



RED AND WOLFE: PART ONE

RED & WOLFE

An Erotic Fairytale

ELLA JAMES

Red & Wolfe Part I was originally published as one of eight stories in The Erotica Consortium's BEND Anthology. BEND was removed from the Kindle store after three days of stellar sales due to alleged content violations. Other fabulous authors with stories in the BEND Anthology are listed below. I recommend you check them out.

**K. Bromberg
J.A. Huss
K.I. Lynn
C.d. Reiss
Shay Savage
Andrea Smith
Alessandra Torre**

Red & Wolfe

Part One

an erotic fairy tale

By Ella James

Chapter One

RED

~~Dear Grandma,~~

~~I've never written you before, so this is weird.~~

*

~~Dear Gertrude,~~

~~I know you don't know me, but I know you. Aaaaand I sound like a stalker.~~

*

~~Dear Gertrude,~~

~~Hi, it's me. Your granddaughter. The one you've never met. I know it's been a long time. My whole life, in fact, but~~

*

~~Dear Gertrude,~~

~~My name is Red. I am your granddaughter. I'd like to meet you. I know you and my mom were estranged. She told me you didn't want to see us when I was younger, but it would be nice if you would give me a chance. I'm a writer, like you. Okay, not like you per se. That would be something of a stretch. I haven't won a Pulitzer, and I'm not a poet, but I worked for the *Boston Journal* until recently, when I was laid off. I was a courts reporter, then an art critic.~~

~~I don't have any family except you. I need money. Or a friend. Or both. But I'll get nothing, because I'm too proud to send this e-mail.~~

~~My rent is late. Like...really late. I'm eating ice cream by the gallon and over-using Mr. Happy, my huge, purple, LELO rabbit vibrator. That's because my boyfriend left me...for a dude. Yeah, I know. It's fucking weird. It sucks.~~

~~I wonder why the hell you and my mom were estranged. She didn't like to talk about it. I can't believe you didn't come to her funeral. Or did you? I'm not even sure what you look like. I think your Wiki picture is about sixty years outdated. Maybe you could visit me in Boston and take a new one.~~

~~Wonder if I'll ever really write you. I doubt it. I bet I get my pride from you, you old coot.~~

~~~Red~~

I slam my Macbook shut and race for the bathroom. The bathroom I've been using as seldom as possible, because I'm running out of toilet paper.

I leap over a pile dirty clothes beside my tan recliner, dash past a three-foot tall stack of paperbacks in the hallway, and narrowly avoid tripping on a pair of ice skates before I punch through the bathroom door.

Pink. This small room looks like the inside of a Bubble Yum bubble. I drop down on the pale pink toilet, let out a sigh, and blink at my reflection. Me: naked in front of an oyster-shell sink, surrounded by pink tile. I look thinner. More like I did in college. And it's not just the leanness. A few weeks ago, shortly after I lost my job, I hacked myself some brand new bangs. I'm wearing them longish, almost in my eyes, the way I did my senior year at Northwestern. The rest of my bright red hair is long like college, too. Past my shoulders, hanging just over the swell of my breasts.

They look pert right now, and full. I'm an apple, with more weight on my tummy than my legs, and my breasts are a generous "C" cup. I've been irrationally proud of this since I hit puberty the summer after eighth grade.

But there's no point admiring my new, thinner figure or my bust. These boobs haven't done a damn thing for me lately. Suddenly I can't even stand to look at my naked body. I tear four squares of toilet paper off the roll and wipe quickly. I flush and look into the basket beside the toilet: six more rolls. That's not so bad. With any luck, I can make that last three weeks. Maybe more like two. If I run out, I'll sneak back into the *Journal* and steal more.

I tuck my hair behind my ears, frown at my freckled, blue-eyed reflection, and pick my way back into the little living area.

Boston is expensive, so when I leased this place two years ago, a studio was all I could afford. And even then, rent was \$2,200 per month. My landlord, a ball-cap-sporting, glasses-wearing hipster named Dursey, raised it to \$2,250 this past fall. At the time, I barely thought about it. Carl had moved in a few months prior, so I was only paying half.

Now I look around the hardwood den and kitchen area and wonder how long until someone else's dust is piling in the corners.

I sink into the nest of pillows and blankets on the couch, where I've been sleeping since I sold my canopy bed, and ask myself if it was worth it, being 'house poor.' I never minded not having a lot in savings, because I never figured I would need it. Before January 30, I spent most of my money on clothes, food, and utilities. Just the basics. I'm not a very materialistic person, which is good, because I guess I'm not very good with money, either.

I glance at the coffee table, where my laptop sits, adorned with stickers I put there in college. I keep telling myself I might have to sell it, too, but honestly, I'm not sure I can. I kind of think

I'd check myself into a homeless shelter with it hidden inside a blanket if I had to. I know I'm not a great writer—I'm definitely not famous like my grandmother, Gertrude O'Malley—but I love writing.

Whatever, though.

Enough moping.

I spent the morning job-hunting, the afternoon reading the latest Richard Powers novel, and the early evening typing up a meal plan, just to be sure I make the food in my pantry last as long as possible. I've got one bottle of Sauvignon Blanc left, and I'm thinking about downing it. Goes well with everything, even tonight's dinner: a little bowl of insta-mac and cheese.

I hop up, slip into the red silk robe hanging on the couch's arm, and walk into the kitchen to microwave the mac and cheese, when my iPhone rings.

I turn a circle, skimming my gaze over the granite countertops and mahogany cabinets, then dash back into the den, where it looks like the women's section of a large department store has vomited everywhere.

"Damnit..."

I can't find anything in this—

There!

I pluck the phone from between a cereal bowl and a copy of *The New Yorker* on my coffee table and see that "Katie Underpants Danger" is calling. My BFF's name is actually Katie Stranger, but everyone from the *Journal* calls her Katie Danger, which makes sense because she's a police reporter. Unlike my amoral self, Katie believes in never going without your underpants, so that's how she got her middle name.

I press the green button. "Cat-yyyyyy!"

"Red!" Katie has a prim, little old lady kind of voice. She sounds like your grandmother crying out your name from the first row of fold-out chairs at the seventh-grade spelling bee. This makes it super funny when she curses.

"Whatcha doing?" I ask, plodding back into the kitchen.

"I'm at the KSC." The Kendall Square Cinema, a little mom and pop place in Cambridge. "Ronnie and Betsy and I. And you, if you can come."

Shit.

Katie keeps inviting me out, and I keep having to tell her 'no,' because I can't afford it. I bite my lower lip. I'm going to have to tell her something like the truth, or she's going to think I'm dodging her.

I sigh. "I would love to come with you guys, but I'm running a little low on funds." I twirl a lock of hair around my finger, figuring there's no need to elaborate. I've been nine weeks without income. I'm footing the entire bill for an apartment I used to share. I'm also having to use a

bunch of my unemployment money paying for an emergency room visit after spraining my ankle ice skating at the Frog Pond New Years' day.

"Oh, okay. Well I see. I'm sorry."

I shrug, adding water to my mac and cheese. "I didn't mention it. And no problem. Is tomorrow Saturday? Yep, tomorrow's Saturday. Come by on Sunday. We'll go...I dunno. We'll go walking or something. Something super cool. And tell Ronnie and B I'll see them next week at Hugh's."

A few minutes later, I'm sliding the phone into the pocket of my robe and pouring cheese powder into my steaming noodles. I stop to pop the cork on my last bottle of wine before I even stir the powder in. It's Villa Maria Sauvignon Blanc: my favorite, which I used to buy maybe too regularly. I take a long swig from the bottle and pinch my lips together.

My robe vibrates. The phone. Katie again.

"Red, OMG, I forgot to tell you! True Crime channel, twenty minutes! Can you DVR for me? They're doing a special on James Wolfe, and Rob told me they're using some footage from the *Times*!"

"Sure." I nod. "No prob."

"Thanks, Red. And hey...we miss you."

"Ditto. TTYL."

I hang up before I can get all dumb and emotional. I see Katie at least twice a week, and the rest of the gang at our Wednesday night bingo game at Hugh's. I have nothing to cry about.

Except that I don't see them every day.

And this week, I realized I can't even afford to go to the MFA to see a traveling collection of "W" paintings. A few months ago, I'd have gotten a private tour. Shit, I might have even gotten to meet the reclusive "W." Okay—maybe not, but still.

I take a long chug from the bottle. Then another. I stir the powder into my noodles and swallow a few bites, followed by another gulp. It tastes so fucking good. God, I've missed drinking.

I miss getting drunk.

I take my bowl and bottle into the den and find the True Crime channel. I'm greeted by a close-up of an attractive guy with shaggy-looking dark brown hair; cold, dark brown eyes; and a mean jawline. Total serial killer material. Only I'm pretty sure this guy only killed his wife. Maybe her lover, too. I don't remember. I was working here at the *Journal* when Katie worked this case as an intern with *The New York Times*. I didn't know her until the next year, when she came on as the new cops reporter at the *Journal*.

I was hired first, and still, I'm the one who got canned.

"Who cares, Red?" I tip back the bottle to shut my bitter self up.

I sink back into the couch and listen to the sad story of one James Wolfe, a privileged upstate New Yorker who married a celebutant and longtime family friend. Her name was Cookie. Seriously—*Cookie*. I drink my way through the story of their debauched marriage: ménages, swinging, maybe a little bit of BDSM. Naturally, our murdering homeboy was the dom. I listen to college friends of both James and Cookie; officers who worked the crime scene; and the senior crime reporter for the *Times*. I think that guy was Katie's superior.

I soak up details of the trial, reacquainting myself with familiar courtroom terms. When I hear the word "redirect," I start to cry. It's not logical. It's silly. But suddenly I miss my old court beat. I pull my computer into my lap, and just to torture myself, I go to the MFA's web site, where I scroll through "W."s breathtaking nature paintings. I cry a little more at 'Self Portrait of an Owl.' That one has really nice colors.

I slap a mental headline on my distress: 'Canned reporter chokes to death on \$20 wine'

A few minutes later, when I hear how James Wolfe walked free, I actually do choke. From there, I slip back into my crying jag. Why do some people have things easy while others don't? Some people get murdered. Some people get fired. Some people starve to death. Kids get cancer. I hate life.

In this frame of mind, I open my computer.

Gertrude:

You have a granddaughter. Remember? I've never met you, and you're getting really fucking old. This is me, inviting myself for drinks. I'll bring the scotch. You send the treasure map to your swanky ass island.

~Sarah Ryder (known to people in the know as "Red," on account of my fabulous red hair).

When I wake up with a terrible hangover, I'm not sure if I really sent the e-mail to the address posted on The O'Malley Foundation's web site. But I know for sure I didn't DVR the special on James Wolfe.

\*

Checking my sent box and realizing I did, in fact, e-mail Gertrude brings a strange relief. I know I've cashed in my only chip. I can finally surrender myself to fate.

Sunday morning, I list my iPad, my flatscreen, my coffee table, and my antique chifferobe for sale on Craig's List and I call my landlord, letting him know I still don't have March's rent money. He offers to let me make a half payment. I tell him I'll move out in two weeks, and I'll give him as much as I can when I hand in the key; the rest when I find a new job. I'm not sure



where I'll go, but it doesn't really matter. I can't stay here.

In the two hours before I meet up with Katie, I list the rest of my furniture, my rugs, my Mikasa dinnerware, two antique mirrors, and my collection of shoes and handbags on Craig's List.

Minutes later, my phone vibrates with the first of what becomes many e-mail notifications. People want my shit.

While I stand in front of the mirror to get dressed, I realize it's the first time in a while that I haven't felt like I'm staring at a loser.

Maybe I'll end up sleeping on friends' couches, but at least I'll know I did everything I could.

I dress in jeans, a thermal shirt, my puffy, navy blue jacket, and my favorite pair of pink and black Nike sneakers, and lock the front door with a growing sense of nostalgia. As I walk the snow-caked sidewalk, headed toward the shops at Beacon Hill, I check my phone. I've got \$63.29 in my checking account and \$344.02 in savings. I move all but \$5.00 from savings into checking and slide my phone back into my pocket.

It's a gray day, not unusual for March in Boston. The kind of day I never minded when I was working, because writing about art is dramatic and fun, and riding the rail to a museum or a gallery or a show or an auction was part of my daily commute.

Before I reach the cozy little business district surrounding Beacon Hill, I try to brace myself for Katie's work talk. Katie loves being a reporter. She tweets about the stories she covers almost 'round the clock. She'd rather check out a crime scene than eat or sleep or fuck her boyfriend, Gage.

Thinking of Gage makes me think of Carl, and I do *not* need to think of Carl. Carl, who waited until the dim afterglow of some fantastically mediocre Christmas Eve sex to tell me he was leaving me for Sam. Blonde, blue-eyed, freckle-faced Sam from Denver. A ripped bartender with a forearm tattoo of a red-haired mermaid. Sam who wears a black apron and an emerald earring. Sam who has a cock.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my coat as I pass the narrow streets of Beacon Hill, a cute historical district just two blocks from my apartment. Down one of the streets is the *Journal* office. Down another, Hugh's Bar, where we play drunk bingo. I'm headed for another Boston staple: the frozen Frog Pond at Boston Commons. I realize belatedly that I've forgotten my ice skates and wonder if I could sell them, too. I doubt it. I let my breath out in a steamy cloud. How pathetic is it that I just want to go back to my apartment and box up clothes for Goodwill? That I feel as if my time would be better spent begging for jobs at the shops here than with my best friend?

I follow the sidewalk past bookstores and coffee shops and sandwich shops and offices,

moving quickly over the icy ground. A few more blocks and I'm in the snow-caked green space of the Commons. I pass couples holding hands, a woman smoking a pipe, a man in a trench coat, a mom with two young, coughing kids. And then there's the pond: decked out with lights strung through the trees around it, dotted by skaters: people laughing, twirling, playing. I spot Katie's short, curvy figure from fifty yards away and immediately feel warmed.

We share a quick hug behind the ice skate rental booth, then exchange five dollar bills for skates and sit on a covered bench to pull them on.

"How are you ya?" Katie asks as she tugs a boot off. Her eyebrows rise halfway up her forehead, near her blonde hairline.

"Still kicking."

"We're worried." By 'we,' she means the *Journal* crew. That's how enmeshed we all are. Were. Everything is 'we.' Damn, I miss that. I get my first skate over my thick wool sock and shake my head.

"Don't worry. I'll land on my feet." And, because I know Katie and I know she's a worrier, I dredge up my cheeriest voice and add: "I've applied for lots of good jobs in the last few days. A copy editor position at the *New York Sentinel* and a court reporting job at the *Long Island Courier*. Eight more jobs in the Boston metro area, including some nanny jobs. Those pay really well."

Katie nods, wearing what she thinks is a poker-face, but what is actually a worried mom face.

"If all else fails," I tell her, "I'll wait tables at Hugh's."

She blows a stray piece of hair off her forehead. "If all else fails, we'll murder Crissy—" the newbiest of the newbie reporters who survived the layoff.

"That doesn't sound like such a bad idea. She still texting her boyfriend all day?"

"Oh, you know it."

Katie stands up on her skates and holds out a hand for me. We latch arms and hobble past a few half-frozen trees, to a little locker room where we pay fifty cents to stash our shoes. Then we push out onto the frozen pond. It's cold tonight, so as I glide, the white cloud of my breath floats around my face. Katie is half a pace ahead of me, holding out her arms. She tips her head back, facing the sky, and I feel a pang of envy at how free she seems. Then I feel like an asshole for feeling envious.

A second later, she turns to face me and smirks. "Want to race?" She nods at the other side of the pond, and I glide out ahead of her.

"Ready, set, go!" I grin, looking at her over my shoulder, and she lunges toward me. She shoves me back and cries, "Go!"

"Bitch!"

Katie's ahead of me, but she's got short legs. I gain quickly. As soon as I find my stride,

feeling almost happy for the first time in weeks, a little kid trips right in front of me and I almost slice his hand off with my skate. By the time we reach the other side of the pond, Katie has grabbed an older man's arm in a desperate attempt not to wipe out, and I've bumped into a pregnant woman. What can I say? I was blinded by my bangs.

Katie beats me by a foot or two, and we shove each other a few times, both barely keeping our balance. We're laughing and panting as we move toward the edge of the pond, looping a boisterous group of college guys.

When we reach a quieter patch of ice, I turn to her. "I forgot to record your thing."

"Was I on it?"

I drop my head into my hand. "I'm a shitty friend. I fell asleep, so I don't even know."

"You dirty whore."

"I know, I know. I suck big, hairy balls."

"It's okay," she says. "I know you have a lot on your mind."

"No it's not." We skate side-by-side, and somewhere nearby, there is music; and all around us, people slide by wearing clothes they got from their dressers and closets, talking to people they care about, smiling because they are happy; and suddenly I know—I just fucking *know*—that things are about to change for me. Big time. I'm not sure how, and I'm too afraid to want to know, but I can feel it. I can sense my path diverging from Katie's, even as we skate here, side by side.

My throat feels thick and tight. I think I'm going to cry. Not because I'm scared or sad for myself, but because I really will miss her and the gang from work. We will never be friends the way we were.

I need a distraction. "Do you think he did it?"

"Wuh?"

"James Wolfe."

"Aaaah." She shakes her head, blonde pigtails bouncing. "I never did." We bump elbows as we move around the perimeter of the pond. "Mainly because of the whole voice thing. You might not have watched it closely enough to see all the evidence, or *not* evidence, but there were some pretty serious holes in the case. Most notably this bit about a butler who supposedly heard a man's voice that didn't sound how James Wolfe's voice actually sounds. But as far as whether he actually did it, or ordered it done..." She shakes her head. "I guess I'm just going on a gut feeling."

That's all anyone can go on. James Wolfe hasn't been seen in six years. "Where do you think he went?"

Katie shrugs. "Could have been anywhere. I'd get the heck out of the country if I were him."

I think once more about the clean-shaven, hard-jawed man with dark brown eyes, and then I

push him from my mind. I want to enjoy this night with Katie. So I do. We talk about work, gliding and twirling through the crowd. The head copy editor, Jane, just got engaged to her longtime girlfriend, and last night, Katie got called out to a big heroin bust. We talk about a controversial editorial in *The Boston Globe*. We pull off our skates and put on our shoes and walk to a coffee shop, where Katie orders a cinnamon bagel and a hot cocoa and I ask for tea; it's only \$2.10.

"Why aren't you getting coffee?" Katie bugs her eyes out.

I smile proudly. "Gave it up."

I'm a liar. But I make it home without having to tell her I'm giving up the apartment, without bursting into tears or freezing to death. I don't even have blisters from the skates.

The first thing I do is check the job boards and my professional, Sarah Ryder e-mail address. I've got four confirmations from the job apps I put through yesterday, but nothing good. No call backs; mostly just spam.

I check my Red account, the one I used to e-mail Gertrude. No reply. Emboldened by my desperate circumstances, I send another e-mail telling her I was drunk but really would like to meet. Then I read some of her poetry. It's beautiful stuff, with lines about flowers like solemn children and the terror of a lone cloud.

I wonder what she's like now. I wonder if she'd remind me of my mother. It's that particular curiosity that, first thing Monday morning, drives me to phone *Strike* magazine in New York City. Gertrude founded it in the mid-1960s: "a journal of enlightenment and issues" aimed at "the contemporary woman."

I get an operator and ask for the managing editor, a woman named Zoey Cruella. I'm put through to her assistant, Thomas, a polite guy who seems a few years younger than me. I tell Thomas my sad story, starting with my single-mother rearing and ending with Mom's untimely death, at 38, of pancreatic cancer.

"I was thinking of my mom today and I figured, why not try to get Gertrude's address? I thought you guys might have it. She's on the magazine's board, isn't she?"

Thomas confirms that indeed she is, but he says he can't just hand it out.

"So there's nothing you can do for me?"

"Just a moment."

He returns and says, "I think my boss has found a solution. I'm going to quiz you."

"Okay." I chew my lip. "I'll do my best."

"What was your mother's full name?"

"Georgia Anna Deckert."

"And your full name?"

"Sarah Lynn Ryder."

“Okay. You’re in business. Please don’t share this, though. It’s only a mailing address—not physical—but Ms. O’Malley values her privacy.”

An hour later, I’m walking to the mailbox with a good ole fashioned hand-written letter. My hungry stomach hurts with nervousness. Things are feeling more real now that I’ve got less than two weeks with a roof over my head. What if she never replies? What if she does, and she invites me to come see her? What if she could help me get a job?

I forfeit my pride and call Thomas back, asking if there are any openings at *Strike*.

“No,” he says. “I’m sorry.” But he doesn’t sound sorry. He sounds annoyed.

On a whim, I call my landlord, Dursey. “I’m sorry to bother you again, but I wanted to let you know—I wanted to ask if you know of any jobs and tell you I’d take almost anything. If you have any friends or anything...”

Silence stretches out between us before finally, Dursey clears his throat.

“For sure. I’ll let you know.”

But he won’t. I can tell.

The days begin to slide through my fingers. My eye starts twitching like it did after Mom died. I stop eating. I just can’t choke food down. I watch my phone and check my e-mail and apply for more jobs. I even go by Hugh’s and ask the owner, Benjamin, if he would hire me.

“In a heartbeat, honey. But I’ve got no openings right now.”

One night, in a state of panic, I look up escort services. I’m not super sexually experienced—no more than average, whatever that is—but I like orgasms, and I’m not ugly. I could maybe have sex with carefully vetted strangers if it meant I could afford a small apartment.

I check college apartment boards, hoping to find a situation where I’d be one of several roommates. Maybe I could get a low rent that way. I e-mail two girls, but get no response.

A week goes by, a week in which I collect an additional \$264 from the sale of various belongings. A week in which I awake in the night, heart beating frantically, and check my inbox with sweaty fingers. A week in which I stand up the *Journal* crew for bingo.

On a Wednesday afternoon, I sell most of my clothes, adding a measly \$43 to my sad sum. I go door to door again, hitting literally every business on Beacon Hill and the surrounding neighborhoods. I swallow the absolute last smidgen of my pride and frenziedly apply at a work-all-night janitorial service, at a Wendy’s, at a car wash down the street.

I wish I hadn’t had to sell my Kia to make rent last month. If I still had it, I could expand the door-to-door part of my job hunt.

On Tuesday, I take the bus to West End and Boston Commons; on Wednesday, Back Bay, and Cambridge. I spend both days walking as far as I can, grabbing job applications from every place with an opening and filling them out on the cold sidewalk, pressing my pen down on my wallet and trying to keep my trembling fingers still enough so my handwriting is readable. I get

home at half past two a.m. Thursday, exhausted and trembling from hunger.

Katie pops up the next day and breezes right into the apartment, which is, accidentally, unlocked.

She looks around with horror on her face and puts her hands on her hips. “Red, what the *hell?*”

I’ve been found out, and I’m slightly mortified, but I shrug and play it off. “I’m moving.”

“Holy wow.” Her mouth lolls. “Just...holy.”

I twirl around the almost-empty living room with my arms out. “I’m trying to live simply.”

“Holy shit, you got evicted, didn’t you? Because Carl left you high and dry.”

“I didn’t get evicted. I’m moving.”

“In with Gage and I.”

“No way.” They live in an 800-square-foot flat and fight and fuck like a pair of rabid cats.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“Katie—”

“Then where are you going?” she demands.

“I’ve got plans.”

“You don’t, Red. Quit putting me off. You’ve been doing it for weeks now and I’m tired of turning a blind eye to this...to this crisis.”

I roll my eyes. “K, you’re totally over-reacting.”

She’s not.

My latest plan involves buying a bus ticket to Florida, where it’s always warm and I can sleep under a dock. I’ll use the free WiFi at coffee shops to apply for jobs. Maybe the Peace Corps.

So I’m surprised when I blurt out, “I’m going to see my grandmother.”

“Gertrude?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah.”

This will be the easiest way to disappear. So Katie won’t worry. I’ll find a job in Florida, find a fresh start.

Over the next few hours, I convince Katie this is true. We read Gertrude’s poems aloud, and Katie orders Chinese food, which I devour so quickly I puke it all back up once Katie leaves.

Late that night, I’m curled up on a blanket in my empty bedroom, wearing the pink iPhone ear buds I used to wear when I wrote at work. I’m lying on my back, my face striped by the streetlight streaming through my blinds. I’m listening to Lana Del Ray, surfing the internet for what will be one of the last times ever on my phone; I’ve just sold it on Craig’s List for \$90.

My leg itches and I reach down to scratch it. One of my nails is jagged. I scrape my calf just a little, and it stings.

I start to sob. I tug at my hair.

“How did this happen? What the fuck is wrong with everything?”

I rip the ear buds from my ears and toss my phone down. I jump up and tug my sneakers on without socks. I stab my arms into my coat and run toward Beacon Hill, where the bar crowd’s out in full force and creepers stand in alleys with their heads lowered. The air is so cold it feels like a corporeal thing.

I continue toward Boston Commons, and when I reach the pond, I spend five bucks on skates, because why the fuck not? I skate furiously in circles, until the dim stars that wink through spindly tree branches are nothing but a blur, and the faces passing by and the strings of lights and crying of a child and icy wind that slaps my cheeks seem like slivers of some dream.

This is not my life. It cannot be my life.

I skate until my feet are numb, and by the time I make it home, my hands are so frostbitten they burn terribly.

I take a hot shower and bundle up in my blankets. I check my Facebook, my e-mail, and feel the morbid compulsion to check my bank account. I do this fanatically now, sometimes like every five minutes. I’m not sure if I’m trying to motivate or torture or...holy shit.

The page has loaded. I blink. And blink. And wipe my eyes and blink.

My heart is pounding hard. Blood roars inside my ears. This can’t be right. It just...can’t be. But there it is. In simple, sans serif font, black on a white screen underneath my bank’s emblem:

\$30,377.12

I can’t believe my eyes. I must be going crazy. I log out, in, and out again. Twice. Four times. Six.

My phone vibrates: an e-mail. [gertrude@omalleyfoundation.com](mailto:gertrude@omalleyfoundation.com)

She has written only one word: “Come.”

Attached is a photocopy of a hand-drawn map, sketched with an ‘X’ on one Rabbit Island, a blip about two miles off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. At the bottom is Gertrude’s e-signature.

I’m pretty sure my “FUCK YES! HELL YES! FUCK!” is heard all through my building.

I throw my snow-damp sneakers back on and dash all the way to Fred’s Coffee & Bagels, where I order a grande latte and four extra-fattening, buttery, cinnamon-crust bagels.

I walk slowly home to my nearly empty apartment, thanking God and sleet and smog and dirty snow for what this night has brought me. I’ve made some stupid choices, but e-mailing grandma is not one of them.

As I climb behind the wheel of my new-to-me ’04 Camry the next afternoon, I’m beaming

from ear to ear. I'm going to meet my mom's mother, and after that—or maybe before if I'm extra lucky—I'm going to find a way to end this two month dry spell.

\*

## **WOLFE**

I leave the island four times annually—one trip inland for each season—and that's mostly for Trudie. *Was* for Trudie. She needed things on occasion, and with her bum hip, it was easier for me to get them.

After she passed, I debated ever leaving the island again. No reason to. I've got food and supplies. I can get Bob, my cousin and my manager, to arrange a courier to get the paintings. Maybe pay him to haul his ass down here and do it himself if he doesn't trust a third party. Not my problem. Keeping me anonymous is Bob's problem. Has been since we started.

The only thing that made me second-guess confinement to the island was pussy.

When I first came here four years ago, I didn't leave for months. I started dreaming of pussy. Smelling pussy. Even tasting it. So I found Clarice, a lonely young widow in one of the row houses by the water. She likes it like I do, and she never wants to see my face.

She's a good enough fuck. But I have to go to her. I would never bring her here. I would never bring anyone here.

I could pay for pussy. Liplocked pussy. Motor boat some discreet escort to the island. But escorts are boring.

Even Clarice—predictable, submissive Clarice—could conceivably say “no.” She could fight me if she wanted. And I need that. Need to think that maybe one day, she'll decide to twist around and grab my hair and look into my eyes.

Without that possibility, without the chance that it could all implode, it's not fucking worth it.

So, no escorts in motor boats.

After I've had some time to digest Trudie's death and my subsequent inheritance of Rabbit Island, I decide no more Clarice, either.

I'll find another way to deal with my dick.

Peace follows my decision. Peace: the closest thing I'd found to happiness. I think Trudie would have been glad for me.

I celebrate my vow of seclusion by wandering the forest. Pines and oaks, cypress, swampland. The island is an eighth of a mile long, and I love every fucking inch of it. I leave my cabin for two nights and pitch a tent on the boulder on the northwest side of the island. Sit beside



it with my feet in the sand and listen to the whip-poor-will, to the lapping of the waves. Watch cypress branches drifting in the salty breeze. And when I can't keep my hands still any longer, I let myself paint. A gull in the water. A squirrel on an oak. Simple shit.

The next day, I call Bob. Set up the courier.

And then three days ago, when I'm up at Trudie's cottage, archiving her unpublished poems, the phone rings.

Trudie wasn't a lover of technology, and she especially hated talking on the phone. In her honor, I let her archaic answering machine pick up. I wonder who the fuck has her number. The old woman was more reclusive than even me.

A second later, a male voice fills her little office.

"This is a message for James Wolfe. I'm Michael Halcomb, partner at Halcomb & Mallory and Gertrude O'Malley's new estate attorney. I need to talk to you about her attempted deeding of Rabbit Island to you."

I sit there a moment, absorbing the echo of my name; resisting the urge to grab the phone. Then I pluck it off her desk. "What do you mean *attempted*?"

I can tell the lawyer is surprised to hear my voice. I've got a deep voice. Distinctive. Shit... It's fucking infamous.

I'm fucking infamous.

Bet the bastard was hoping he wouldn't reach me.

"Mr. Wolfe?" His voice sounds tinny.

"You mentioned a problem?"

He clears his throat. "Er...yes sir. I'm glad I reached you. There's an issue with the deeding of the island. Nothing insurmountable—"

"Spit it out."

"I'm afraid the attorney in charge of Ms. O'Malley's final arrangements was a junior colleague. He was only on the—"

"Spit. It. Out."

"The island can't be deeded to you, despite your being temporarily in charge of her trust. In the event that no family member is helping govern the trust, conservation land like the island can't pass hands. For ownership of the island to change hands posthumously, it's got to be done via Gertrude's family. There's only one living descendant, according to my research. A granddaughter—"

"Sarah Ryder." A redhead. Freckled and pale, from the look of her in the photo on Trudie's desk. Despite some kind of family feud, Trudie kept track of the girl. Subscribed to the *Boston Journal* online. Even had me program Google to send Trudie an e-mail alert when it picked up the name "Sarah L. Ryder."

In the last few weeks of Trudie's life, I corresponded two times with her oncologist via e-mail. Which is how I found out that little, red-haired Sarah lost her job. About a week before Trudie passed, Sarah e-mailed, wanting to meet up. Trudie asked me not to reply.

"I waited too late," she told me.

Why hadn't Sarah reached out to her until now? I did some checking around, had Bob call up a mutual friend from our Bridgewater days, and found out little miss Sarah was looking for a job. Looking unsuccessfully. Applications out all over Boston.

So...a moneygrubber.

"You're right," Halcomb says. "Her name is Sarah. She needs to take a position with the trust. She can then decide if the island should be sold to an individual. You. You'll need to convince Sarah to get involved, and convince her to sell the island to you."

"I hope your office intends to handle this. It's your fuck-up. And I don't leave the island. Ever." That's a stretch, but I'm damn sure not going to this bastard's office.

"I can send someone out to help you—"

"Not someone. You."

"Ah, well, I—"

"If you and I have to meet for any reason, you come to me. I don't want to deal with an intern or some fucking first-year lackey."

I enjoy his silence. Nervous silence.

He clears his throat again. The fucking pussy.

"Er...yes. Of course. Just tell me when and...well," he chuckles, "I don't need to ask where. Gertrude paid my firm well to be...considerate of her preferences. Her solitude. Yours as well, by extension, sir. But there won't be any paperwork to sign, no business between you and me, until you contact Sarah."

*Fuck.*

# Chapter Two

RED

I arrive in Charleston in mid-morning. There are so many more trees than I remembered, many of them adorned with beautiful gray moss. Water spreads out around the city like an obsidian plate of glass. The historic homes—Federal style, Queen Anne, Italianate—are painted in pastels, and arranged in neat rows along lamp-lit sidewalks. The day is overcast, with dark gray clouds like rain, so some of the lamps are already glowing.

I drive around, reacquainting myself with iron-gated cemeteries and sprawling plantation homes. Finally, about 3:30 p.m., I stop at a little local produce store and ask about the Briar Bay boat dock, which I'm told is in a cove near Dill Creek, on the James Island side of Charleston Harbor. I head across the Ashley River, find a shrimp shack, and spend the next hour and a half eating and obsessively checking my phone. I fire off a quick e-mail telling Gertrude I'll be the girl with long, red hair, wearing jeans and a long-sleeved gray t-shirt.

When I got the call from my bank confirming that an anonymous donor had infused my account with new life, I renewed the lease on my apartment, but I didn't have time to buy new furniture or clothes, so here I am, in my slightly baggy jeans and a Northwestern shirt I've had since...spring my junior year. So yeah, meeting grandma for the first time in a six-year-old t-shirt.

I refresh my red lipstick about twelve times before leaving the shrimp shack, then point my Camry toward the water.

The clouds are darker now, hanging low over the harbor. Gulls crisscross the sky, moving in frenzied zigzags. I follow the instructions of my GPS and pull into a parking lot that reaches to the water's edge, where there's a long, wooden dock lined with boat slips. Mossy trees shade the deck and walkway, hanging over boats big and small. I run my eyes over the larger boats, wondering which one is my grandmother's.

I pull my phone out of my cup holder and shoot off an e-mail. "I'm here." Then I grab my duffel bag and purse, lean against my hood, and wait.

What will Gertrude look like? I watch the docked boats, serviced by fluttering figures, heads bowed against a swift but muggy breeze.

There's a luxury boat, maybe fifty feet, with a pelican's post on the top. I wonder if she's wealthy enough to own that. I guess she probably is. I cast my gaze to a smaller boat, this one blue and white, with the name *Dirty Sammy* scrawled across its back in cursive.

I'm holding my breath when my phone vibrates. '*The boat name is Fog.*'

My heart hammers. My mouth feels dry. I tuck my hair behind my ears, adjust the bag on my shoulder, and start toward the dock. The square, wood deck adjoining the parking lot is dotted

with a few benches and an abandoned fishing pole. I take a left onto one of the long planks that runs parallel with the shoreline. Boats bob all along it, settled into little, wood-framed slots.

I walk slowly, glancing at each boat for *Fog*. I see *Double Trouble*, *Choppy Cass*, *Stupid Does*, *Great Escape*. I think the beige, gray, and crimson sailboat a few slots down looks like a *Fog*, and am disappointed to find its name is *Rammer Jammer*. I pass a few smaller boats, the kind you might ski behind, as well as a yacht that looks almost too big for its allotted docking space.

I pass a yellow boat named *Fifty*, where a pretty blonde mans the steering wheel and a short-haired brunette in a red bikini stands beside the motors, waving her hands in an attempt to help the blonde back out.

I look down at my feet as gulls caw overhead.

The wind blows my hair across my cheeks. A few strands stick to my lips.

I'm pushing at them with my fingertips, glancing down the dock for a woman with gray hair and my mother's mouth, when I see him: a tall man blocking my path. He's wearing a pair of loose, charcoal slacks and a battered-looking white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, so I can see his muscled forearms. His face is partially shaded by a baseball cap. And even so, I know he's here for me.

My cheeks heat up, as if I've been sunburned; my stomach aches; and, swear to god, my pussy actually clenches, like it's saying "fuck me now."

Then he takes a slow stride toward me, lifts his head a little, and I see his face.

Holy fucking wow. This man is brutally handsome.

A short, scruffy black beard covers his face, begging for my fingers. His jaw is hard, his cheekbones stark and high. His mouth, which twists when he sees me, is full and pink and sensuous. And yet, there's something harsh about it. Almost mean. I picture it closing around my nipple, sucking me before he sinks his teeth into my tender flesh.

His eyes flick up to mine and my heart beings to hammer. They're dark brown—intense and long-lashed—but that's not what makes me stop mid-stride. No. It's the way they sweep me up and down, so obviously assessing.

Does he find me wanting? Satisfactory?

I want to take a step closer and yank off his Mets ball cap. I want to run my fingers through his hair.

I notice I'm breathing fast and shallow, like I'm recovering from a panic attack.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

He steps toward me and I lick my lips.

"You're Red." His voice is so low, I can feel the timbre of it between my legs.

“You’re...not my grandmother.”

“No.” His mouth presses into a tight line. “Red,” he says slowly, “I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news. Gertrude passed a few days ago.”

“She died?”

He nods once. “She did.”

He swipes his cap off his head, revealing short, black hair.

I stare at it, as if it might help me comprehend. I waited a lifetime to meet my grandmother, longed for her since my mother died, and came this close to knowing her? How could she be gone?

My eyes water—from shock or disappointment? Maybe from the wind. “When did she die?”

“Earlier in the week,” he says.

I can’t believe it. I cut my eyes away from him, casting my gaze into the water lapping at the wood posts of the dock. I run my eyes back up his body, and in that moment, I resent his beauty. I don’t want to notice the way his slacks hang on his muscled legs, the way the wind presses his button-up to his washboard abs.

And yet I do.

So inappropriate.

I put a hand over my face and try to collect myself. When I feel cooler—too cool now; cold—I ask, “So the money...? It’s an inheritance?”

His features morph, from neutral to furious in seconds. “So it *was* the money,” he barks.

“What?”

“You needed money.” His tone is harsh and judging.

“The money was given to me. I didn’t ask for it.”

He makes a face that starts out as a wince and turns into an angry smirk. “That’s how I got you here. Money grubber.”

My stomach tightens. “I’m not a money grubber. What do you mean ‘got me here?’” It hits me like a cannon ball that I don’t even know who he is, this man who’s suddenly so angry with me. “Who are you?”

“My name is Race. I was Gertrude’s assistant.” He folds his arms in front of his chiseled chest, revealing thick, tanned forearms.

I look beyond him, down the dock, where a group of men are unloading fish into several large, white coolers.

“You said you got me here with money. What does that mean?”

His eyebrows narrow. “I deposited thirty thousand dollars in your account. Gertrude didn’t leave you anything.”

“*What?*”

“She left her island to me by putting me in charge of her trust. But it turns out the trust can’t transfer ownership of the island to me without you, because the island is conservation land, and conservation land can only be passed down within a family. I can’t have it unless you become involved with the trust and sign off on the sale of it to me.

“If you want to keep the money that I gave you, what you have to do is simple. Sign on to oversee her trust, and decide the island should be sold to me. The money will go to the trust, but I’ll give you an additional thirty thousand dollars for your trouble.”

I blink a few times. “Are you...bribing me?”

He pins me with that awful look again. The condemning one. “Do you consider yourself above that?”

“I don’t know. *Yes*. You called me a money-grubber. That’s not a good way to get my help.”

A beam of sunlight pushes through the dark clouds, illuminating the man’s wavy black hair. “So you’re saying you won’t do it?”

I rub my eyes, noticing as I do that my hand is shaking. “I don’t know if I will. I don’t know.” I draw a deep breath in. Force myself to look into his almost-black eyes. “I don’t think I would agree to sell her island to you. You seem like an asshole.”

“Do I?” He steps closer, and my chest and cheeks go molten hot.

I grit my teeth. “Yes. You *are* an asshole. I can spot one.”

“You’re a beggar.”

“How did she die?”

“Excuse me?”

“How did my grandmother die, asshole?”

His face hardens. “It was cancer. Do you care?”

“Of course I care!”

His sneer tells me what he thinks of that, but I ignore him. “Pancreatic cancer?” I ask.

He frowns.

“Did she die of pancreatic cancer?”

“Lung.”

I exhale slowly, feeling faint. “She didn’t want to meet me, did she? It was you who told me to come here.”

He nods, and my throat constricts.

“After your first e-mail,” he says, “I did some digging. I found out about your financial woes. After she passed, I gave you a ‘gift.’”

“A bribe.”

“A gift. A token of my intent if you were to decide, on behalf of the trust, to sell the island to me. Her trust will get the money. A little under a million, if I’m correct about the island’s worth.

You can keep the sixty thousand I give you, and I get to continue living at my home.” He holds his hands out, as if everything he’s said is totally logical.

I shake my head. “Just because you were dumb enough to deposit money into my account—under false pretenses, might I add—doesn’t mean I have to agree to sell the island to you. How could I do that, anyway? If you’re one of the trust’s administrators, wouldn’t that be like... illegal?”

“I’d have to remove myself first.”

That sounds complicated. “Why do you care so much about this island? If you can buy this one, couldn’t you just buy another one?”

He shakes his head, as if he’s lost. When he speaks, his voice is surprisingly soft. “It’s my home.”

“Only if I decide to give it to you. So far, I haven’t thought of a single reason why I should.”

“What if I told you the money is gone unless you do?”

I snort. “Are you a magician?”

His eyes harden. “The money is gone, Red. It’s been gone since this morning. I had it removed.”

“W-what do you mean?” My voice is squeaky.

“Your check for that car you bought won’t bounce. But everything else is gone.”

I start to tremble, shoulders first, then chest. “Are you fucking kidding me? Is this a fucking joke?” I fumble for my phone and he steps closer. “Go ahead and check,” he says. “You’ll see.”

I can barely get to the bank’s web site, my hands are shaking so badly. When I see the balance, I nearly vomit: \$245.13.

“I don’t understand! Why did you do this?”

“I needed to get you here.”

“I would have probably come if you’d asked like a normal person!”

He shakes his head. “I needed a guarantee.”

I grind my jaw together as hard as I can and put my head in my hands. I haven’t felt this screwed—this utterly and totally fucked—since mom was diagnosed.

I feel his hand touch my shoulder, and I slap him off. “I can’t believe this shit. I can’t believe —”

He holds up a check, and I shut my mouth.

My name is in the “to” space. The dollar amount is \$60,000.

Suddenly, my lungs work again. It takes me a moment to find my voice, and when I do, it’s raspy and weak. “How can I trust you? If you can deposit and remove money from my account one time...” I shake my head. “How did you even do that?”

“It wasn’t easy. It’s not something just anyone can do. I doubt I could do it again, for what

that's worth."

"It's worth nothing."

I take a step back, and his fingers close around my arm as his black eyes find mine. "I'm sorry I did things this way. I really am. I'd like nothing more than to hand this check to you—and I will. As soon as you agree to sign the island over to me. Come with me, Red. Just for a night. Give me a chance to talk you into this. You can see where your grandmother lived."

I look at the blue and white sailboat behind him. It's got two glossy cedar benches in the middle, two motors on the back, and a steering wheel podium near the front. I shake my head. I'm not going anywhere with him.

"God, this is so my luck. Some asshole poses as my grandmother, and now you want to steal her island from me. You're like...the big bad wolf."

He blanches for just a second before he turns his face into something more neutral. "Get into the boat, Red. I promise you'll be glad you did."

\*

## ***WOLFE***

Surprises.

Fucking hell, I'm rocked by her surprises. For starters: the little redhead makes my dick hard. The righteous outrage. I'm glad I pissed her off. How fucking sexy is that mouth when she's using it to slap me around?

As she stands there with her hands on her hips, glaring at me like she's sure she knows how big and bad I am, I'm shifting to try and hide my erection.

I can't keep my eyes from returning to her breasts. They stretch her long-sleeved gray t-shirt. I run my gaze down to her curvy hips and wonder what she'd do if I grabbed her ass right now.

I can't believe my reaction to her. The way my dick salutes her. The way my balls draw up like she's tickling them with her tongue.

It's not because she's classically beautiful. She's got an unusual look: long, straight, red hair; red lips; porcelain skin with a smattering of freckles on her nose. Her blue eyes are big and wide. If I had to paint her as an animal, I'd make her a fox. Sleek. Striking.

I roll my gaze down her lithe body, lingering on her hips, encased in jeans. I wonder what her cunt would taste like.

Strawberries, I bet.

I imagine thrusting two fingers into her slick, pink flesh; working my pinkie into her tight asshole.



I'd love to see those legs sag open for me.

I want to hear her moan and pant, feel her writhe under me.

"This is a really terrible thing to do to someone," she says, hands on her hips. "You're using my financial troubles to manipulate me."

I arch a brow. "I'm offering you an easy chance to drive off tomorrow with a check for sixty thousand dollars and an opportunity to net much more for your grandmother's trust."

"Really? Because it looks to me like you gave me thirty thousand dollars, then snatched it away in order to control me. I'd rather be poor and homeless than manipulated by an ass like you."

Christ, she's sexy.

I struggle to suppress a smile.

"I'd like you to come and see the island," I try.

"So I can decide if I want to give it to you?" She snorts. "I can tell you right now, my answer is 'no.'"

"Reconsider."

She bites down on her lower lip, and my dick pulses. I wonder if she's red between her legs.

"Why should I get into a boat with you, wolf?"

I hate how she keeps calling me that—my real last name—so I'm terse when I say, "Do it because I asked."

A little laugh, soft as the wind. "Are you sure you were my grandmother's employee? Something about you feels really...lawyer to me. Lawyer or...hmmm." She strokes her chin. "Maybe banker."

I force myself to breathe. "You've got it all wrong, Rojo."

I step down into the boat to give her the illusion of space. If she turns to leave, I'll go after her, but she doesn't need to know that.

I watch her look from me to the parking lot, so obviously considering her choice. I'm still hard, so I lean on the dock and try to find something about her I don't like.

Freckles.

Never have liked them.

She has freckles.

Except on her, they emphasize just how fucking smooth and soft and unblemished the rest of her skin is. I wonder if she has freckles on her breasts.

I grit my teeth again, and when I look back at her face, I get this feeling like she might be checking me out, too.

Another surprise: The scrutiny makes me squirm.

Squirming makes me angry. I'm not who I used to be, and most days I think it's for the best.

But this is pathetic.

I reach out and grab her around the knees, throw her over my shoulder, and set her down inside the boat. I snatch her bags from the dock and say, “Come on, Rojo.”

Her lips twitch. “Are you really calling me Rojo?”

I shrug. “It fits.”

I hedge my bets and turn away from her to finish breaking down the sail. I’m watching, though. She doesn’t run—not yet, anyway. By the time the sail is secured, I’m sweating, so I unbutton the top of my shirt and lean against the side of the boat.

“Come see the place, Rojo. I have some poems for you, and pictures.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and glances at the dock. “How long did you work for Gertrude?” she asks pointedly.

I can tell from her intense stare that my answer is important, so I don’t say ‘four years.’ It sounds insubstantial, which it’s not.

“We met in Madrid, at an art exhibit. Have you ever heard of ‘W?’”

I know she has. I’ve done my homework.

“He’s one of my favorites,” she confirms.

“I met Trudie at one of his first café shows.”

Her face transforms—a look of wonder; maybe even envy—and I’m irrationally pleased she appreciates my work.

“We both liked nature, and being by ourselves. I moved here to help her keep the island up.”

She bites her lip again, inspecting me from beneath her eyelashes. “Tell me something about my mother. Anything you know. And you will know something if you really knew Gertrude.”

“Her middle name was Anna, and she liked butterflies and worked as a professor.”

She juts her chin up. “Where did she work?”

“University of Alabama at Birmingham.”

Again, with her teeth on that tasty little lip. My dick, which had been settling down, is all the way up again, and I want to groan.

“Okay, so you really worked for my grandmother. That doesn’t mean you’re not a manipulative asshole. I’m afraid I have no interest in helping you. I’d rather take my money-grubbing self and starve.” She grabs her bags and starts to climb out of the boat, and I’m on her; my hand on her elbow, fingers closing around her smooth skin.

“C’mon, Rojo. Just come see it with me. All I’m asking for is one night. How about this? If you come with me, I’ll pay you ten thousand. Either way. I *promise*.” I put my heart and soul into the word, because what’s left of them is anchored to that goddamn island. I can’t exist anywhere else. For so many reasons. I jerk my gaze around the docks, suddenly terrified someone will recognize me and I’ll lose my chance with her.

Her mouth puckers. “I want to see a photo ID or I won’t even consider your ridiculous request.”

Fuck!

I rake a hand back through my hair. “I don’t have it on me.”

“Really. ’Cause that’s not strange or anything...”

I straighten my shoulders. “I don’t often leave the island.”

“Also strange,” she says. “Why is that?”

“I’m uncomfortable around people.” It’s the closest I can get to the truth, which reads more like *I hate everyone*.

*That’ll win her, James.*

As if she hears my thoughts, she says, “What’s your name?”

“Race.” It’s my college nickname.

“Race *what*?” She’s frowning at me like she thinks I’m stupid.

“Race Hollister.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Do you have a problem with it?”

“Only that I can’t believe you. What the hell would make me go anywhere with you, let alone a deserted island where you could chop me into little pieces and feed me to your pet turtles?”

“Turtles aren’t meant to be pets. Most animals aren’t.”

“Even posing as a humanitarian, I still don’t trust you.”

I take a step away from her, suddenly drained. “I’m not going to keep begging, Rojo. If you don’t need ten thousand dollars, walk away. If you do, get in.”

\*

## ***RED***

My stomach twists when I think of the money he’s offering. Ten thousand dollars is enough to tide me over until I find work. Sixty is enough to take a year or two off. Enough to travel almost anywhere I want.

“You must really want this island badly.”

He rubs his forehead, reminding me of a tired child. “I do.”

Even now, standing close enough so I can see the sweat on his brow and throat, he’s beautiful. A handsome villain.

I sigh. “I can’t believe I’m desperate enough to consider this.”

“I’m sorry I called you a money-grubber.”

I meet his eyes and am surprised to find they're softer now. Probably an act.

I look down at my bag and purse, then around, at the other boats, then out at the sea, which is choppy from the humid breeze. I drag my phone out of my pocket.

"Let me see if I've got service. The e-mail you sent had the longitude and latitude of the island. I'll copy that and send it to a friend. Just in case you turn out to be a lunatic. Promise me you won't turn out to be a lunatic?"

He nods, looking surprisingly serious. "Scouts' honor."

"Shit. That's not enough. Just e-mailing my friend is definitely not enough to convince me to go with you. I need something more. I need...I don't know. A reference. Or maybe I don't..." I have a Taser in the bottom of my purse. I could always use that.

No—I've got a much better idea!

He turns away from me and moves over to the motors, and I point my phone at him. With trembling fingers, I pull my camera up and set it on video mode. When he turns back toward me, I get a side shot of his face and send it, along with a note and the island's coordinates, to Katie.

He's leaning back over the motors, pulling on the top of one of them so it rises slightly out of the water, when I notice the bulge in his pants.

# Chapter Three

*RED*

This is a surprise.

Does he find me attractive? *This* man? I'm not ugly, but I'm no beauty—and I know that. And yet, I'm pretty sure he doesn't have a hard-on for my brilliant personality.

All we've done so far is argue.

Maybe he gets off on arguing.

He looks up from what he's doing and, again, I think he looks tired. Much wearier and more sympathetic than a jerk like him has a right to look.

I wonder how close he was to Gertrude.

I wonder why he doesn't want to leave the island.

I'm a fool for caring.

He turns back around toward me, and a quick glance-over reveals he's tucked his boner away. Or lost it. For a moment I'm dizzy by how good he looks in those slacks; how much broader his shoulders are than his hips.

Tall, dark, and handsome. That's what he is. And an asshole.

"So, you ready?" The corner of his lip tugs up, as if he's trying to smile and failing.

"Hmm." I make him sweat it, because he deserves that much. Then, after I tuck my hair behind my ears and sit down on one of the benches, I say, "I guess so."

A brilliant grin spreads over his face, confirming what I'd figured: He's got a beautiful smile. It lightens his eyes, almost literally. They don't look quite so dark.

"Thanks for this. Either way I'll drop you back here tomorrow with a check."

"You fucking better."

I spend the next few minutes pretending to be absorbed with something on my phone. I have the wherewithal to be sure the GPS tracking service is turned on, in the event he does turn out to be insane. But I don't get that vibe.

A few minutes later, his big hand is pushing the boat away from the dock. He's stepping over to the steering podium, and I'm shamelessly watching the way his shirt melds against the hard lines of his back.

I hunch my shoulders against the wind and watch him as he steers the boat, first idling through the cove, then pushing a joystick up a few inches and increasing our speed until the boat's nose rises out of the water, then the rest of it. The boat bounces as it flies across the sea.

I wonder if the money will be worth this ordeal. I hope I learn something from what I see of Gertrude's home. I wish Gertrude was here.

This day has turned out to be so fucking weird.

I let my mind wander as the wind whips my hair out behind me.

I'm curious to know whether Gertrude liked the color blue, like Mom did; whether she was a fan of sunflower patterns and brightly colored kitchenware. Mom was the queen of neon orange and pink coffee mugs, of funky watermelon plates in summer. Did she get her style from her stoic poet mother? How far off base was I, when I would dream of meeting the great Gertrude O'Malley?

Maybe Gertrude was more like me. My favorite colors are green and pink, my favorite season fall. I'm a writer. Not a poet, but still a writer.

I gather my hair into one of my hands and wonder why I didn't bring a rubber band. I guess I thought Gertrude's boat would have an inside. I pictured it big. I pictured her on it.

Sigh.

Another glance up at Race's back and ass, and I'm distracted by the bulge I imagine is still straining against his pants.

I'm practically twitching with nervous energy—nervous, sexually appreciative, emotionally irritated energy—so I decide instead of just watching him from my seat, I'll join him at the pedestal that houses the steering system.

I hold onto the side of the boat as I move, feeling grateful I wore sneakers. Beyond the boat's nose, the horizon line bounces. Clouds bear down on the water, matching my mood.

I clutch the edge of the podium, and he looks over at me. He's not wearing sunglasses, so his eyes are squinted slightly against the glare of the water.

I lean closer to him, and I swear I think I can feel him checking me out. Not simply looking at me; *looking* at me.

I lean back a little, trying to ignore the way my body calls to his, and raise my voice so he can hear me over the wind and choppy sea. "Why did she want you to have the island?"

He shakes his head, turning toward me, so his torso is an inch from my shoulder, and his lips are almost brushing my cheek. I lose my breath again, in a way I haven't since high school—and earlier today. "Probably because I live there," he says.

We hit a bump, and my shoulder bumps into his chest, sending a starburst of sensation through me. I look into his face, wondering why it strikes me as familiar.

"Are you a recluse?"

His eyes flicker over to mine, then back out to the sea. His looks first annoyed, then amused. "Is this a quiz?"

"I think I have a right to quiz you."

One dark eyebrow arches. "Terrible thing, loaning you money to buy a car. That's basically what I did, you realize. That and offer to pay you ten thousand dollars for a night on an island."

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that. You took advantage of me.”

“I wish you would stop saying that, Rojo.”

“Quit calling me that,” I say. “It sounds like a man’s name, and the part that sticks out in my mind the most is ‘ho.’”

He smirks, and in that low voice of his, he says, “Are you a ho?”

I pinch my lips together to avoid a smile; his tone is clearly teasing. “No. I’m not.”

A reluctant little half smile slips over his mouth, and my poor neglected vagina responds. I bite my lip to distract myself from the party in my jeans.

I wrap my arms around my waist, feeling a little weird about myself. This is hardly a normal response to finding out about the death of one’s grandmother. Then again, Gertrude was a total stranger. Her death is, for me, mainly just a disappointment. The end of some remote possibility that probably wasn’t ever possible at all.

I push my bangs over the top of my head, where they tend to stay, whipped back in the wind. Race’s lips twitch again, and I glare. “What?”

Why the hell am I feeling so warm and fuzzy? I’m like a high school freshman creaming my panties over the senior quarterback. I shouldn’t be so damn attracted to him—so I am. Of course I am. This is the way things go for me.

And then he tilts his head my way, gives me a full smile, and says, “You wanna steer?”

Total swoon land. Which is sad. So very, very pitiful.

I take a long, slow breath. “Are you being condescending?”

He shakes his head. Angles his body toward mine. In a low, scratchy voice that may just be the wind and my imagination, he murmurs, “Truth? I want to put my hands on you.”

Heat sings through me. “Did you really just say that?”

He grins, and I say, “You should keep your hands to yourself. I don’t need or want them.”

*LIAR!*

“If this is some kind of ploy,” I continue, looking into his eyes, “it won’t work. I’m not even attracted to you.”

If at all possible, his grin widens, making him look wolfish. His eyes flit down the front of me, and before I can prepare myself, he reaches out and flicks my nipple gently. “Not attracted?”

Pleasure shoots in a direct line down to my pussy—so fierce I go all limp and almost lose my footing. I clamp an arm over my chest and laugh, because seriously, I cannot believe this asshole did that. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Believe it, baby.” Again, that smug smirk. “I don’t think you minded. In fact,” he says slowly, leaning so close his lips brush me near my ear, “I think you liked it.”

Before I can deny this, his arms are going around my waist, moving me in front of him,

turning me toward the boat's nose. I wait, lightheaded, for him to press my ass against his huge erection, and am dizzily disappointed when he simply places my hands on the wheel and wraps his hands around them.

He moves my sweaty fingers to a position that looks like nine and three. "Hold it here," he purrs into my ear. He holds up one finger and disappears, moving toward the back of the boat.

I look into a little rear view mirror and see him pushing a button on the side of one of the motors. A few seconds later, their overpowering roar quiets a few notches. I look over my shoulder; the wind whips my hair across my face.

"What did you do?" I ask as he returns to stand beside me.

"Shifted the motors to a different setting. Kind of like shifting down a gear."

Now the loudest thing in my ears is the whipping wind. He stands so close to me we're practically hip to hip, and then he wraps an arm around my back.

"Are you cold?" he asks. "You're shivering a little."

Omigod, I'm not shivering. I'm trembling. With lust.

I swallow. Shake my head. I try to step away from him, I swear I do, but my legs are frozen. He's got me entranced.

"Quit acting like you care if I'm cold."

I tighten my hands around the wheel, and for a second I swear I can feel his hardness against my butt. The sensation is gone as quickly as I notice it, but I'm so fired up now I can barely remember my own name, feeling sweaty and shaky and flushed.

His hand comes down beside mine on the wheel, tugging it slightly to the right. "Hold it there for a few minutes," he says. The boat veers a foot or two in the direction of the setting sun, and the current ripples around us.

For the next few minutes, the only sound is the purr of the motors, the splash of water under us, and the wind. The sailboat never quite goes fast enough to completely level off, so the nose of the boat, where we're standing, rides slightly higher than the back.

Ocean spray dampens my cheeks. It feels good, because I'm over-hot. His arm is still around my back. I wonder why I don't ask him to move it. We pass a barge, flat and slow-moving, hauling big, rusted-looking pipes. Overhead, the sky darkens, threatening to spill.

We pass a group of three tiny, tree-covered islands on our left, and I hold my breath, wondering if one of them is Gertrude's. Race doesn't move, though, so I shift my eyes ahead, where I see a dark fuzz on the horizon line. Another half mile or so, and I can see it clearly: a long island, covered with tall pines and mossy oaks.

"Beautiful," I murmur.

"Perhaps it could be yours," he says with a funny little half-smile. "I can see if it's for sale."

"No thanks." I shrug his hand off, still hot and shaky, but working to remember who this is.



“If I need one, I’ll take yours.”

We sail over the ocean’s surface, rushing the gray sky that seems to hang lower over the water. Race’s arm brushes mine, and I can feel us lose a little momentum.

He tilts the wheel to the left, we move around the curve of the island, and I see it: the widest island so far, covered with so many trees, it looks like someone took a swatch of luscious southern forest and plunked it down in the middle of the ocean. I frown at all the trees beyond the rocky shore: pines, oaks, cypresses.

Birds sail in the sky above it.

Rocks pepper the sandy shore.

Waves crash into it, dying in a spray of white.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper.

And then he rocks against my ass. I feel the hardness of his cock. I hang onto the wheel as my knees tremble.

\*

## ***WOLFE***

I press my dick against her.

Reckless.

Instinctive.

Necessary.

I can almost scent her wet cunt. I’ve been with enough women to recognize the glazed eyes, unsteady feet, flushed cheeks, hard nipples. She wants me. She may not like me, but she fucking wants me just like I want her. She confirms this with a wiggle of her ass against my swollen, aching cock. My balls fist up.

I grit my teeth to avoid moaning. I wrap one arm over her shoulder, folding her against my chest because my cock needs to feel that round ass.

We near the shore; I flip a switch to pull the motors up.

As the wind dies down I hear her panting.

“Oh my God, you’re such a fucking asshole.”

I rock against her and groan my words: “Bad first impression, baby.”

She rubs her ass against my dick. “I’m not...your baby.”

I reach around and unfasten her jeans button, yank the zipper down and reach inside. I flatten my palm over her mound. I’m so jacked up I can barely see straight but I have to take this slow. Can’t just dip inside.

“I want you.”

“This is crazy,” she says.

I clasp her hip with my left hand and curl the pointer finger of my right hand, dragging over her soft, hot, panty-covered flesh.

The waves knock the boat into gentle rocking as we creep toward the shore. My finger slides down toward her slit. She gasps.

I can feel her wetness through cotton.

“I want to slip inside you. Not my dick. My finger.”

I hear her blow her breath out and I lift the elastic of her panties. I work my hand inside—palm rough against her moist skin. My finger strokes over her puffy flesh, glides into the silky moisture of her slit. She sags against me.

“Hate you...”

I glide my fingertip through her wetness, stroking down toward her core. She rocks against me, gasps. I rub my thumb over her clit, urging my middle finger down, inside.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Fuck,” she echoes.

I curl my finger, push it deeper, until I feel her G-spot. She leans against the steering console, and I bite her neck. I stroke her clit. “I want to taste you. I would love to taste you.”

“I’d...hate that!”

“I want to see you hate it. Turn around. Like this.” I drag my hand out of her, guide her hips so she’s facing me. Her mouth hangs slightly open as I work her jeans and panties to her knees.

I’m thrilled to find her just as brilliant red as I had hoped.

“So beautiful.”

I run my finger over her tight curls. I part her lips with reverence, inhaling deeply her sweet scent. I touch my mouth down on her as my finger works its way inside. She grabs onto my shoulders, sinks down onto me. I balance her on my arm and guide her to the boat’s floor, damp with sea spray.

I pump my finger in and out. With the tip of my tongue, I trace her up and down.

“Oh fuck! Oh God!”

“Come for me. Take your time, but you will come for me.”

I slide a second finger in and am rewarded by a ragged gasp. She’s clutching my elbow, gritting her teeth, clenching her spread legs against my sides.

She tastes sweet, and I devour her like island fruit.

“Oh God... Oh no... Yes. Oh...fuck... Oh yes.”

Her hips rock up to meet my mouth. My tongue rolls gently, softly over her.

“That feels *so good*.”

I push my fingers in as far as they will go.

“So full...” she gasps.

I’m not surprised at all when she jerks her hips up off the floor and comes with a guttural shriek.

But I’m shocked that I come with her.

# Chapter Four

*RED*

I fall back to earth in pieces, with the rain. Cold, hard rain. Stinging rain. He pulls my pants and underwear up and lifts me underneath my ass and back, putting me over his shoulder like one might a child. I open my bleary eyes and realize that we're touching sand. The boat sits sideways on the shore, knocked here by the tide.

He grabs my bag. My purse. I cannot move. Can only stare. The trees are tall and mossy. Thick. Untouched.

I don't know if I think the dark, overgrown forest just beyond the beach is beautiful or frightening. But I'm here.

I'm here, and the rain is falling harder every second.

\*

Want more Red & Wolfe? Part two will be out Wednesday, May 21. That's less than two weeks away! You can pre-order it now if you'd like: [http://www.amazon.com/Red-Wolfe-Part-II-Erotic-ebook/dp/B00K0PNVEC/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1399236696&sr=1-2&keywords=red+wolfe](http://www.amazon.com/Red-Wolfe-Part-II-Erotic-ebook/dp/B00K0PNVEC/ref=sr_1_2?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1399236696&sr=1-2&keywords=red+wolfe)

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