I'm shivering. I clench my teeth.

"Oh God." *I can't believe he did that to me!*

I suck a deep breath in and notice something pressed against my core. It's warm and smooth, moving slowly in a circle, re-arousing tattered nerve endings. My eyes can barely focus enough to see his swollen, purple head, but I enjoy the feeling of it. I'm growing hungry for him, parting my legs a little wider, when he leans forward, stretching his magnificent torso out over my chest, and clasps my hands in one of his. He presses them into the sand over my head and looks down at me with black, hypnotic eyes.

"I'm going to fuck you. Now."

His eyes bore into mine and my lips tremble as I nod.

I watch as he takes himself in hand—he's that long—and, positioned with his head between my swollen lips, he balances his weight on his arms, restraining both of mine, and rocks his hips.

The moment his thick cock punches into me, I'm blinded. Deafened. I know nothing but the fullness of my cunt. My hungry, swollen, dripping, ravaged cunt. I'm stretched so tight. He's buried *so* deep. He rocks against me and I swear to God he's rearranging me inside. I'm trembling violently, quivering, stretched painfully around him but deep within me, pleasure ignites.

He starts to fuck me, hard and fast, brutal. I return it thrust for thrust, lifting my ass off the ground, throwing my legs wide, opening myself so I can take every inch of him. I'm so wet and warm, so drunk. I need him, all of him.

I clutch his shoulders. Claw his neck. His balls punch my pussy, sending shockwaves to my clit. I hear him groan, but I can't even open my eyes to see his face.

"Red..."

"Fuck me." It's barely a whisper as he does just that. He drags himself out of me slowly and pushes viciously back in—over and over, making me groan and grunt and whimper.

I'm so wet that when he shoves deep inside me, the base of him glides deliciously against my clit. My eyes leak. My heart gallops. My chest tightens. I wonder if it's possible to fuck to death.

Then I feel him expand inside me. He's pressed so tightly into me, I'm not sure my pussy will ever let him go. Suddenly he lets go of my wrists. Hard fingers clench the soft skin of my ass, lifting me up, clutching my hips as he groans, pulls halfway out, and slams me one final time.

I come with a primitive scream.

I can feel his body quake as he unloads inside me, but my mind is somewhere else. Heaven, maybe.

I'm limp and helpless when he pulls out, leaving me soaking wet and sore.

I'm so exhausted, so empty now, I can do nothing but curl into a little ball and shut my eyes.

Chapter Two

RED

I guess he dresses me. Dresses himself. It's not until he's crouching in front of me with my bags on his shoulder, drawing me close to pick me up, that my synapses start firing again.

I'm wet and cold.

There's sand in my hair. In my bra. In my underwear. Once my focus shifts down there, I'm stunned by how sore I am. Sore from over-use. I'm wet, too. My panties are tattered and soaked, and not because it's raining. My legs feel unsteady, like I've just stepped off a roller coaster. My stomach is tight and fluttery, as if moths are bumping around inside, trying to force their way out my throat.

Oh, this is so not good.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Did I just have some kind of mental break?

No Red, you were horny.

He's a stranger. A stranger I can't trust!

I look at Race, and even now, I still can't see straight. I don't see a strange man. I see a man my body appreciates.

I feel pleasantly off-kilter. Breathless. Excited. I take a deep breath and work to keep my face impassive. He doesn't need to know that I want to lick his tanned throat and smell his wet, dark hair and throw my head back and let him mark me like an animal.

Of course he knows!

Rage. Embarrassment and horror.

But that was the most fabulous sex of my life.

I didn't know sex like that existed.

Dammit, it was way too good! Addictively good!

That's as far as I get before he throws me over his shoulder and starts toward the shadowed trees.

I see the beach spread out behind us as he strides across the rain-pocked sand. It's deep tan, zigzagged with lines of black silt—the ocean's scribbles. Waves crash to the shore, but they've petered out some since last I looked. Behind them, the boat shimmies in the current. It's getting dark. The cloud-strewn sky seems to hang low over the horizon line.

I can't see mainland anywhere. Can't see anything but this island.

As we move into the trees, the rain peters into a dribble. Further beneath the cover of pines, oaks, and other leafy, moss-flung trees, it's almost dry. Every few steps, a raindrop hits my head or shoulders. I look around, trying to pin down some specifics on exactly we are, but it's no use. It's all just trees to me. Trees that rise up from a boggy ground of decomposing leaves and pine-straw. Trees

where moss sways gently in the breeze.

A part of me wants to jump down and run from Race, but where would I go?

I lean my cheek against his neck. My stomach quivers, almost as if I've been kicked in the gut—and all because of his scent: sweaty man and sex and saltwater.

I wonder what kind of man he is. I know he's a sex god, and controlling. And an asshole. Manipulative. Doesn't like people. I shut my eyes and breathe slowly.

Yeah, you've really gone and done it this time, Red.

As if he hears my thoughts, Race looks down at me. I can feel him more than see him, since I'm turned toward the trees behind us.

I don't move a muscle as I contemplate my options. How do I even know what they are when I know so little about him?

Who likes solitude so much they want to live alone here?

Who has millions to throw into the purchase of an island?

Who has the power to put money into my bank account, then yank it out?

The trees quiver around me, as if they know the answer but they simply cannot speak.

Suddenly I can't handle being carried by him anymore. I lean back so I can see his face, which is still gorgeous, even now that the sight of it fills me with a shame so strong it verges on panic.

"Put me down," I manage, sounding almost normal.

He sets me on the ground, and my eyes are pulled up his delectable body, to his face, as if my gaze is being controlled by a magnet.

His hair hangs wet in his eyes. He brushes it back, and I can't help feel a renewed burst of lust. The dark, dramatic eyes; the chiseled jaw; smooth cheeks; biteable lips. Lips that kissed my pussy. And that short, soft beard that tickled me. The memory leaves me so unsteady, I don't know what to say.

This is probably nothing to him. I bet he's used to getting whatever he wants. If not in life, with women surely.

I glance through the trees behind him, where I can just barely make out the boat, bobbing against the shore, and the waves rolling into the sand. I jerk my thumb that way and manage to loosen my too-tight throat enough so I can tell him: "What happened back there, that is *not* the norm for me. At all. *Ever*. That was you getting lucky because I'm going through a weird time in my life."

He looks me up and down, igniting a trail of heat from head to toe. His face is hard to read—just thoughtful, maybe. "Weird?"

I bite my lip. "It's nothing that you need to know about. But it doesn't have to do with you—what happened. It had to do with me. I was having a reaction to some things that...to some difficult things. Not you. 'Cause you're an asshole."

His lips twitch, as if my calling him an asshole is amusing. "'What happened?'" He arches one

brow. “You mean the fucking we did.”

“Yes. We fucked, okay? I know that.”

He’s staring at me, prodding me with his eyes. I’m not sure to what end.

“It was very nice, okay? You’re a total stud. In every way. And I enjoyed myself. I’m not going to lie about it. I’m sure I couldn’t if I tried.” I grit my teeth, because I fear I may be blushing.

He smirks. “No, you couldn’t, Red.”

I wipe my hands on my jeans, even though my hands aren’t wet and my jeans are. It’s a nervous habit. “I thought we agreed you were going to stop calling me that.”

His smirk deepens. He shakes his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Well I’m not a ho. I’m really not. And I mean it when I say nothing like that is going to happen again.”

He folds his arms across his chest and looks ridiculous standing there with my bags on his shoulder, in an I-conjured-this-man-from-my-dreams sort of way. I have a brief and random longing to touch his beard. This leads me to realize I didn’t touch his dick one time during our...exchange. I wonder if that was intentional on his part. I remind myself that I don’t care.

He’s smirking at me again. The smirk smooths out, but his lip is twitching like he wants to smile. “You think it won’t.”

“It definitely won’t. You paid me to come here—” *And I did come, didn’t I?* My sex-starved inner horn dog wags her tail. I am definitely blushing now. I take a deep breath and try again. “You paid me to see this place. Not have sex with you. And I’m aware it’s not like you dragged me into it or anything, but let’s be honest, you enticed me back there on the boat. You’re a practiced seducer. I have no doubt.”

I purse my lips at him, and he smiles. He tries to hide it, but it’s definitely a smug little smile. It’s there and gone, leaving me longing to see it again. Which is ridiculous.

“So anyway, I just want to let you know I’m not just going to...do things like that. Not again, anyway. I’m staying in Gertrude’s house, in her room with the door dead-bolted.”

“You know what I think?” Smirky bastard.

“I don’t care what you think.”

“I’m going to tell you anyway.” He steps a little closer, and I notice his clothes are sticking to him just like mine are. I can see every line of his beautiful chest through that soaked dress shirt. I bite my cheek and he leans in even closer, so all I can see is his face, and the rumble of his voice fills my ears.

“I think you need a door that locks from the outside if you want to be sure you don’t fall legs-spread on my cock.”

That deep voice permeates my mind. It gets inside me. I wrap my arms around myself, but I still feel an ache low in my belly and warmth between my legs.

I stand up straighter. Twist my lips into a frown. “You’re a jerk, Race. It’s painfully obvious to

me. First you tried to manipulate me into giving you this island. Then you seduced me. I don't know what I can expect from you next, which is why I think we should part ways. Right here, right now."

His eyebrows arch, and even that simple movement sends a bolt of lust straight to my girly parts.

"Give me my bags." I hold my arms out, and he leans close enough so I can smell his breath and feel his heat. As he slides them on my shoulder, his fingers whisper across my arm and my body goes molten.

I step back. "Can I have the key?"

A self-pleased little twitch of his lips makes me want to punch him in the nose. "If you insist, Red. There's a key under the flower pot with yellow polka dots. Let yourself in. Look around if you want. I don't think she'd mind you poking around, as long as you don't take anything."

I close my hand around the strap of my bag. "I would never do that. I'm her granddaughter, remember?"

Another subtle lift of his brows. His cheek tugs up a little, but it's not a smile. It's a kind of tired, kind of doubting look—one that seems to say he's over messing with me. "You sure you don't want company on the walk?" He shifts his weight, drawing my gaze to his long, muscular legs.

"Yes." I lick my slightly chapped lips. "Very sure."

He nods. "You'll find a folder on the desk in her office. Top of the pile. Everything in there is yours. To get there, you'll want to take this path," he says, pointing at something behind my shoulder. I turn to see a ribbon of pale pebbles that curls between the pines, rolling in the opposite direction of where Race was carrying me before we stopped. "It will lead you all the way to Trudie's cottage. Just keep on through the woods until you see it. It's about five hundred yards from here, near some rocks."

I glance briefly at the treetops, where, in between the leaves, the sky is gray. It's not going to be sunny again this afternoon, but I have at least two hours until dark, if I'm correct about the time. "I think I can handle that," I tell Race.

My eyes cling to his face. I just can't help myself. With his ripped physique and worn-out clothes, he looks like just the kind of trouble that would await a woman in the woods at dusk.

I huff my breath out, hold up a hand in a casual wave. A wave that's meant to tell him I'm totally over the crazy monkey sex we just had.

"Bye, Race. I mean Wolf." I smirk over my shoulder. "Thank you for the orgasms."

Chapter Three

RED

As soon as I'm more than a stone's throw from Race, I drop the smirking-girl-in-charge-of-her-own-sexuality façade and let a wave of anxiety wash over me. I'm way out of my element here: on the island, and with him.

Not that there is any 'with him.'

Not that I'd ever, in a million years, want there to be.

My nickname for him—Wolf—is totally appropriate.

I definitely feel like Little Red Riding Hood right now, clutching my bags as I walk slowly through the woods, to grandmother's house. I keep my gaze up in the trees, where rain drips from thin, squiggly moss; where pine needles tremble in the wind; where I can see swatches of sky through the treetops. Rain drips only occasionally on my forehead, in my hair, where it tickles as it makes its way down toward my neck. Birds call over the dim noise of the waves. I can see the ocean if I glance out to my left. It's grey-blue and looks choppy, as if it's underlining the fact that I'm stuck here tonight. Stuck on an island with a man I know almost nothing about, one who, inexplicably, I can't stop thinking about.

I remember the way I cried when I came on the beach. The way I felt right before I got off for the last time. How super intense it was. I wonder if it was that good for him. I hope it was.

I still can't believe I did that. Sure, Race is obviously an all-star player, but I have a will of my own. Why *did* I do it?

It's probably my pent-up sexual frustration. After Carl, there's been no one. Jobless, going-broke me didn't have the confidence to put herself out there. I told myself there was no need. I had Mr. Happy, who I suddenly wish I'd tucked into my bag.

I remember how Race looked in between my legs, smirking as he licked me. I wish I'd had the chance to touch his dick. I would love to—*would have* loved to give him some of the same pleasure he gave me.

As soon as I get to Gertrude's place, I'm taking a cold shower. Or maybe a warm shower where I put my hand to good use.

Thinking about following up my experience with Race by pleasuring myself in my grandmother's bathroom makes me depressed. I feel lonely again. Lonely, unemployed, and probably just played by a master manipulator.

I pick up the pace, eager to put as much distance as possible between Race and me. I'm grateful when, a minute or two later, the pebble path leads me out of the woods, into a grassy clearing where two weeping willows, swaying on either side of the path, herald a spacious cottage: stone with lots of glass and a roof made of adorable wooden shingles. The cottage is situated on what looks like the tip

of the island. It's surrounded by a rocky beach where waves crash in sprays of white. Two gulls circle above it. A garden sprawls behind it, overrun with delicate purple flowers, spindly yellow ones, pink snap roses, monkey grass, ferns, a young maple tree, and a sea of ivy that climbs the glass walls of the sunroom on the back of the house.

So Gertrude had a green thumb. *A green thumb and a black heart...* I scowl at my own bitterness. I guess I've still got some hard feelings. I shove them aside and walk across a stone patio surrounding the garden. I'm looking for the pot that—

There it is. Beside the baby maple tree.

I lift it up and find an ordinary-looking, silver key. The sunroom door is teal green, with glass panes in the middle. I can see the cozy-looking furniture inside before I push the door open: two small, lipstick-colored couches and a wicker-backed rocking chair resting atop a cream rug that almost looks crocheted. A Tiffany's style stained glass floor lamp beside the rocking chair. A big, leather trunk serving as a coffee table, stacked with magazines and a tablet. I step slowly inside, feeling like an interloper, half expecting Gertrude to step through the doorway that leads back to the rest of the house and tell me she was only testing me.

I'm sure I failed the moment I let Race shove his fingers inside me.

I stand there for a second, waiting for I'm not sure what, but the only thing I hear is...shit. Is that a cat purring?

He's fat and orange, sitting in a green wing-backed chair I hadn't noticed before. His gaze flicks to me before he lifts one of his front paws and begins to lick it.

My eyes are already watering.

I put a hand over my mouth, but it's no use. I'm madly allergic to cats, and one is sitting within sneezing distance of me. The bastard continues purring as I sneeze twice into my palms.

Along the wall to my left, I notice a quote done in black brush-script: "The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline toward the religion of solitude. —Aldous Huxley"

That makes Gertrude seem like an asshole. Was she implying she was reclusive because of her great mind? That's bullshit.

There are other telling trinkets: a framed photo here and there—all featuring people I've never seen; that entire tablet full of ebooks. But I sneeze three more times and realize I should probably leave the room. If not because of the cat, because I'd like to take a look around, see what I see, and find a bed. I'm all thrown off by what just happened on the beach, and frankly, I'd just like to leave. Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

I pass through a cavernous kitchen, where pots and pans hang over a spacious, emerald-tiled counter cluttered with bills, sticky notes, and a returned envelope bearing Gertrude's handwriting: a distinctive, angular script I recognize from photos of some of her early poetry notebooks. It's stamped in royal blue ink with her name and address, and the stamp features an acorn. I rub my finger over it,

wondering what it meant about her. She wasn't Mrs. Gertrude O'Malley, but Ms.

She and my mother's father never married. She got pregnant but decided not to commit to a man she didn't love. At least that's what my mom told me. She only met her father a handful of times.

I put the letter back down and sneeze into my hand. Damn cat. I wander into the next room, a dining room with a radio sitting on the table, and a—

“*Aaahh choo!*”

I wipe my mouth and swipe at my eyes and glance around the room. Damn it if there's not a white cat perched on the arm of one of the chairs.

Shit. There's another one under the coffee table, cleaning its hind leg with its tongue.

So Gertrude was a cat lover. My mom liked cats, too—until we realized how allergic I am.

A quick peek into the room next to this one reveals a cozy little den with a flat-screen, a small couch, a recliner, and a coffee table that looks like it was made of driftwood. Over the couch hangs a framed poem by Carl Sandburg: *Fog*.

I don't even notice the cat on the floor until I almost trip over him—or her. He/she is beige, like the rug, and so fluffy I sneeze twice just looking at her/him.

“Damn it.”

I stumble into the next room, my eyes burning and watering. This was clearly Gertrude's office. On the desk is perched a brown and black cat; on the floor beside a rocking chair, a black and white one.

I sneeze three times.

“Jesus.” I grab a tissue from a box and turn a slow circle, built-in cedar bookshelves packed with hardbacks and several rickety-looking filing cabinets.

I drop down in the desk chair and hold my hand over my nose, hoping no dander will get in. Which is futile. I know that. I wipe my nose with my hand, then turn my attention to the desk, floored for a moment to be at the famous Gertrude O'Malley's work space. The first thing I see is a folder marked ‘family.’

I open it slowly, feeling slightly as if I'm spying, and pull out a thin stack of papers. I can tell from the way the words are arranged on the pages that they're poems. I shuffle them, and photos fall onto the desk. I'd know the face in those pictures anywhere: my mother's. I shove them behind the poems.

My heart is beating hard. The few times I've gotten a never-before-seen picture of Mom since her death, I feel almost like I'm seeing her again. It's new data about her, and it's so thrilling I want to relish the buildup for a minute.

I glance around the room again, noting details now: a one-handed Ghost Busters clock on one of the bookshelves; an encased baseball with a squiggly signature on the windowsill, in between burgundy curtains; a tube of lipstick on the edge of the desk, right out in front of me. I pull the top off and scrutinize the color: it's pale, and almost purple. Why would she wear lipstick? What's the point, if you're never going to see anyone—except Race? I wonder how often she saw Race. I wonder if she

thought he was attractive.

I groan.

Then I lean back a little in her office chair and read through the first of the poems. I'm not positive, since poetry is kind of veiled most of the time, but I'm pretty sure the piece compares my mother to a mirage, which makes me angry. My mom was real. Maybe Gertrude chose to relegate her to an almost imaginary figure, but she wasn't. I set that poem face-down atop a stack of envelopes and try the next one, *Farmer's Wife*. In it, Gertrude writes about beans in a pod, shucked open by a farmer's wife. Thrown into a bowl, incapable of recognizing one another. There's a sense of melancholy that makes me assume the beans are my mother and Gertrude. Maybe even me.

Whatever.

I'm relieved to find the third poem is about sea turtles. I'm sure there's some more profound point, but I let my imagination stick to just the words, please, and imagine big, dopey turtles laying eggs in sand.

When I'm finished, I turn the photos over. The first one is of my mother, wearing her undergrad cap and gown at the University of Alabama. My father smiles beside her. I can still smell him: yeast and tomato sauce; fresh cheese. He died in a car wreck, delivering pizza. I was four. My mom got pregnant with me when she was in her sophomore year at Bama, and they got married shortly thereafter.

I hug the picture to my heart, then start to sit it on my lap. My jeans are still wet, though—actually, all of me is—so I grab one of Gertrude's dumb poems, put it on my wet jeans, and set the picture on top of it.

The second picture is my mother as a young child—maybe five. She's wearing pig-tails and holding a ballerina doll whose plastic toes are pointed. I spend a long time staring at her smile. I never knew her as a five-year-old, have never seen a picture of her this age, but it's still her smile. I love her smile.

It doesn't take long for tears to make my throat sting. I'm not in the mood to cry, so I stand up, sit the photos back on the desk, and wander around the office.

A closer examination of knickknacks on the bookshelves reveals a clay paperweight with my mother's initials, a framed photo of me as a baby, a copy of the *Journal*. In a corner, underneath the leaves of a giant fern, I find a size-eight pair of house shoes. I wonder absently if I could sell them for money.

I return to the desk and sit down. I read the poem about the turtle again.

I'm frustrated. Because the thought of leaving here tomorrow makes me depressed. Because I find myself longing for more of Race. Not him; what we did together.

For the first time, I think of one of the things Carl told me when he left me. I was mad at him, screeching about how it should have been impossible for him not to know he was gay. He looked right into my eyes and he said, "It's not because you're female, Red. It's because you're boring. You don't

want anything that you can't have. You're always...satisfied."

And I thought that was funny, because I'm not. At all. My mother used to tell a story about how, as a baby, I skipped baby food and went right to chicken and potatoes. In school if I didn't make a 95 or better on a test/quiz/report, my day was ruined. I'm never well-exercised enough, smart enough, funny enough. At least in my own mind I'm not. And it's funny—it struck me as hilariously ridiculously funny that day, with Carl in the apartment—because he didn't know that about me. I'd never been open enough with him.

So in the end, maybe it was almost as much my fault as his.

I walk slowly back through the kitchen, off which I find a tiny, blue-tiled half bath. I use a mini hair-dryer I find there to dry my clothes a bit, then walk back out into the garden. It's humid. Hot, even at night. I walk to the edge of the yard, where the vibrant grass meets large boulders, piled between the yard and sea.

I stare down at the swirling sea and think of mermaids. I wish I could just swim away. Tears sting my eyes, because I've been ignoring the depth of my desperation for months now. I have no one. Nothing. I wrap my arms around myself, protection from a brisk breeze. A gull caws obnoxiously. I sneeze a few times. I wonder what they think of me—a large intruder.

I pull off my shoes and venture down some of the rocks, using hands and feet to balance on the steep descent. I start to feel a little less frenzied. A little less allergic. I make it to the lowest rock, on the farthest end of the boulder pile, and stand there, letting the ocean spray my legs. I stick my foot in, up to my calf, and relish the shock of cold on my bare skin. The tide is high and getting higher. As I watch the gray sky and the waves that crest gently, further out, the sea settles over my feet and calves.

I crouch down, submerging myself from the waist down. The waves break at my belly. I think: *I could be pulled in. I really could.*

Moving slowly, almost robotically, I tug off my jeans. I want to feel the water. It reminds me of college. I was a swimmer.

I pull my shirt off and toss it on the rocks behind me. I'm going in. Why not? I wait for a break between the waves and lower my whole self into the water. It's cold, leaving me breathless. I kick a few times, searching for sand, but the water around the rocks is deep. A wave smacks me in the face. I kick out a few strokes, making it past the spot where the waves break. I check for current, finding none. Around my shoulders, waves lap at my neck and chin—but they're not violent. I go under, emerging wet and cleansed. I turn over on my back and look up at the sky.

Mom, where are you?

I drift there on a wave, surprised at how quickly I've adjusted to the cold. I'm watching gulls circle, thinking how nice it must be to fly in a group like that, when I feel like I'm drifting. I get in free-style position and swim, but the current holds me in place. No, not in place. I'm being dragged out, slowly but surely. I swim at an angle, don't panic. I'm a strong swimmer. I'm okay.

I swim harder, am tugged harder. I fix my eyes on my shirt, crumpled on the lowest rock. The water's almost reached it.

I kick and stroke harder, till my muscles burn. The rocks grow smaller. So does Gertrude's house.

I'm feeling winded. That's to be expected. I'm not in swimming shape anymore. I'm calm until I'm not. I'm calm until my muscles give out. When I realize I'm stuck—I'm caught in a rip tide—it's too late to do anything about it.

I throw my head back and scream. Then I'm pulled under.

Chapter Four

WOLFE

I followed her to Trudie's just so I could watch that ass in those wet jeans. When she went inside through the sunroom door, I circled back around, into the trees at the edge of Trudie's yard, where I've got a tree house and a tool kit. The rocky shoreline around the cottage has been featured in several of my paintings. I like to capture the gulls as they swoop down for fish. Last summer, I painted a storm from here. That afternoon, the wet air and occasional sprays of rain made the oils layer less densely, so the clouds looked lighter, more illuminated. This evening, I'm going to see if the moisture in the air has the same effect on Red's ass; her hips; her sweet, pink pussy. I want her as real as I can make her.

I climb the stairs that wrap around a big oak tree and duck under a small, tin roof. I pull my kit out from under the wooden bench that wraps around the interior perimeter of the little tree house. I know before I take out my canvas, paints, and tools how I'm going to paint her. Red, spread out on the stones, her legs throw open, one finger rubbing circles on her clit, one finger knuckle-deep in her pussy.

I pull out my fold-up metal easel and open the large plastic case where I keep canvases. I sit one on the easel and spend fifteen minutes or so readying my oils, using water from a bottle to get the brush the way I like, dabbing on a primer that I mix myself.

I start out with a coat of pale beige, followed by a few streaks of pink. I layer on some blue and gray and blend until I'm satisfied with the tone of the sunset sky. My hands make quick work of the rocks, the grass, the flowers. This comes more naturally to me than my job in finance ever did. I'm ambidextrous, so when one hand gets tired or cramped, I hand the brush off to the other.

On a whim, I do something I don't normally do: I go ahead and etch my signature "W" in the lower left corner. It's just another way to mark her. When I'm satisfied that it looks like all the other "W"s, I turn my attention back to the landscape.

One rock is in the forefront, set off to the side, surrounded by small purple flowers. I put Red there, nude, with wild hair, hard nipples, and a sweet, red pussy. I remember driving into it, burying myself there. I remember her hands bound in mine, her body pliant and willing.

I work a while on the glimmer of her skin: purest porcelain. Her hair: almost the same red as a strawberry. I capture the mounds of her breasts, the softness of her stomach.

I'm breathless, swinging my legs wide so my cock can spring up. My balls draw up. I reach down and cup them, slide my hand inside my pants like a college kid and stroke up and down my length.

Red.

Jesus, what a fuck.

It's been a long time since I had this reaction—to anyone. I've come twice in the last two hours and here I am, needing it again because I can't get her out of my mind. I'm breathing heavily, shoulders rising up and down, as I get her legs and cunt just right. I keep my hand on myself but don't allow myself to come while I work the details out.

I'm finally relaxing, dragging my palm around my head and heading back down to the base of my shaft, when I hear a scream.

I know who it is and what's gone wrong before I'm out of my tree stand. She's caught up in the current, out beyond the rocks. I just know it.

I fly through the trees, across the clearing, around the house, and down the rocks. I throw off my shirt and kick off my shoes and don't take time for my pants, still damp and melded to my legs. I stop on one of the lower rocks and glance in the waves nearby; I immediately sweep the sea beyond.

After a few seconds holding my breath, I see her head bobbing, far out. Christ, she's so far out!

I dive into the waves and come up swimming hard. The current's strong here, even for me—and I played college water polo. It's been a long time since I fought the tide and longer since I rescued someone. But if I can't get my hands on her, she doesn't stand a chance.

*

RED

I'm dimly aware of him pulling me through the water. My head tipped back, getting splashed with waves. Big biceps. Mmm. There's an arm around my head. I have a dream that it's James Wolfe and I'm his dead wife. I dream of Katie and my mom, cheering us on.

Then I'm on the sand, and someone's mouth pressed on mine. I'm sprawled out on my side, coughing, coughing, coughing...

Stars explode behind my eyes, and everything seems washed in white. I'm feeling warmer now—so tired. I could float away... Except...my arm hurts. Both of my arms. They hurt. They hurt because someone is squeezing them.

“Look at me, Red. Fucking look at me.”

I try to obey.

It's him. It's...Race.

I cough again, and get a brief glimpse of his face. Then his hands are scooping under my back, pulling me against his chest. Big hands rub my hair and shoulders. His arm goes around me. His hand presses against the small of my back. For a dizzy minute, I wonder why he thinks he has to support me sitting up. Then I notice I'm shivering—really hard.

“There's a...current,” I grit between chattering teeth.

He looks down at me. “No shit. It's almost dark. What the hell were you doing out there?”

“I d-don’t know.” I’m so cold. I feel like I might throw up.

Before I can think more about the question, he scoops me up with his arm under my knees, carrying me against his chest like an injured lamb. I try to look around, to get a sense of where I am, what time it is, what’s going on. The last thing I remember was trying to keep my mouth above the waves and sucking in a huge mouthful of water.

I get a glimpse of the choppy, gray ocean and the rocks around us. Then he stands to his full height and turns toward the grassy outcropping just above us, the one I climbed down to get here. The one in Gertrude’s yard. The sky jolts over us, and I can feel him climbing up rocks, toward her house. I press my cheek against his chest and squeeze my eyelids shut as tears begin to flow. I feel embarrassed. Scared.

I hate remembering how quickly the current had me whipped, the way it spun me head first, like a tornado victim tossed by a cyclone. I could have died out there. I would have died had he not been there. *Alone*, a small voice whispers in my head. *You would have died alone. Because you are alone.* One single sob punches from my chest before I find the strength to clench my throat.

The arm around my shoulders pulls me closer.

Race leans down, and I guess he plucks his shirt from whatever stone he left it on, because as soon as he straightens back up, he wraps the button-up around my arms and chest. It’s cool and damp, but it still does the job; in a few more steps I’m feeling warmer. His hand rubs my arm. It’s gentle, moving in circles. Surprising...

When I get the nerve to look up at his face, I can’t glean anything from it. He’s looking up, toward Gertrude’s cottage, which we’ve almost reached. His lips are pressed into a line, but he doesn’t look irritated or angry. He just looks focused.

It only takes another minute or so for us make our way across the grassy lawn and up two stone steps leading to the front door. I’m wondering how we’re going to get inside when he steps over to a wall lamp by the door, sticks his fingers behind the bulb, and pulls out a shiny, silver key.

I press my lips shut as he slides it in the lock and pushes the door open.

As soon as he steps inside, his grip on me tightens, and I feel something change. His body seems to harden—like he’s angry. He lengthens his strides as he carries me through the hall, up some stairs I never even noticed last time I was here. His bare feet slap the hardwood floor upstairs as he shoulders through a little cedar door and stalks across a flower-crazy pink and white bedroom as if he’s going to save—or end—the world.

I guess he’s angry at me.

He steps into a bathroom with sunflower wallpaper, a pale stone floor, a podium-style sink, and an enormous, raised garden tub.

He sets me beside the tub, turns on the water, and looks me briefly in the eye before he kneels in front of me and strips my panties off. They’re torn from earlier, barely hanging on my hips. He stands

up to unfasten my bra, and the instant his hands brush my back, I know I'm lost to him again. His fingertips trail fire.

My breasts bounce free, drawing his eyes. I'm surprised when he doesn't touch them—just lets his gaze linger, then wraps his hands around my waist and sets me in the bath. The water is hot, so hot it burns a little as my skin adjusts to it.

"Sit down," he orders, and I obey without a thought. He leans over the tub's side, puts his fingers on my temples, and lowers my head back, under the faucet. His fingers are hard, not gentle. Is he frustrated? Just annoyed? I was pretty stupid, I guess, but did saving me really put him out so terribly?

With every stroke of his hands through my tangled hair, he seems tenser. I'm extra aware of my body, prone before him. Aware of his chest. How dark his skin is. How deep the ridges of muscle around his pecs and abs; his huge biceps.

He's washing my hair. Taking his time. And yet I still feel his...intensity.

"You don't need to do this," I murmur, even as he rubs his fingertips pleasantly against my scalp.

"Your assessment of my needs or yours isn't very valuable right now." He doesn't return the look I give him, but opens a bottle of shampoo and pools a pink, half-dollar-sized circle in his palm. With his left hand still supporting my head, he tells me, "Shut your eyes."

I shut my eyes and consciously decide to let my worries go. I almost died. He saved me. I'm still here, and this feels good. I'm tired of second-guessing everything.

I allow myself relish the feeling of his hands soaping my hair. I can feel him breathing. Feel his arms flex as his fingers work. Every few seconds, he touches my face: a brush of his forearm on my cheek, the base of his palm on my temple. I struggle not to shiver.

Then he tilts my head into the stream of water from the faucet. He smooths his hands back through my hair, working the soap out with firm, massaging motions. Oh, God.

Is it insane that I almost drowned, and now I'm daydreaming about having him between my legs?

His fingers continue their ministrations, massaging as he directs my head left and right, forward and back. He's still tense. Or angry or frustrated. Whichever, I feel sure it's because of me. After one final, shiver-inducing sweep through my hair, he lets me go.

I expect him to say something—maybe about how he was very busy doing important island-related things, and the time he spent saving me could have been spent nursing a wounded seagull to health.

Instead, when I open my eyes, I find him climbing over the side of the tub. He's still shirtless, wearing just wet slacks. His chest is so much wider than his hips; it looks enormous in the dim light of the bathroom. My gaze roves his abs, following his happy trail down past the waist of his slacks, to the bulge I knew I'd find. Knowing what he really looks like underneath his clothes makes me feel... hungry.

This is insane. Until this point, I told myself sex with him was just a...I don't know. A fluke. A Red-gone-crazy, beautiful-asshole-taking-advantage, ridiculous, fantastical fluke.

I don't even know him. We have nothing in common except this chemistry.

Why do we ignite each other this way?

All I know is he's crouching down over me, sinking down into the water with his slacks on, and I'm wondering why he didn't take them off.

Water laps around his chest. I think if I live to be older than Gertrude, I will never forget the way he looks right now. That stunning face, those black eyes, and that sweet-Jesus-amazing chest.

His face is tight, almost pained as he raises his hands to each side of my face. At first I think he's going to kiss me, but his mouth doesn't soften. He doesn't tilt his head closer. He sets his fingers on the sides of my forehead and drags his thumbs along my temples.

"Lean against me, Red."

His glorious fingers rub my forehead in some magic way that erases weeks and weeks of tension as my shoulders sag. I'm propped against him, giddy on the inside, so relaxed I'm losing track of time.

My mouth twitches. "If you're trying to earn my support...with the island...this is a good way to start."

I smile a little, and when I cut my eyes up so I can see a sliver of his face through my hair and his arms, I'm surprised to find he looks grave. I tense a little, but his fingers keep on soothing. It's as if he's telling me two different things. His fingers say, *It's okay—relax*, but the rest of him says, *Something wicked this way comes*.

Abruptly, he moves his hands off my head and neck and sits back on his knees. I'm so relaxed it takes me a second to lift my head. When I do, I find him looking at me pointedly. He's calm but coiled.

"I want to know," he says slowly, "what possessed you to get in the ocean." His eyebrows narrow. "Are you a swimmer?"

I bite my lip, feeling like an errant child. "I used to swim. In college"

His eyebrows pull together, as if maybe I've given the wrong answer. "And then you were a writer."

I sit up a little straighter. Pull my dripping hair over my shoulder and start to wring it out. "I still am," I tell him quietly. "Not like Gertrude—but I guess you know that. You know all about me, don't you?"

His face is still a solemn mask. "I know some."

It's a testament to how insane I've gone that a part of me likes this. He must have gone to a lot of trouble to put the money into my bank account. How on earth did he even get the number? I'm not quite sure I want to know. I shift into a different position, leaning against the side of the tub, and look back up at him. I wait a moment for him to say more, and when he doesn't, I squeeze my hair out, feeling inexplicably nervous.

"I still don't understand why you gave me the money."

He blinks. "You needed it, didn't you?"

“You know I did. That’s why you took it away. To control my decision about the island.” I thought he was an asshole before, but now I think there’s a little more to it than that. “You’re a control freak, aren’t you?”

I watch his face carefully for some validation, but he gives none. He straightens his spine, so I can see all of his pecs and the top of his smooth abs over the surface of the tub. He asks his next question slowly, his mouth moving before the words come out. “Did you think you would make it back to the island?”

“What?”

“When you were swimming.”

“That seems like a random question.”

His eyebrows arch. “Did you think you would make it back?”

I exhale slowly. “No. I didn’t.” I rub my forehead. I thought I would drown. “What does that have to do with you being a control freak?”

He leans forward slightly. “What was that feeling like?” He sounds so serious. It almost scares me.

“The feeling of almost drowning?” I think about the question honestly. “It was freeing.”

“Why?”

“Are you a psychologist?” He has that vibe: that intense, mind-fucker vibe about him. The one that makes it so I’m not ever sure what to expect from him, or how I feel toward him.

“I’m not a psychologist. But I’d like to know.”

I pull in a deep breath. The air feels steamy from the bath. I look down at the water, stained dark by his slacks-clad lower body. Then I look into his eyes. “I don’t know why it was freeing. I guess because I thought my worries would be over. I could just stop trying.”

How pathetic. I must be a weaker person than I thought if all it takes to do me in is losing my boyfriend and my job. I wrap my arm around my breasts, feeling exposed.

Race moves slightly closer. The water ripples around him. He looks right into my eyes and asks, “You’re tired, aren’t you, Red?”

I’m surprised to feel my eyes sting with tears. I guess I really am exhausted. I should never have gone swimming in the open ocean like that. “I’m really tired,” I murmur. And stupid.

And ashamed.

I start to get up, to get out of the tub. I want to go to sleep right now. Just find a bed and collapse.

I’m rising up on my knees when Race’s hand closes around my wrist. “Stay there, Red. I’ll get a towel.”

I nod. I think I need to get away from him. Tomorrow morning, I’m leaving. He can have this island. I’ll take his ten thousand dollars down to Florida, where I can be alone.

Pain twists in my chest, and I realize for the first time that it’s what I feel that I deserve. This

aloneless that I've had for so long. First Dad, then Mom, and now my fabled grandmother. Everyone snatched away. Maybe that's why I'm so intoxicated by this man. Because I've finally realized I have no one else.

I watch his body as he gets out of the tub. His slacks show me every delicious line of his body: his grabable ass and his very nice package. He trails water to a cabinet. It drips off his hands and down his slacks as he gets a soft, pink towel. He holds it open as he steps back, but I sit there for a minute, feeling ridiculously raw.

"Don't be shy. Your body is beautiful." I stand, and he folds the towel around me. He turns me so my back's to his chest and rubs his hands all over me, warming me. His voice, when he speaks, is a rumble in my ear. "I have a proposition for you, Red."

He turns me to face him.

His eyes glitter with the reflection of the water.

I can see his hardness through his pants.

"Stay here with me. Rest. You'll want for nothing, and you won't have to make any decisions." He sinks slowly to his knees, pushes the towel aside, and finds my pussy with his tongue—giving me a long kiss before he pulls away. I can feel his breath against my thigh as he looks up at me. "You'll be satisfied in every way you can imagine."

He wraps both arms around my butt and ducks under my towel. He pushes his tongue between my lips, licking as my legs quiver. I'm panting in seconds, sliding to my butt on the floor with my legs spread and Race between my knees. He glides a finger inside me—moves it in a slow, slick glide; he kisses my nipple, pulls away, looks down at me.

"I want you to agree, Red. This could be incredibly fulfilling—for us both."

I pull back, despite the way my body calls for his. I feel like I barely have control of myself, and I'm not sure how much I like that.

"I would be your sex slave." The words sound so strange.

"No, Red. I would take care of you. Take care of all your needs. And you'd take care of mine."

Chapter Five

RED

I stare at him dazedly. Run his words back through my mind.

“I would help you forget about your life. Your many debts. Your painful voids. I would make you whole while you were here with me.” He leans closer, crowding me. All I can see is him. All I can feel is his body in between my legs.

“Do you know what a submissive is, Red?”

I nod. “But I don’t know that I’m one of those.”

He pulls his pants off and peels his boxer-briefs down. His cock juts up. It’s beautiful. So thick and long. “You want to touch this, don’t you?”

I swallow. Am I so obvious?

“I know because I can read you. I can spot a sub, Red. A beautiful sub is more precious than gold to someone like me. I could give you everything. Things you might not even know you want. I can give you what you need. Right now, I think you need to feel me in your hand. So come here—touch me.”

He sinks down to the rug and widens his knees just slightly, so I have an unobstructed view of his magnificent cock and balls. His eyes follow me as I crab-crawl toward him. When I’m close enough to sink down in between his legs, I can’t resist. He’s right. I want to touch him. Badly. I want to make him feel the way he made me feel.

I reach slowly down toward him. I close my fingers around his velvet shaft and rub my palm over his head. He leans back on his arms, his eyes sharp, drinking me in, his cock growing longer, thicker, harder under my fingers. I can feel his eyes on me even as I look down so I can grip him more tightly, glide my hand up and down.

I surprise myself by leaning over and sucking the head of him into my mouth. I’m hoping to surprise him, too, but his hips don’t jerk. His legs don’t move. He doesn’t even seem to breathe despite how very hard he is. I suck him in a little deeper, ease him out, and look up at him. He’s got his head leaned back, baring his smooth, tanned throat. I want to bite it—so I do. I climb up his prone body to bite him near his collar bone. My other hand keeps a tight grip on his shaft.

I lean back down and trace my tongue around him, moving slowly from base to head. Now his legs tighten, and I love it. His cock hardens; it stiffens so much I’m not sure I can fit it down my throat.

“Take me, Red. I want you to take me in your mouth.”

I nod. I open wide and lower my mouth over his head, making it my goal to take in as much of him as I can handle. I don’t make it within three inches of his base, but when I have most of him, I gently cup his balls and stroke my other hand at the bottom of his shaft.

He groans, reaching out to tangle his fingers in my damp hair.

He puts his other hand on my shoulder and rocks further into my mouth.

“Take all of me,” he says as I pull him deeper.

I suck my cheeks, and am rewarded when he groans. I swirl my tongue around his head and lick down his shaft, then take him all back into my mouth again. I stroke his balls, and he grits, “Fuck. Keep doing that.”

My hand tickles under his balls. He lays—more like falls—down on his back and props his arms behind his head. His chest looks huge. His hands form fists.

His eyes slit open. He looks slightly dazed. Relaxed, but still sharp. Focused on me.

“You want to see me lose control, Red?”

I nod.

“Slide a finger inside.”

“Inside...?” I look down at his taut balls, imagining what’s behind them as my eyes widen. A guy like Race—I’m surprised that he would go for that.

“Don’t be shy, Red. I can take it.”

I’m shaking a little as I push his heavy sac out of my hand’s path, but I do it. As I tickle the area between his dick and ass, he exhales slowly.

I find my mark. He grunts as I push my index finger into him and groans as I slide deeper. His cock stiffens and swells until he’s panting. I can’t deny I’m getting wet, too. “Slide it in and out, Red.” He sounds hoarse, unraveled.

I slide my finger in and out and am stunned to see wetness pearling on the head of him.

He groans, a rough, dry sound, and I bend down to lick the moisture off. His hands lock on my shoulders. “Red.” I slide my finger slightly out, then work it in. He sucks a breath in. “Jesus, Red.”

“Am I...doing it right?”

He nods, his eyes on me slightly unfocused. “Suck me again.”

I search his face for evidence that he’s being honest—that I’m really doing okay. I slide my hand underneath his tightening, and for the first time in my life, I can’t wait to suck cock.

I want to hear him moan.

I open as wide as I can and glide down almost to his base. If I concentrate, I can coordinate my movements: sucking my cheeks in to stimulate his head, tightening my lips around his shaft, gliding my tongue here and there. Rolling the top of my hand under his heavy sac and moving in and out of him with my finger.

His hands come down on my head. He pulls my hair. “Red. Fuck.”

I can tell he’s almost there because his ass lifts off the ground and he thrusts into my mouth. A few seconds later, he jerks forcefully away from me. My first thought is he was about to come, but in a heartbeat, he’s got me on my back. He’s spreading my thighs and parting my slick lips and pushing into

me.

I gasp as he fills me so deliciously.

“Fuck Red. Fuck.”

He lays his chest over mine, and his weight pins me to the floor. He pumps frenziedly, holding roughly to my hips, paying no heed to my reactions as he uses my body. I shut my eyes as little wails escape my lips because it feels so good.

He thrusts so hard I slide across the floor.

“Wrap your legs around me, Red.”

I obey. He thrusts once more, his eyes squeezed shut. Then they pop open. “Come for me, Red. *Come.*”

And I do. I come and come and come.

And when I’m done, it’s back into the bath. He gets in with me, settling me atop his lap. He faces me away from him and presses his mouth against my throat.

“Did you like what we just did?” he rumbles.

“I like it all.”

“How did you like doing what you did to me?”

I turn my head so I can look into his eyes. Why is he asking me these things? What does he want me to say? “I liked pleasuring you,” I confess—an almost whisper.

“You know what I liked the most?”

I shake my head.

“Even with your finger in my asshole—even when you have me totally prone—you look to me for instructions.”

Did I really? God, I guess I kind of did.

“And when I changed the course of things, when I fucked you, you liked it. Didn’t you? You liked giving up control.”

I bite my lip. I can’t believe I did. I’m usually on top of things. Organized, successful. Isn’t that who I’ve always been? But he’s right. He’s totally right. When I’m with him, all of that just seems to fade away. Along with my anxieties.

“Don’t look so troubled. I like control. I’m good at it.” He kisses my neck, tickling me with his short beard. Still, he’s surprisingly gentle. He wraps one arm around me and pulls me against his chest. He cups my breast and tweaks the nipple with his thumb and forefinger. Toying with me. Making me feel breathless again.

“Tell me that you’ll stay. Let me fuck you like this every day. One week. That’s all we need.”

My heart speeds up, just thinking of it.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Come to my place,” he says. “You can sleep on it.”

He traces a finger down my back, and I can almost relax under his touch and just go with it. I can't make decisions like that, though. I have to use my brain. I turn around, my ass bumping into his dick. I don't miss the look of pleasure that flits across his face.

"Why are we going to your place?"

"You're allergic to cats."

"How do you know?"

"Your eyes are red and puffy."

I draw my hand out of the water, press my finger gently around them. "You're observant."

"One of my strengths."

"What are your weaknesses?" I ask, marveling again at how attractive he is.

His lips curl up and he says, "I'm afraid that you are, Red."

*

WOLFE

I don't push her. If she stays, I don't want her to feel pushed. It's not an offer I planned on making, but that was before I pulled her out of the ocean. Saw her smooth body, marred by goosebumps. Carried her here and washed her hair. I want her. I can't deny it. I'm tired of being alone. I know she wouldn't stay forever, but for a while, I'd like to see where I can take her. A woman this well-suited for me is hard to find, especially when you live on an island.

She walks in front of me on the path to my cabin. It's intentional. I want to see her move. She may leave tomorrow and I want to be sure I see as much of her as I can.

As I walk, I think how fucking weird it is, having her here. I'm anxious as we approach my house. As if she can see me in the angles, in the wood. As if she is privy to all the thoughts running through my head when I made it. That's how my critics are. They think they know me—but they don't. They would never guess my true identity.

We reach the cabin—a two-story, cedar structure topped with wood shingles and surrounded by a rose garden—she throws her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God, it's beautiful."

I want to turn her away. I want to put her in the boat and send her off. I swallow and say, "thank you."

"You built it yourself."

"I did."

"And the roses?"

"Mine," I say.

"Holy shit, you've got a major green thumb."

I wiggle my brows, because it's weird, getting compliments on a place I built so I'd never have to

share it with anyone, never have to hear this kind of feedback.

I lead her around to the front of the house, up two stairs, and to the door, sandwiched between two rocking chairs I also made.

I can feel the heat of her body behind me as I turn the key. I step inside, and she's right on me. She can see the glass roof in my room. The stack of *Paris Reviews* beside my couch. The sleek granite counter in my tiny kitchen: one of the only perks of "home" I imported. I hope I've put up all the paint and canvas, but there're probably smudges here and there. I don't mind it—like the smell—so I don't notice.

She steps in and glances around. My eyes follow hers: the smooth stone I use for a coffee table in the little living area; the Bose sound system where I play music on a first-gen iPod. I see her take in the little kitchen area, done in smooth gray stone; the leather mat in front of the sink.

She looks through the open doorway, in the direction of my bedroom and bathroom, then tilts her head back, her long hair curling down around her waist. "Did you paint recently?"

I work the muscles of my throat. "Yes."

"What part?"

I can't say "walls." The walls are wood.

"Varnish on the walls of the bathroom," I lie. She's an out-of-work art critic, but still, she may not know.

I lead her through the doorway, into my room: a wood-walled, glass-roofed haven that, like the den and kitchen, is tall enough to be two stories, even though it's not. I watch her gaze roll up the wall. Can see it in her mouth how she appreciates the glass ceiling.

"I bet that's beautiful at night."

It is. I grit my teeth, wondering why the fuck her comments on my house feel so damn personal. I've always liked my privacy, but I guess years living here have made me worse. I nod at the bed. It's a queen and folds out from the wall, right next to a little wood-burning stove I use in December and January. It's covered with a thick suede duvet, which stretches atop silk sheets. I guess they're another import, and just now I'm glad of it. Red's beautiful body deserves nothing less.

"That's yours. As long as you're here, you'll sleep in my bed."

I watch her face carefully, searching for a clue about her decision, but she's not giving away anything.

I walk further into the bedroom, past my desk and the sheet that divides my closet from the bedroom. "Here's the bathroom." I open the door beside my closet, revealing a claw-footed tub, a toilet, and a sink. "Pretty basic."

She nods.

For a long moment, she just looks at me, and I look back at her. It's me who tugs my gaze away, because I'm feeling...I don't know. Fucking shy or something.

“Have a seat,” I say. “The bed won’t bite.”

She smirks, but doesn’t speak, just sits. She crosses her legs and leans back on her arms and watches quietly as I push the half-wall dividing the den-kitchen from the bedroom-bathroom area into the wall, opening the whole space the way I prefer. I make her buttered bread and black tea with honey while she watches like a little hawk.

I walk it over to her, surprised by how good it feels to place the tray in front of her. “I like it hot. Feel free to let it cool and add stevia.”

Her smile lights up her face. “Oooh, a health nut, are you?”

I shrug.

Despite how...drawn to her I feel, maybe I shouldn’t have asked her to stay. I’m uneasy with her here. Uneasy with her...lightness. She’s got some darkness in there somewhere, but it’s not who she is. Most of her is light as air. She’s a good person. Very innocent.

I let go of the tray and take a step back. “You want more, I’ll get you something else.”

She nods, then tucks her hair behind her ear. “Thank you for this. And everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

I get a blanket and a pillow from my closet and put them on the couch, turn to find her peeling back the covers on my bed. I have to admit, she looks good there. Really fucking good.

“I’m going to get a shower. Make yourself at home.”

“If you insist.” She smiles. “Do you know where I can find some cell service?” She holds out a phone, and I press my lips together. “You can try outside. Due west of the house, by that little grove of pine saplings.” I turn away, then turn back toward her. “Be careful,” I warn. “I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I will.”

I walk into the bathroom, run the water, and call my cousin, who doubles as my manager. He answers on the first ring, which is a bad sign.

“Hey man. Thanks for calling back.”

“Yep. What’s up?”

“Well,” his tenor voice says, “It’s not good. Our man says her family is still gunning for you. Maybe more than they were. They’ve got a contact within the Justice Department now. They’re trying to get a government track on you. Seeing if they can dig up some credit cards. Deeds. That kind of thing. Find out where you are.”

Fuck. “Can you block that? Can ‘our guy?’”

“We’re working on it... Are you doing anything new since Ms. O’Malley passed? Still planning to try to stay on the island?”

“Of course.”

“You seen anybody lately? Workmen? Service people? Anybody who might recognize your face?”

I think of Red. Then I shake my head. She doesn't recognize me. It's the only thing that's made my dalliance with her possible.

"Why?"

"Just saying...don't. With all that's going on, you might want to lay low for a while." He laughs. "Lower."

"Might." I exhale slowly. "How's my business?" I usually don't ask questions, but something about having Red here makes me want to be sure my shit's on lockdown.

"Some little paper in Boston says you're from the northeast coast. Something about the color schemes resembling winter. And yet another critic thinks you're hiding things."

I snort. I guess they're not all idiots.

We shoot the shit a few more minutes. After hanging up, I walk out of the bathroom without realizing I never even wet my hair. I've lost my edge for lying. Living mostly alone, among a bunch of animals, has a way of making a person trust more.

The last thought I have before walking out my front door in search of Red is that maybe that's a good thing. Maybe I could loosen up a little. Stop being so goddamned edgy. Bitter.

With Red here, almost anything seems possible.

Chapter Six

RED

At some point since I've been here, I missed twenty-seven calls from Katie. That makes me nervous—downright scared—so as soon as Race gets in the shower, I hurry to the clearing in front of his cabin and start searching for the pine saplings he mentioned. Unfortunately, my cheapo phone doesn't seem to get service anywhere. I must have had service at some point while I was here, so I start to wander back down the path toward Gertrude's house.

I heard somewhere that trees and buildings can block a cell phone tower's signal. I need to find another clearing like the one at Race's house. I look up at the treetops. I can see stars through the leaves, but no clearings. The nearest one I know of is the one behind Gertrude's cottage. It's not particularly close, but I don't care. I hate to leave without telling Race where I'm going, but I'm worried about Katie. I lope into a run, my sneakers kicking up pebbles.

A few minutes later, I arrive breathless by the willows. It's a windy night, especially windy on the point. The trees and flowers dance in the damp breeze. I can hear the ocean crash against the rocks below. I turn a slow circle, holding my phone up, my eyes honed on the tiny bars in one corner of the screen.

None.

Panic claws at me.

I wonder if Gertrude has a land-line. I bet she does. But I don't have a key. I don't think Race put one back under the polka-dotted pot. If he did, I didn't see him do it. I turn toward the pebble path. I'll have to go back and find Race. My gaze flits to the moon in a desperate attempt to discern, from its position, how late it is. What could Katie be doing? Is she hurt?

That's when I see the tree house. I squint, but yep, it's definitely that.

My first thought is *whose is it?* Did Gertrude have another family? Other grandchildren? My second thought: *Katie*.

I rush over to the huge oak tree and easily spot the winding stairs that wrap around it. I climb as quickly as I can. My phone lights up before I even reach the top; two bars. Now three!

I rush into the little square space, barely looking at the tin roof or the toys scattered about. I sink down on a bench and scroll to Recent Calls. I shift around. Something is hurting my butt. I shimmy into a different position, but it's still there. I must be sitting on a stick.

I stand up, only halfway, and pull out a...paint brush?

Yep, this thing is definitely a paint-brush. It's stained red. And...*what?* The paint is wet. That's really weird. I look around the little tree house and can't believe I didn't notice it sooner: In the corner, closest to Gertrude's house, is an easel with a canvas on it. I stand up, wondering immediately if Race is a painter. No one else lives here as far as I know.

I hold my phone up to the canvas and wait a second for my eyes to adjust. Is that... Oh, boy. Damn. That's me. That's very sexy, and that's me.

I scrutinize the details, from the brilliant mane of hair around my face to the pale globes of my breasts to the shock of red hair between them.

Good job, Race.

Geez.

He's good, though. Really, really good. His style resembles someone famous. I cluck my tongue. Who is it?

My eyes know the answer before my brain does. My gaze jerks to the corner, where I see it: "W."

I blink and look again, but it's still there. That small, distinctive "W." I'd know it anywhere.

My eyes fly from the canvas to my phone. Could it be true? That Race is "W."? Suddenly it all makes sense. His need to continue living on the island. His skill with that beautiful cabin he built. The smell of paint inside.

He's good with his hands...

He's confident, despite being a recluse.

He's also rich as hell.

I look to the little initial again, half expecting it to be gone.

It's not.

Holy crap. My Race is "W."

The “W.”

I grin.

“W” is sexy.

Oh my God, I’ve got to tell Katie.

I hold my phone up, trying to decide if it would be a violation of Race’s privacy and immediately deciding it would.

But still... I know who “W.” is.

I had a tryst with “W.”!

What a beautiful cock he has.

I spin a little circle, feeling buoyant. I’ve loved W.’s work for years. I feel like I know him.

I do know him. Intimately.

I sink down on the bench. I need to chill out. Quit fangirling. Check on Katie. I’ll sleep on it, maybe even ask Race about it. I don’t want to upset him. Not when he’s tried so hard to keep his identity secret.

I bite my lip and look down at my phone. Looks like Katie left some messages.

I’ve got the phone to my ear, my finger on the “play” button, when I hear footsteps on the stairs.

#

Want more Red & Wolfe? Mark your calendars! Part Three comes out Monday, June 16. It may, at some point between now and then, be available for pre-order, so check my Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ellajamesbooks) and do a few spot checks on Amazon to see if you see it—if you like the convenience of a pre-order.

To everyone who pre-ordered Part Two, thank you! I hope you enjoyed it. Got feedback for me? Shoot me an e-mail at ella@ellajamesbooks.com, or tweet me at author_ellaj.

If you get a chance, please consider leaving me a review. They help so much!

Xs and <3s,
Ella