Dedication

Thanks to MB, who read it first. To Amy, who made it stronger. To my mom, who loved it, predictably. And to Liz, who corrigez’d my terrible français.

Thanks also to my editor, Anne, who chiseled away the excess and polished up the rough bits.

Biggest thanks of all to my husband, for suggesting we visit Nova Scotia. Near-moose-aulings aside, I couldn’t have asked for a finer honeymoon. You are truly a guillemot among herring gulls.
You’ve got to be frigging kidding me.
This was where she’d be getting naked?
Fallon halted so abruptly her sneakers kicked up two clouds of dust, making it feel as if she’d arrived early for a shoot-out in the Wild West. She gawked at the studio fifty yards farther down the long, gravel drive. It was a saltbox-style house, or had been—less a house now than a solarium. As she approached, Fallon found she could peer clear through the front windows to the backyard, as though it had been gutted of its rooms. Gutted and given more facelifts than an aging D-list celebrity. Dozens of mismatched windows had been installed, so many that the roof looked to be held up more by glass than by walls.
Perfect. She might as well strip and ride naked on a float through the town center for all the privacy this place offered.
“It’s worth it,” she whispered, forcing herself to believe the words. “Do it for Gloria.” She conjured her aunt’s smiling face. She conjured the memory of every kind thing Gloria had ever done for her, and she steeled herself. She mounted the front steps and studied the little brass door plaque a moment.
M.L. Emery, Malcontent
And world-renowned classical sculptor, or so she’d been told. Fallon had been picturing a grandfatherly sort of figure...eccentric but benign. Preferably warm and charming, though she was in no position to be choosy.
The fist clenching her tote bag prickled, begging for circulation. With an almighty exhalation, Fallon put her finger to the doorbell and gave it a push, hearing the chime through the open windows.
“A moment,” came the shouted reply.
She shifted uneasily on the doorstep. Above her the wind folded and refolded a Canadian flag with aggressive snaps. It was late summer in Nova Scotia, and the breeze coming off the ocean felt icy and unwelcoming, like a warning. She glanced beyond the rolling green hills to the craggy cliffs, the dark blue of the Atlantic crashing at their feet.
Another curt shout. “Yes, come in.”
She took a breath and pulled the screen door open, surprised to walk in not on the sculptor himself but two models—an elegant young woman and a striking man. The man was just zipping up the woman’s dress and Fallon hoped she hadn’t interrupted a tryst.
“May I help you?” the male model asked in a difficult-to-pinpoint accent, snapping his dark eyes to Fallon’s.
“I’m looking for the artist. Mr. Emery.”
“What do you want that bastard for?” He handed the young woman her purse from the floor.
“I have an appointment. Could you tell him Fallon Frost is here? If he’s in.”
His eyebrows rose with curiosity or realization, and he addressed the young woman with a hand on her lower back. “Excellent work today. I will call you.”
He nodded and smiled, and they exchanged double cheek kisses before she exited with a polite nod to Fallon.
“He’s in.” The man wiped a hand on his filthy pants and extended it.
Fallon shook it, understanding with a small start. “You’re M.L. Emery?”
His hand was warm and strong, coated in a dusty film. “Max is fine.”
Fallon’s insides did a somersault. This man was not what she’d been expecting. Not even remotely. Max Emery was too young, for starters. And he looked more like a rock star destined for a sensationally tragic and premature death than a classical sculptor. He stood six feet tall or close to it, slender but not skinny, with unruly black hair long enough to tuck behind his ears. Clay dust and paint coated his jeans, and he wore an untucked black T-shirt, also filthy. His muscular arms belied something beyond an artistic vocation. A laborer’s arms, Fallon thought, and swallowed.
“I apologize that I forgot your appointment,” he said. “I don’t usually have appointments.”
“Oh, sorry.”
“No matter. Refresh my memory, Miss Frost. Soon to be Mrs…?”
“Forrester,” she lied, stomach turning. Dear God, what a disgusting thought. The only thing that nauseated her more than that face-saving fib was her real motive for being here.
“And your fiancé didn’t come with you today?”
“No.”
Behind heavy black stubble, his mouth twitched—amused or offended, it was tough to pinpoint which. “Your
fiancé is investing a great deal of money in this. Doesn’t he want a say in the piece?”

“He gave me a photo. To give you an idea of what he wants.” Fallon could feel herself blushing already.

Max Emery frowned outright. His eyes narrowed and his lips pursed in a lopsided scowl.

“Is that not…sufficient?” Fallon asked.

He ran a hand through his messy hair. “The money he’s offering can compensate. But I’m not impressed.”

Fallon decided it was the accent of a Frenchman who’d learned English in Great Britain. An accent that couldn’t help its own contemptuousness.

“Sorry,” she said again.

Max flapped a hand designed to dismiss her worries. “No matter. May I make you a coffee?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

Fallon watched him stroll to the far side of the cottage to a huge, industrial sink. He had a lazy way of moving that made it seem as though he’d just rolled out of a bed full of satisfied women. A photograph hung on the wall beside the cupboards, and he paused to kiss two fingers and press them to the frame as he passed.

The studio matched its denizen: dusty and a bit off. The walls that would have created individual rooms had been reduced to support beams, lending the house a cavernous, cathedral quality. What had formerly been an attic had been half-removed and converted to a loft, reached by the spiral staircase winding up from the center of the floor. Fallon saw a bed there, positioned under one of many skylights, a mess of sheets and blankets heaped on it. The other half of the studio, from which the attic had been entirely removed, was bathed in light from the proliferation of mismatched windows. Mullioned and louvered, some modern and some less so, they looked to have been scavenged from buildings of any and all types and relocated here, to this sunny patchwork of a residence. Fallon spotted an old, clawfooted enamel bathtub parked immodestly below a tall window in the rear of the house and felt her eyebrows rise.

A kettle wailed.

Max poured steaming water into a French press and grabbed a wooden folding chair from beside the stove. He approached Fallon and snapped it open, setting it at her side.

“Thank you.”

“Sugar?” he asked.

“No. Cream, if you have it.”

“No cream. Black coffee and red wine are normally the sacraments of this house,” he said, as if reciting a proverb.

“But you may bring some next time, if you like.”

“Okay.” Fallon sat, clasping her hands, pretending to be entranced by the view through the front windows. In her periphery, Max crossed his arms over his chest, scrutinizing. She met his stare. He seemed to study her with detachment, as if she were some interesting object that he couldn’t quite identify.

“You’re not what I was picturing,” he said slowly.

Before she could echo these sentiments, he turned and walked back to the stove.

A minute later Fallon accepted a chipped mug filled with coffee so black she felt jittery just looking at it. Max dragged a stepladder over and perched on the second step, wrapping an arm around his knees.

He blew the steam off his cup. “So. Do you have this photo of the pose your fiancé is envisioning?” His baritone voice was smooth and rough at the same time, like cement.

“Yes.” Dread gurgled in Fallon’s stomach as she rooted through her canvas tote and withdrew the magazine clipping.

Max took it and studied it and frowned so deeply it bordered on disgust. “This is a joke.”

“No, it’s what he wants.” Fallon agreed that the photo was risqué, a pin-up to say the least, but she hadn’t expected this strong a reaction. She’d seen Max Emery’s work online—nudes, almost without exception.

“You wouldn’t be caught dead in this position,” he said, still staring at it.

Fallon rankled. As if this man knew the first thing about her. “It’s what he’s asking for.”

“Your fiancé set his price, Miss Frost, but not my terms.”

Her throat tightened. “It’s very important he’s happy with it.”

Max ran the tip of his tongue over the edge of his mouth. Balancing his cup on his knee, he pinched the corners of the clipping and ripped it cleanly in two. “I’m not a pornographer.”

Fallon watched with mounting panic as the torn paper fluttered to the floor. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to suggest that—”

“Young fiancé will be happy with the piece,” Max interrupted. “If he has seen my work, he knows what I do. Sensual. Not obscene.”

“I’m sure. It’s just that he’s very particular.” A soft thud scattered Fallon’s thoughts as a cat dropped from the loft onto a tall cabinet, then to the floor. It strolled across the dusty hardwood with an errant push against Max’s shins.
He ran a palm down its back, leaving a faint white print on its black fur.

“What’s your cat’s name?” Fallon asked, desperate for a change of topic.

“It is not my cat.”

“Oh. Well, what’s the cat’s name?”

He caught her eyes with his penetrating ones and held them for a long moment, then blinked, nonplussed. “It’s a cat.”

Fallon’s civility was fraying. Everything about this meeting was going even worse than she’d feared, and she could barely recognize herself this far out of her element. Where had the assertive and capable woman she knew herself to be at work and home gone to? She felt abandoned. And stranded.

She studied the man opposite her, trying to make sense of him. His irises were as near-black as the coffee he was sipping. He couldn’t be more than thirty-five, though his eyes seemed older. They were dark, utterly—dark lashes and brows and faintly darker skin and fine lines edging them—making him look as though he hadn’t slept in weeks. Fallon had a disturbing desire for them to snap back to hers. It was a troubling urge, a temptation, that fourth glass of wine at a lousy office party that always seems like a good idea at the time.

She thought of the woman who’d just left, all youth and grace and poise. She glanced down at her worn-out gray corduroys and yellow canvas sneakers, feeling like the antithesis of a French artist’s model. But then again, this was Cape Breton, not Paris. Besides, her clothing was most certainly not this man’s concern.

She cleared her throat. “Can we talk about the process? He’s very eager to know when the piece will be done.”

Max turned to stare pointedly at her, as if trying to guess what Fallon looked like beneath her clothes. And seeming as though he could. “Three months,” he concluded. “Barring geological tragedy.”

“All right.”

“Two weeks for studies and ten for the marble.” He ran a hand over his stubbly chin. “I trust your beloved can live without you for that long?”

Fallon started. “How much of that time do I actually need to be here for?”

“Every moment.”


“Because that is how I work.”

“Three months?” she asked, awestruck. “How many days a week?”

“Every day.”

“All day?”

He looked thoughtful. “Perhaps six hours a day. Ten o’clock to four. Peak sun. But I’m flexible.”

“It doesn’t sound like you are.” Fallon’s temper flared, just as it always did when she was faced with pushy, self-important men.

“If you’re unhappy with my terms I suggest you find a different sculptor, miss.”

“No,” she said, diminished. “It has to be you. He insisted.”

Max made a face that unequivocally asked, And you’re arguing with me why?

“But I need to be here all that time?”

Max sighed. “Do you have a work conflict?”

“I might.”

“Then allow me to be indiscreet,” he said. “Your fiancé has offered me seven hundred thousand for this commission.”

Fallon gritted her teeth to keep her jaw from dropping.

“American dollars. If he can toss that much away on a statue, I trust he can keep you afloat during an unpaid leave from your job, no?”

“You don’t understand—”

“I am sure I don’t,” he interrupted. “But I’m an artist, Miss Frost, not a doctor. I have no moral obligation to perform for you. If this is actually important, you will agree to my terms. They’re non-negotiable. Not because I cannot change them, but because I won’t. Do you see?”

“Why do I need to be here so much, though? It seems excessive.”

“It is all very dull and nonsensical, I’m afraid.” Max sounded as if he himself were bored by it. “I need your…energy, here with me. That is the best way I can explain it. You do not have to hold a pose every moment you’re here, but you do need to be here.”

“I was hoping you could take photos.” Fallon’s face warmed at the mere idea. “And work from those?”

He smiled, a glorified twitch of his lips. “I think you’ll agree you have three dimensions.”

“Well, could you…”

“Could I what?”
“Could you use another woman’s body? I’d pay you for the model’s time. I wanted to ask about that, anyway.”
Max’s eyes lit up. “What is wrong with yours?” He looked extremely eager to hear the answer.
“Nothing. I just…I’d prefer not to be naked in front of you.”
Another twitchy grin. “I very much doubt your fiancé is paying me a small fortune to play Frankenstein. Surely he wants your body, yes?”
Fallon bit her lip. “That he does.”
“You’ve got your answer.”

The cat jumped into Max’s lap.

Fallon saw the coffee in her mug quivering from her shaky grip and set it on the floor. Her host stroked the cat languidly—a Bond villain, complete with accent. She felt a powerful urge to run. In one corner a pair of eight-foot-tall hunks of white marble stood sentinel on wheeled dollies, looking as if they might stop her if she tried to make a break for it.

She wondered distractedly if Max lived here or if the bed and the kitchen trappings were just conveniences. Or if that bed was designed for dalliances with young models. She glanced at his hands. A couple of thick silver rings but none on that symbolic finger. He caught her scrutiny and returned it, staring pointedly at her own bare, third finger.

He set the cat and then his empty mug on the ground and caught her again with those magnetic eyes.

“What points would you like me to disappoint you on?”
“I’m not sure.”

He laughed and his smile made Fallon wonder if he wasn’t the sexiest man she’d ever seen this close up.

“Make no mistake,” Max said, “this is a very intimate process. And I don’t need your fiancé’s money, incidentally. If you do not want to do this, you’ll find the door is unlocked.”

“No—I want to do this. It’s very, very important.”

“To your fiancé?”

Fallon wished he’d stop using that word. She sat up straight and returned his stare. “No. To me.”

Max clapped his hands on his knees and stood. “All right then, Miss Frost. Let’s get started.”

Max watched his guest shift in her seat, hemorrhaging anxiety.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked.

“Are you prepared to take your clothes off today?” He caught her flinch from the question. She flinched from him, he suspected. Good. If she was going to change her mind, the sooner the better for both of them.

“Um…”

“I didn’t think so. How about down to a T-shirt, at least? Give me some sense of your body.” He studied her with his head cocked, doing his best impression of lechery.

“I’ve got a tank top on…but I’d like to keep my pants on, if that’s okay.”

“That will do.” Max stood and began gathering tools for the sitting—an easel and a second chair. He grabbed his leather tool belt from the workbench and strapped it around his hips. In place of drills and wrenches, it held pencils and carving tools. Fallon eyed it as though she feared he might draw a pistol on her.

“Feel free to use the loo.” He aimed a finger in the direction of the one enclosed space in the whole studio. She seemed eager to accept the offer, and Max bet she wanted more than a mere layer of clothing between them as a barrier.

He turned to the cat as the door closed.

“Oscar,” he hissed. It ran to him and he gathered it into his arms and pointed it toward the bathroom. “What do you think, eh? Do you think she’ll last the day?” Max half-hoped so. The money was obscene. Three months lost on this commission would earn him enough to fund four years’ worth of the projects he’d rather be consumed with, maybe longer. Four years of complete freedom from commercial work… But something about the deal smelled unmistakably sour.

“She is more than just shy,” he said to the cat. “She wants this just a fraction more than she hates the idea of it.” She’d hate the process too, Max could tell already. “It would be a kindness to drive her away now.” The cat purred its agreement and Max pressed his lips between its ears. “I won’t blame you if you stay away for a while.” He dropped it gently to the floor as he heard the water run.

Fallon emerged, face pale. She took her cardigan off and tucked it into her bag and approached.

“Is this okay?” she asked, sitting again on the folding chair. She had on a cotton camisole that revealed her long arms and neck, a slender waist leading down to a far more voluptuous lower half.

Max scrutinized her openly, trying to gauge how rude he could appear without risking cruelty. Trying to give her every chance to change her mind.
“That will do. For now.” He poked around in the compartments of his tool belt and selected a soft charcoal stick.

“You may do as you wish. I just want to get a preliminary look at you.”

She crossed her legs and clasped her hands on top of her knees, focusing her eyes out the front windows.

“Your hair,” Max said, starting to sketch.

“What about my hair?”

“That is going to be a fantastic challenge.”

She touched a hand to the mess of auburn curls brushing her shoulders. “Sorry.”

“No no, that’s a good thing. I love a challenge.” Max smiled at the easel, where his hand was struggling to capture his first impressions. The sketch felt as rigid and labored as its subject’s affected calm.

Fallon cleared her throat. “How close to my fiancé’s picture is the statue actually going to be?”

Max caught her stumble on the F-word again, as though she’d hit a piece of gristle.

“I cannot tell you, yet. I will get to know you very well in the next couple of weeks.” If you make it that long. “Hopefully by then I will have a posture in mind. He will not be disappointed, even though it will not be his ridiculous vision. That photo…” He shook his head. “All it tells me is that he wants something sexual. I don’t do butcher-block sex. I do sensuality, like I said. Some people can’t see the distinction. If your fiancé is as simple a man as I suspect, I promise you it will have the same effect.”

Fallon cringed but said nothing.

Max smiled deeply and met her eyes. “You do not defend your beloved’s taste?”

“I wasn’t pleased with that photo, either.”

“But no words in defense of his character?”

She frowned. “I’m not an argumentative person.”

Max suspected it was one of the most bald-faced lies he’d ever been fed. “I find that difficult to believe.”

Fallon changed topics as though veering to avoid careening off a cliff. “The woman who left when I got here—she’s very beautiful.”

“Yes.” He paused his sketching to stare thoughtfully into the middle distance. “She has the most extraordinary scar.”

Fallon’s brow bunched. “I see.”

They fell silent for a long time. Max worked feverishly, trying to catch all the little details of his model before his opinions gelled and he lost objectivity. It was a relief to give himself over to the process. Fallon probably didn’t realize he was as uncomfortable with this partnership as she so clearly was.

After an hour or so she adjusted, leaning forward and crossing her arms atop her knees, hands dangling.

Max grinned. “Oh yes. That is so you.” The charcoal scratched enthusiastically across the pad, a connection finally sparking.

“How can you tell if something is ‘me’ so soon?”

“You do sadness very well.”

She seemed to consider her defeatist body position. “I’m not sad.”

“This pose begs to differ,” he said, feeling energized. “You wear malaise like a silk gown.”

Fallon narrowed her eyes, looking fed up with him. Excellent.

“What is it you do for money, Miss Frost? Or shall I guess?”

She shifted in her chair. “You can guess, if you want. Although I can’t imagine what conclusions you’ve managed to draw, two hours into knowing me.”


“Why on earth do you think that?” Her tone told him he was right.

“That’s true.” She seemed glad of an invitation to slight him.

“You strike me as rather combative. I think maybe you have a job that goes unlauded. Something to do with biology,” Max said, divining his impressions from her no-nonsense style of dress and the air of practicality and curiosity that surrounded her. A hundred tiny clues that spoke volumes. “I think you do something that you love very much, and also I think that you would much rather be doing it now, instead of being trapped here in this dusty studio with me.”

“Exactly.” She seemed glad of an invitation to slight him.

“And I think you will be very difficult to work with.” Max smiled to himself.
“Oh do you?”

“May I call you Fallon?” he asked primly, sketching again.

“Fine.”

“Fallon,” he said, and he felt them shiver in tandem from the intimacy with which the word left his lips. “I question your motives for being here. Or rather, I fail to find any.”

“I have my reasons.”

“They are not in alignment with those of the man who has commissioned me.”

“You disapprove of the kind of patron my fiancé is. Is that it?”

Max shrugged. “Even the most distasteful patron will eventually die. It is not the patrons I hold to a high standard.”

Her eyes narrowed again. “I see.”

“Would you like to know something, Miss Frost? Fallon?” He held her gaze, caught there against his will for a long moment. “I do not believe you have a fiancé at all.”

She fidgeted with the hair elastic on her wrist, face blank, eyes cold and steady. Too steady. “Oh?”

“Certainly not one you care about.”

“Why do you say that?”

He cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest. “Because I’m asking you to pose for your lover, and you’re giving me a woman who looks like she’s waiting for a pap smear.”

Fallon blushed deeply. “Well, if this job’s not to your liking, why are you agreeing to it? You said you don’t need the money.”

“Have you ever been given seven hundred thousand dollars, Miss Frost?”

She froze, all the pink draining from her cheeks. “No.”

“Then you will just have to trust me when I say it makes life a hell of a lot more pleasant.”

“Fine,” she said, icily. “And you know, incidentally, maybe it’s you I’m not comfortable with. Ever think of that?”

He smiled. “This is no more for me than a photograph is for the camera that captures it. It’s the man on the other side that you have a problem with. I think maybe, you and I, we feel the same way about this man. Your fiancé. I think maybe we’ll both do as we’re told if the price is right.”

She held the pose but her tone turned deadly. “You watch yourself.”

He smiled deeper and licked his lips. “No matter. This is only the first day. I will figure you out soon enough.”

“Why do you even need to?” she asked, pissed.

“Have you seen my work?”

She nodded. “Pictures of it, yes.”

“Well, perhaps it is time you met some of your contemporaries in person.”
Fallon exited through the studio’s rear door into a small vegetable garden. Beyond it lay a long expanse of yard, wild with tall grass and wind-twisted trees. The smell of saltwater and tomato plants yanked at her, trying to pull her into some indeterminate memory.

Scattered around the immediate area were a dozen marble casualties, busts and full-sized figures, all broken. She approached the closest one, a nude woman, a bit overweight, her elbows out, hands clasped behind her head. A great hunk of white stone was missing from her ribs to her knee—cracked off along a fault—but she looked positively living. Fallon felt sure the ample flesh was actually quivering, certain that if she touched the rendered skin it would be as warm as her own. Warmer. Eerie. Beautiful but unnerving. Much like Max Emery.

“What do you think?”
Fallon nearly yelped, not realizing he’d followed her outside. She caught her breath. “It’s very…”

“Disturbing?” he offered, sidling up to her and staring at the sculpture.

“No, not that bad.”
He nodded, tucking his hands in his back pockets. “That is good. I don’t like when people say that. But they do.”

“It’s a little disconcerting. It feels very…real.”

“Thank you. You can touch it, if you want to.”

“I’d rather hold a mirror under her nose.” Fallon leaned in for a final look, swallowed uneasily and went inside.

She wanted to be away from Max, from his energy and his unnatural talent. She stole a closer look at the framed photograph in the kitchen as she passed, the one he’d touched his fingers to. A beautiful, twenty-something woman smiled warmly at the camera. Judging from the photo quality it had been taken in the seventies, and judging from the eyes she could be no one aside from his mother. Max Emery, World-Renowned Classical Sculptor and Momma’s Boy. With that curious thought furrowing her brow, Fallon returned to where she’d been posing.

Max followed and scooted a chair near to hers. He propped an open sketchbook on his forearm, holding a thick pencil in his charcoal-smeared fingers. Fallon noticed a tattoo, simple black lines along one of his pronounced triceps. She couldn’t make out the design.

“So,” he said. “You see now that what I do is something slightly more than a stone snapshot of a person, yes?”

“I do.”

“Good. Because right now, you’re less lively and real to me than any of those hunks of rock out there.” He caught her sour look and fixed her with an oddly predatory glance. “But don’t worry. We’ve only just begun.”

“I’ll do my best.” Fallon knew anybody could catch how half-assed this promise sounded.

“I’m going to do some studies of your face.” He began to draw. “Move as you wish. Grab something to read, if you like.” He nodded to a card table housing a teetering pile of periodicals.

The magazine on top had a French title and its cover boasted a macro image of what looked like either bacteria or psychedelic art. Fallon rifled through the stack until she found the comics and puzzle section of an outdated newspaper.

“Can I borrow something to write with?” She held the pages up to show Max the crossword.

He nodded and fished a pencil out of his tool belt for her.

“Thanks.” Oh good, a Times puzzle. Fallon happily poured all her attention into it. Or nearly all—she couldn’t get the feeling of Max’s eyes off her skin. It was as tangible as fingertips grazing her body.

“I am no good at those,” Max said a few minutes later, his hand still flying across the pad.

“Crosswords?”
He shook his head. “There is too much pop culture. I am no good with celebrities.”

“Me neither. Or opera,” she added, glad of a normal conversation with this abnormal man. “They always throw in an opera question. Or like a fort from a war in the fifteenth century.”

He smiled. “I have been in the Times puzzle.”

Fallon couldn’t tell if he was bragging or not. “Well, that’s an honor, I suppose.”

He made a dismissive sputtering noise with his lips that caught her off-guard in its playfulness. “It was many years ago when I still lived in New York. I am sure I’m a dream crossword answer. Obscure. And ‘M.L. Emery’ is a very nice collection of very obedient letters.”

“Do you remember what the clue was? Your clue?”

“You have quite extraordinary eyes,” Max announced suddenly, and Fallon couldn’t help but raise them to meet his.
“Thanks.”
“What would you call that color?”
“Um, gray.”
“Cerulean,” he corrected. “Not the blue. One coat of green cerulean over white stoneware.”
“You’ve lost me. Is this pottery?”
“Your eyes,” Max continued, “are the color of a two-inch-thick pane of tempered glass.”
Fallon couldn’t decide if this was poetry or evidence of some vague mental affliction. “Greenish gray,” she amended, trying to be agreeable.
“Indeed. Look up at the skylights,” he ordered and she complied. “With that lovely dark ring. And so clear. Your eyes make me wish I worked in color, Miss Frost.”
“Well. Thanks.” She lowered her gaze back to the crossword, blinking away the spots in her vision. She wondered if he was hitting on her in his own strange way. She wondered why it was she didn’t disapprove.
“Your crow’s feet,” he said, eyes on his work. “How old are you?”
Fallon tensed, trying very hard not to find this last comment insulting. She wasn’t bothered by this first flirtation with aging but the flippant way he’d pointed it out threw her off-balance. “Twenty-nine.” She felt every last day of it at this instant.
He nodded.
“How old are you?”
“Thirty-three.”
“Ah.” Her eyebrows rose as she pondered again how a man so relatively young could command such lucrative commissions. She had some research to do on Max Emery, clearly.
“And when is your birthday?” he demanded.
“October ninth.”
He broke into a grin. “So you shall be here for your historic thirtieth birthday, then?” he said, glowing. “I could let you have the day off, of course.”
“I don’t have anything special planned. Yet,” she added, an escape clause.
“Well, perhaps your misogynist of a supposed fiancé could spare you for that day,” Max said loftily. Before Fallon could react to his shamelessness he added, “I do love birthdays.”
Her fingers clenched the newspaper with a rustle as she made a concerted effort to not rise to the bait. “Oh?”
“Ah, yes. Birthdays are fantastic. If you are here I’ll make you supper, how is that?”
“Fine.” She decided then to most definitely take that day off. Fascinating or not, this man was a provocateur, and tactless. Unapologetically so. Like a good many people she routinely bumped heads with. Like the man who’d sent her here.
Max set his pad aside and stood, peeling off his T-shirt—it was late August and the midday sun still asserted the season. Underneath he wore a sleeveless white undershirt and under that lay an impressive landscape of a torso. Fallon swallowed, registering the heat of the studio.
He took up his study again and she couldn’t resist watching those arms. Definitely not the beefy type, though what bulk Max did carry was pure muscle. He had shoulders that made Fallon bite her lip, and she was not the lip-biting sort. A pair of thin lanyards hung around his neck, one suspending a small silver disc, the other an antique key, both obscuring the tattooed lines tracing one half of his collarbone. Just above the neck of his undershirt Fallon could see a fine spray of hair, equally black.
She needed more conversation to draw her attention away from these unsettling observations. “So…”
“Yes?” He looked up but only to eyeball some feature or other before recording it on his pad.
“How long have you lived on Cape Breton?”
“Eh…eight years, now.”
“It’s a beautiful piece of property. I didn’t see a car.”
“No, I never learned how to drive. And I never plan to.”
“Oh.”
“And you came here on foot?” he asked. “I did not hear any engines.”
She nodded.
“I am very glad you do not have a car.”
“Well, I have one back in New York,” she admitted.
“City?”
“Not quite. A little farther up the coast.”
“Good. I hate New York City.” His tone was light and conversational. Fallon rankled. “Perhaps the feeling is mutual.”
“Oh, it is. Where will you be staying while you are on Cape Breton?”
“Here in Pettiplaise, I guess. My stuff’s at a little bed and breakfast.”
“No no, get yourself a cottage,” Max said. “They are so cheap this time of year. And who can stand eating with strangers every morning? Rent a cottage and you can have your own kitchen. Your own bathroom. You can tell friends to visit you. Your fiancé, so that I may meet him.”
“Um, maybe.”
“Yes, get a cottage,” Max said again, enlivened. “We will be neighbors. One day soon, we will take a walk. We will find you a nice one. I like my prisoners to feel comfortable,” he added with a devilish smirk.
“Fine, I’ll take a look.”
“When I was a child,” he said, still sketching, “I lived in a place a bit like this. In France, near the ocean. A tiny village in Brittany. Everything rundown, everyone poor. Small houses and clear air. The sea. So quiet.” He sounded far away, thinking of these things.
“It sounds very… idyllic.”
“Like everything in childhood, looking back.”
“I guess.”
He glanced up. “You do not pine for your childhood?”
“Not really. It wasn’t that amazing, to be honest.”
“I am sad to hear that.” His earnest stare held Fallon hostage. “I did not get a very long childhood, myself. Perhaps we only pine for what is taken from us.” His eyes finally released hers and he went back to his work, arm muscles twitching and flexing, distracting her.
“I, um… How long do I need to stay here today? I need to make a couple phone calls. For work,” Fallon lied, desperate for some notion of when she’d be free of this man and his unsettling ways.
“Very well… give me two more hours. I will make lunch and do a quick bust, and then you may go.”
“Oh, good.”
That lopsided smile again. “You do not like me.” He sounded pleased by the idea.
“Tough.”
“I don’t know you, yet.”
“But you suspect that you do not like me.”
Fallon sat up straight. “I find you extremely disquieting.”
“That is good. That’s a new adjective. I have not been called that before.”
“And self-important.”
“That one, I have heard.” His hand sketched away. “Though I assure you I am of little importance.”
Fallon bit her lip, flustered.
“I do not think I like you, either,” Max said, suddenly standing. “I think you will get on my nerves very greatly.” He dropped his tool belt with a clatter.
Fallon swiveled her butt on the chair, addressing his long back as he strode to the fridge. “Oh, really? Weren’t you just eager to celebrate my birthday?”
He glanced over his shoulder. “It’s okay. I very much like having my nerves gotten upon. The people I don’t like are so much more interesting than the ones who please me.”
Fallon put her finger on why this man bothered her so much. This was a game to him. And to her it was very, very serious.
“You talk about people like they’re objects, or specimens.”
“To me,” he said, rummaging in the fridge and setting containers on the counter, “they are.”
“That’s terrible.”
“Don’t worry. I am not a sociopath.” He shut the fridge and turned to her. “But you have to understand that for my work, I dissect people. Visually. Spiritually, maybe.” He slid a knife from a block and wiggled the blade in her direction. “It is my job to open you up and see how all of your little gears work, then I put you back together in a piece of stone. And if I can’t stand you, then it will be that much more fun, you see?”
“No, I don’t.”
“Well, I suppose you will just have to take my word for it, then.”
Fallon rolled her eyes and held her tongue. A few minutes later Max handed her a bowl of thick-sliced mozzarella cheese and olive oil, cherry tomatoes and crushed basil from his garden.
“Thanks,” she muttered, still tender from his insensitive conversational style. She wanted to chalk it up to a cultural rift, but she’d met plenty of French people in her life and none of them were half as brusque as this one.
Max gathered utensils, shutting the drawer with a well-placed swing of his hip. He gave her a fork and a napkin and went back for a bottle of wine and a glass. He sat and poured her a healthy measure of cabernet. She accepted it with wide eyes, and he clanked the bottle against the glass and took a swig.
“À la vôtre.”
“Cheers,” she said dubiously and took a tiny sip.
“So, tell me more about your fiancé.” Max’s smile could only be described as wicked. He licked the red off his lips.
“Well,” Fallon began, feeling nauseous. Why had she bothered lying about that? If she’d known how galling Max Emery would turn out to be, she wouldn’t have wasted her time worrying what he might think of her. “He’s a property developer. And an art enthusiast, obviously.”
“You live together?”
“No. Not yet, I mean.”
He nodded, openly skeptical.
“You clearly don’t care for him, and you’ve never even met him.”
“I spoke to him on the phone last week, for a few minutes. He struck me as a person I would very much like to watch fall down a flight of stairs,” Max said casually. “And I daresay you do not care for him, either.”
“That’s one man’s uninformed opinion.”
“Just admit it—you don’t have a fiancé. Not that man, at least. I will not think any less of you. Quite the contrary.”
Her nostrils flared. “Fine.”
“That’s better. Was that really so hard?” He raised his eyebrows and took another drink. “So.”
“What?” Fallon demanded, at the end of her very frayed rope.
“He grinned. “So, do you tell me now about this mysterious patron who is so desperate to get his hands on the next best thing to your naked body? Or will that take more than just the one bottle?”
Fallon blushed and took far too deep a gulp of her wine. “You’re overstepping your bounds,” she said after a breath. “Unless that’s yet another thing you desperately need to know in order to make this statue?”
“No, I am just nosy.” His eyes glittered.
Fallon’s skin went warm, fevery from the alcohol. “Well, get used to not knowing.”
They fell silent, eating. Fallon tried very hard to find the food unpalatable but it was too delicious to deny. The wine heightened her senses, or perhaps it was the strange, intense energy vibrating out of her companion.
“This is fantastic,” she admitted politely a few minutes later, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the bowl.
“I’m glad you think so. Do you eat meat? You seem like perhaps you would not.”
“Not generally,” she said, unnerved yet again. “How can you tell?”
“Your shoes and your belt, your bag. All canvas. No leather. Just a guess.”
“You’re a very perceptive man.” It was a thought she wouldn’t have shared a few minutes earlier. She took another drink, the sensation of the alcohol warming her blood an odd complement to the combative exchange. “You ought to be a detective.”
The corners of Max’s lips curled. “Sometimes I suspect that I am. Do you eat seafood?”
“As long as it’s sustainable.”
His face lit up with triumph and he pointed his fork at her. “I knew you were a biologist. That is good. There is fantastic shellfish here. Oysters, mussels. Crab. I will spoil you rotten with local delicacies.”
Fallon let herself stare openly at him for a few moments. Everything this man said sounded like a cross between a threat and a seduction.
“So, tell me, Fallon Frost… You have no fiancé. Whoever this patron is, he is not your lover. Is there someone else? I would ask for you to think of someone you long for,” he said between bites, “when you are posing for me in a week or two. When we find the right position.”
Fallon felt quite certain that most of Max Emery’s models wouldn’t need to conjure the image of a man they craved when they sat for him—they probably only had to open their eyes to locate such a muse.
“I’m sure I can think of something,” she said evasively, deciding now that her mental inspiration would be someone as unlike this man as possible. A beefy, blond, blue-eyed jock.
“More wine?”
Fallon was shocked to find her formerly generous glass empty. “No. That’s plenty.” She passed him her bowl and fork, and he cleared away the dishes and bottle. The cat startled her, brushing her calf. It sniffed her fingers.
“Oh, hello.”
Max frowned over his shoulder and addressed the animal. “Eh! Laisse-la tranquille.”
The cat abandoned Fallon to rush to him, leaping onto the counter expectantly. He nudged it affectionately with an elbow as he dried his hands. “Qu’est-ce que tu veux? Eh, you nuisance?” He pulled a covered dish from the fridge, arranged some sort of meat on a saucer and placed it on the floor where the cat set upon it with gusto.
“You say it’s not yours, but you feed it like it’s a pet.”
Max returned with a private smile on his lips. He grabbed a hefty bag of gray clay from a shelf and tossed it with
a loud slap onto a worktable. He looked to be savoring a joke only he was in on.

“'Yes?'” Fallon prompted.

“I was just thinking,” he began, unknotting the bag. “That both of you—you and that cat.” He nodded to it. “You
arrived here in very much the same fashion. On my doorstep, barely invited, demanding and ungrateful.” He
laughed. “And yet I still feed you both.”

Fallon was torn between seething anger and amusement—his playful tone made it impossible to interpret how
mean he was trying to be.

Max met her eyes. “And if I stroked either of you the wrong way, I doubt very much that you’d hesitate to sink
your claws into me.” He began wedging a ball of clay against the tabletop. “Funny, no?”

“Hilarious,” she said, cold. “I can’t imagine why you keep letting us in.”

“It’s only that I find one of you so very pleasant. And the other,” he added, staring blatantly at her, “will just have
to grow on me.”

Fallon held down the three button on her cell phone and listened to the tone as it speed-dialed. She glanced around
the inn’s far-too-quaint bedroom, praying Rachel was home from work by now.

“Well, hello, weary traveler!”

Fallon didn’t think she’d ever been so relieved to hear her best friend’s voice. “Hey, Rache. Greetings from Cape
Breton.”

She heard stretching behind Rachel’s words, the sounds of her getting comfortable. Probably on their ratty,
overstuffed sofa. Homesickness hit Fallon like a truck.

“So, how does it feel?” Rachel asked. “Being a famous artist’s muse?”

Fallon let rip a sigh of utmost exasperation. “Oh my God, what am I doing here?”

“Wish I knew, Fal. Preserving your childhood, if I understood you correctly. More importantly though, what’s he
like? This M.L. Emery character? Norman Rockwell or Andy Warhol?”

“Neither. He’s...odd. Really odd.”

“Artist,” Rachel said, as if this were an affliction with a predictable set of symptoms. “Naturally. But details,
please? What sort of oddball’s gawking at your nakedness?”

Fallon flinched. “He’s not, yet. I need you to Google him for me. There’s no internet at my bed and breakfast.”

“Ooh, what about him?”

Fallon heard a chair scrape on the other end of the line and the chime of a computer waking up. “Just the basics, I
guess. I was massively unprepared today.”

“I thought you looked him up before you left.”

“I looked up his work, so I’d know what sort of thing I was getting myself into. Then all I saw was naked people
and I kind of ran away from the computer.”

“You’re such a prude.” The sounds of typing, then a pause. “Wow, he’s only thirty-three?”

“Yeah. That was the biggest surprise.”

“Right...”

Fallon itched with impatience. “So?”

“Sorry, just reading. ‘M.L. Emery, thirty-three, born in the village of Manent, France. Discovered at...’ Whoa!”

“What?”

“Sorry. ‘Discovered at age twelve and brought by a benefactor to England to study classical sculpture.’ Wow, a
phenom.”

“What else?” Fallon toyed with the fringe bordering a throw pillow.

“Let’s see...moved into his own London studio at age fifteen, New York at nineteen, blah blah gallery names,
blah blah eccentric, press-shy, recluse, blah blah blah. Bunch of name-dropping, mostly.”

“Nothing else?”

“Let me try another site,” Rachel said.

“Wife? Kids?”

“I’m working on it—holy shit!”

“What?”

“Dude. He is seriously sexy.”

Fallon rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on.”

“’The artist in his studio,’” Rachel said, apparently reading a caption. “I mean, damn. Is that why you want to
know if he’s married?”
“No. Definitely not. I just… I don’t get him. I was curious.” She groaned, flustered. “I was expecting some old
guy, you know, and he’s like… I don’t know.”
She heard more clicking on Rachel’s end.
“Is he tall?” Rachel demanded, always her first question about any friend’s new love interest.
“Dunno, a bit. Six feet?”
“Tall enough,” Rachel said. “Does he have an accent still?”
“He’s got a couple.”
“Hot, Fallon. Does he need anyone else to get naked for him? You know, for art?”
“Ha ha, easy for you to say. He’s like, way too intense.”
“And how is that not hot?”
“You know me,” Fallon said. “I don’t do intense.”
“Who do you do, then?” Rachel asked in a bored voice, followed by more clicking. “Jesus, Fal, can I come for a
visit?”
“Take a cold shower, please. Give your boyfriend a jump.”
“Oh, whoa!”
“What?”
“Listen to this.” Rachel cleared her throat officiously. “Bear in mind this website looks a bit gossipy. ’It is widely
speculated that Emery faked a self-destructive addiction to heroin at the height of his commercial career in order to
withdraw from the high-profile art scene. After leaving Manhattan, he gained further notoriety by abandoning his
trademark sensual nudes in favor of an extensive foray sculpting subjects with serious physical deformities. The
switch was called a gimmick by critics in the art world, though Emery never promoted the studies, sold the pieces,
or granted interviews on the subject. He currently resides in Nova Scotia and has not spoken to any member of the
press in over seven years.’ Whoa.”
“Indeed.”
“I’m not seeing anything about wives or children, Fal. Lucky, lucky you. How long are you stuck taking your
clothes off for this controversial Frenchman?”
Fallon groaned again, tempted to smother herself with the pillow. “Three months.”
“Yikes. That’s okay for work?”
“It’ll have to be. Feel like watering my plants?”
Rachel laughed. “Three months? I’ll be renting your room and office out to transients by the end of the week.”
“Cute.”
“Only to supplement your lack of income. We’ve still got a mortgage to pay. Well, it’s good to hear you landed
safe, anyhow. Even if you sound a bit miserable.”
“Sorry, I shouldn’t whine. This is worth it.” Fallon adopted it then as the mantra she’d need to keep her sanity
intact for the next twelve weeks.
“Give it a chance, before you knock it,” Rachel said. “It might liberate you.”
“Oh, thanks.”
“Seriously. Intense or not, this experience could be really interesting. Give him a shot. You never give anyone a
chance to stick around long enough to grow on you. Except me, and that’s only because you couldn’t get rid of me.”
“That’s an exaggeration,” Fallon said defensively.
“If you say so. This could be good, you being trapped with some freaky artist. It might get you out of your
element, shake up those safe little routines you’re addicted to.”
“You think it’s a good thing that I have to get naked in order to keep my biggest rival from bulldozing Gloria’s
house?”
“No, sweetie, I’m just looking for a silver lining. It’s hard not to, with a situation this weird.” Rachel sounded
strained. “Damn it, I wish you could just sue him.”
“Even if he got put away for being a complete creep, that still wouldn’t save the property. Some other greedy old
man could buy it and turn it into a strip mall. As disgusting as this deal is, it’s the only chance I have to ensure that
the house can’t get knocked down.”
“You have his word on that?” Rachel asked.
“In writing. He gets the statue, I get the deed.”
“What sort of a rich douchebag can even afford to play such creepy games?”
“The same one who’s ruined half the wetlands I’ve fought to preserve, among other things.”
Rachel made an exasperated noise. “Is he actually hot for you, or is this like him being sick?”
“Who knows. Vindictive or perverted, does it even make a difference?”
“Well, it’s effed up. What have you ever done to him?”
“Ruined a few multi-million-dollar real estate deals.”
“True. Which you should be home doing now.”
“No shit,” Fallon said and instantly regretted it. “Sorry. I don’t mean to snap at you. It was just such a weird-ass day.”
“Be as snappy as you want. It sounds like you’re stuck between a perv and an eccentric place. But try and remember that Emery’s not Forrester. Try and at least enjoy getting nakeds for him, just to spite the man you’re actually supposed to be creeped out by.”
Fallon took a deep breath. “I’ll try. Thanks for the perspective. My best to Josh, okay?”
“Indeed. Oh, and Fal?”
“Yeah?”
“Get laid, while you’re up there, won’t you?”
“Oh, God.”
“Seriously. Your hymen’s going to grow back, it’s been so long. Have a fling. It might lighten you up.”
“Goodbye, Rache.”
“Bye, sweetie. Call me tomorrow.”
Fallon flipped her phone closed, dreading the next call she had to make. She dug through her bag for the business card belonging to her least favorite person on the face of the earth.
It rang twice before that familiar, hateful voice answered. “Donald Forrester.”
“It’s Fallon, Donald.” His name stung her throat like bile.
“Fallon, my darling! How are you finding Cape Breton? I’ve heard it’s just beautiful,” he boomed, in that hale and hardy, grandfatherly tone that didn’t match the slithering snake he really was.
“Yeah, it’s great. I don’t want to talk to you, except to say Emery will do the statue. He said it’ll take three months, so expect it in November sometime. Okay?”
“Wonderful, just wonderful.” He sounded so pleased Fallon wished she could somehow punch him through the magic of cellular technology.
“He said he won’t do the exact…pose you requested. He found it as tacky and sexist as I do, I’m happy to report,” she said. “You’ll have to be happy with whatever direction he decides to go in. He doesn’t know what it’ll be yet. It sounds like a long process.”
“I’m sure I’ll be delighted. He does beautiful work, just beautiful. Finest artist alive today. I’ve always wanted to own one of his pieces and now… Well this is truly a delight. An honor.”
“Great. I’m going to hang up now, and I’m not going to talk to you again until November, all right? Don’t ever call me on this number, either.”
Fallon didn’t wait for the lecherous land developer to sneak in a creepy farewell. She shuddered theatrically to herself after snapping the phone closed.
Max was right about patrons, at least—in two or three decades’ time, Donald Forrester would retire to his miserable, opulent grave, and good riddance. After that, the marble version of Fallon’s naked, thirty-year-old self would be the property of some other collector. Perhaps even a museum. It gave her a little jolt to imagine such a thing. Centuries from now, if the human race hadn’t yet destroyed itself, someone might be staring at her white, pear-shaped facsimile, wondering who she’d been and why she was perched on a plinth among other famous works of art.
Odd. Definitely odd.

“Excuse me?”
Morning sunlight glanced off the little table by the coffee shop’s front window. Fallon looked up from her crossword to find the young, graceful model she’d encountered the previous day in Max Emery’s studio standing before her. She wore a half-apron emblazoned with the café’s logo.
“Oh, hello.” Fallon wasn’t sure if she was being approached for coffee-related reasons or social ones. “You’re Max’s…”
“I’m one of his models, I guess,” the woman—girl, really—said with an awkward smile. “I’m Erin.” She extended a slender hand.
“Fallon.”
They shook politely.
“Um.” Erin’s blue eyes darted across the tabletop, from the near-empty cup to the Saturday crossword to Fallon’s phone. “Do you need another drink or anything?”
“No thanks. Not yet.”
“Okay. I could sure use one. And it’s only my first day,” Erin added with a tired laugh. Coffee splatters peppered her white T-shirt and she looked exhausted.

Fallon glanced around the little shop. It was the no-man’s-land between breakfast and lunch and she was the only patron save an elderly woman adding sugar to a takeaway cup at the counter. Another barista was stationed by the register.

“Would you like to sit down?” Fallon ventured. “I wouldn’t mind grilling you about the town, if you’re not busy…?”

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt.”

“You’re not. I’m totally stumped on this.” Fallon tapped the puzzle with her eraser and slid it to one side.

“Let me see if I can take a break.” Erin went the counter and came back shortly with a coffee and sat down opposite Fallon.

“I like your name,” Erin said, timid.

“Oh, thanks…” Fallon stalled out, hopeless with chitchat.

Erin came to her rescue. “So, what do you do? Like, for a job?”

“I’m an ecologist. And an environmental advocate, lately.”

“Oh, cool. I love dolphins. Do you work with them at all?”

Fallon smiled, registering how young this woman must be. “No, not directly. I used to spend a lot of time wading around in bays, collecting eelgrass. Fieldwork. That’s about as close as I get to dolphins. But lately I’m mostly stuck inside courtrooms, arguing about conservation reform.”

“Are you a lawyer?” Erin asked, sounding impressed.

“No, just a loudmouth.” Fallon leaned back in her chair. “So, how long have you been here? On Cape Breton?”

“Only a couple weeks.”

“Did you move here?” Fallon asked.

“Well, I hadn’t planned on it. But I’m thinking about it now. That’s why I got a job. All my stuff’s back in Ohio, though.”

“It’s really beautiful here,” Fallon offered lamely. “What do you do in Ohio?”

“Well, I’m starting college next month, in New York City, actually. Or I’m supposed to.”

“Wow, exciting! So, you’re only like eighteen, then?” Fallon asked carefully.

“I will be, in a couple weeks.”

Fallon’s stomach gurgled. Seventeen? And Max was how old? Please, God, don’t let him be a creepy old letch. One was enough. “So how did you meet…”

“Mr. Emery? Max,” Erin amended, sounding like she’d never called him this to his face but longed to.

“Yeah.”

“It’s a weird story.”

“Too weird for a coffee break?”

Erin bit her lip. “Maybe. I’ll try and give you the SparkNotes version. Um, when I was younger, like ten, I had to have this really strange…procedure. It was featured in all sorts of surgery magazines and stuff. Mr. Emery wrote to me a few months ago. He reads medical journals, I guess. He’s sort of weird, you know? He wrote to me and invited me to come and sit for him, you know, for money. I have this really huge scar, on my hip. He thinks it’s beautiful, I guess.” She fidgeted with her cup.

“Wow. That’s pretty brave of you. I wouldn’t have been caught dead with my clothes off in front of anybody when I was your age.” Let alone Max Emery.

“When I was younger I had to do all the time, for doctors. It’s not that big a deal. Well, I mean…” She blushed deeply, her pale skin burning deep pink. “It’s a little weird. With him.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Dear God, here it comes—he’s a pervert.

“You know…he’s so not a doctor.”

Fallon took a sip of her cold cappuccino, dread wrenching her insides. “How do you mean?”

“You know. Don’t you think he’s hot?”

Fallon nearly sprayed her drink across the table. “Oh, well.”

“I do.” Erin’s eyes were aglow in that way only women who’ve just fallen in love can manage. “And he’s got a hot accent.”

“I suppose.”

“There’s just something about him…”

“It’s called charisma,” Fallon said dryly.

“I know he’s, like, a lot older than me, obviously,” Erin went on, animated, clearly on her favorite topic of conversation. “And he wouldn’t go there.”
Fallon bit her lip. “You don’t think?”
“No, I don’t think he’s like that. Actually,” Erin said, smile fading. “Posing for him… I’ve been over there like a dozen times now, right?”
“Okay.”
“And you know what it’s like?”
“No, what’s it like?” Fallon asked.
“It’s like I’m there, but I’m there with another girl who’s like ten times prettier than me, like I’m invisible.”
“I don’t quite follow.”
Erin spun her cup noisily on her saucer. “It’s the scar, I guess. That’s what he’s into. Not like, into, you know—not like sexual. But he totally couldn’t care less about me. And I’m like, naked, you know? I guess he’s probably seen tons of naked girls.”
“Yes,” Fallon said, cautious. “And you wouldn’t want to be with someone who’s almost twice your age, anyway. I mean, you wouldn’t want to be with a guy who’s as old as Max—Mr. Emery—is, who’d even be interested in someone as young as you, right?”
Erin shrugged in a distinctly teenaged, apathetic way, and Fallon wondered how she’d ever found this girl intimidating.
“Well, trust me, you wouldn’t,” Fallon concluded for her.
“It doesn’t matter, either way. He called and told me last night that whatever he’s working on now, it’ll take months. He said to go by there so he can give me the money for my plane ride back home.” She gave Fallon a split-second glance and then shrugged, irritated. “I may as well go to New York.”
“Yeah, college is a big deal. Where are you going?”
She sighed. “Juilliard.”
Fallon felt her jaw drop. “Well, yeah, that’s a pretty damn big deal. For dance or music or…?”
“Ballet.”
“You got accepted at Juilliard for ballet and you’re thinking about not going?”
Erin shrugged again.
“Listen, kiddo,” Fallon said, unintentionally turning into her aunt. “If I catch you still in this town when September rolls around, I’ll knock you unconscious and ship you back there myself. Okay?”
Erin grinned, looking uncomfortable. “Yeah.”
“No seriously, I will. And I throw a mean punch.”
“I get it.” Erin craned her long neck to check the clock above the door. “I better get back to work. You want another capp?”
“No, thanks. I should head out soon, get my day started. Good luck with school. And don’t forget my threat.”
Erin picked up her cup, lingering a few beats. “Are you posing for him?” she asked, not meeting Fallon’s eyes.
“Yeah,” she said, thinking of how ridiculous that must sound to this waif. “But someone’s paying him to make a statue of me. Mr. Emery didn’t ask me to pose, specifically.”
“Oh, okay.” Erin looked relieved, almost haughty. “I was going to ask if you had a scar too. But I guess not.”
“No.” Fallon cleared her throat. “No scars.”
The encounter with Erin spurred Fallon to head to Max’s earlier than she normally would have—she’d lost her appetite for crosswords and café-lingering. The sun was bright and the air wet and cool, and after a stop at the bakery, Fallon set off along the long dirt road toward the ocean. Max lived about twenty minutes’ stroll from the so-called town center of Pettiplaise, and Fallon’s time would be well spent trying to get her head cleared.

Just as the studio’s many windows glinted in the distance, Fallon ran into Max himself. Or rather, vice versa.

“Is that my baguette?” His distinctive baritone came from behind her shoulder, accompanied by the rhythmic crunch of gravel.

Fallon turned to find him doing something that surprised her greatly—jogging. He had on a T-shirt and track pants and very European-looking sneakers.

“Good morning.” She squinted at him through the midmorning sun. “I never would have guessed you were a runner.”

He dropped to her pace and smiled through his heavy breathing. “My job is harder on the lungs than smoking. I like to make sure they still work.”

A vee of sweat streaked the front of his shirt and Fallon tried very hard not to enjoy the smell of him—that smell of active man. From a biological standpoint she couldn’t help whose scent she found compelling. Yes, that was true enough…this was definitely not her fault.

“I didn’t think artists were so inclined. You know, die young and all that.”

Max flashed one of his patented grins, clearly intrigued by her decision to be friendly to him this morning. “Well, I intend to live long enough to die in some more spectacular way than particle inhalation.”

She nodded and they walked the last couple minutes to the cottage in silence.

Fallon set her bag on the counter and handed Max the bread he’d requested when they’d parted the previous afternoon. “I ran into Erin this morning.”


“Yeah, she was working at the café.”

“She has the most extraordinary scar.” It was the tone of a man missing an old lover.

“You said that yesterday. What’s so amazing about it?” Fallon pulled a carton of half-and-half from her bag, and Max put it in the fridge for her.

“I’ll have to show you the article from the AMA journal. Just fascinating.” He went to root around in a paint-splattered filing cabinet. “She was a conjoined twin, you know.”

“Whoa—really?” Fallon blinked a few times.

“Indeed. A Siamese twin, as we used to say.” He withdrew an old magazine and flipped to a sticky-note-tagged page, held it out to her. “They operated and separated her and her sister, but her sister only lived a week before her kidney failed.”

“Oh, God, that’s horrible!” She pushed his hand away. “I don’t want to read about that.”

“Just fascinating.”

“And you’re sculpting that?” Fallon asked, disgusted. “Don’t you think that’s massively insensitive? I mean, she’s been through enough, hasn’t she?”

Max raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised. “How is that insensitive?”

“She’s probably been traumatized. You think she really needs some…artist fixating on the worst memory of her whole life? She’s only seventeen.”

“No one forced her,” he said evenly. “And I’m not treating her like a medical anomaly.”

“I think you are.” Fallon stared at the journal, irritation snowballing into anger.

“I don’t do grotesques. I study what I feel is beautiful.”

“How is that beautiful? I bet she’d get rid of that scar in a heartbeat if she could.”

“Loss is beautiful,” Max said solemnly, breaking eye contact. “What she’s got is an extraordinary proof of loss.”

“That just seems really callous. Sick. Dwelling on someone else’s pain for your own pleasure. Or fascination, or whatever.”

His eyes snapped back to hers again. “I don’t exploit people, if that is what you’re implying. Unlike some men. I would remind you that you’re here under duress, arguably exploiting your own body in exchange for a payoff.”

“Are you calling me a prostitute?” Fallon was almost tempted to laugh. And even more tempted to hit him.

He smiled. “I have studied plenty of prostitutes, Miss Frost. Be assured you lack any measure of their charm.”
Her mouth dropped open. “Pardon me?”

Max turned away, busying himself unlacing his shoes. Fallon spun on her heel and marched to the screen door, hurling it shut behind her with a disappointingly quiet slam.

Fallon made it nearly all the way back to town before she calmed enough to remember her priorities, swallow her pride, and return to the studio. She rang the bell, face hot with humiliation.

Max’s distant shout came through the window. “Yes, come in.”

Fallon entered and closed the door with intentional gentleness. As she turned her midsection jolted—in her absence Max had drawn a bath in the tub that sat beneath the far windows. Propped on the rim, his muscular shoulders and arms gleamed wet in the sun. His hair dripped, slicked back from his face.

“Um,” Fallon began then stopped. She became very interested in the ventilation system.

“It is nine fifty-six,” Max announced, voice lazy. “So your sitting has not even begun yet. I think we should pretend that little outburst never happened, don’t you?”

Fallon had no clue if he was being snide or gracious. “Fine.”

“Very good.”

There was a sloshing noise as he stood, and Fallon spun around just in time to preserve his privacy and hide her own furious blush. The rear of the cottage faced east so his body was largely silhouetted, but it was bright enough for Fallon to have taken in far more details of Max Emery’s lean, chiseled chest and abdomen than she cared to.

There followed rustling and the rush of draining water.

Max spoke a short time later, sounding amused. “You’re safe now, my little Puritan.”

Fallon turned to find him dressed in jeans and an undershirt once more, tugging on socks. He grinned at her, and she could still see droplets of water along his neck and arms and face.

“I apologize for making you slam my door.”

“Well…I’m sorry I slammed it,” she replied, feeling idiotic.

“No matter. Are you ready to start the sitting? You want coffee first?”

“No, I’m ready.” She’d reached the depths of her own humility back on the dirt road.

Max dragged the worktable over to the brightest part of the studio, and Fallon removed her jacket and shoes. As he hefted a bag of clay from a shelf, she stripped her shirt off. She unzipped her pants and let them drop, folding them neatly as Max strapped on his tool belt. He turned to find her in her underwear, shaking faintly but determined to see this through.

His eyebrows rose. “Well.”

She reached behind to unhook her bra. She set it atop the other items, pretending she was at the doctor’s office. Sliding her panties down her legs, she crouched as demurely as she could manage and added them to the pile. The air of the studio felt cool and dry on her skin.

“Where do you want me?” she asked with affected calm.


She nodded. “Um…”

He looked up from where he’d begun kneading clay on the tabletop. “Yes?”

“I’m not comfortable at all. Is that okay?”

Max smiled, eyes crinkling. “Oh, yes, be as uncomfortable as you like. How silly of me. Why don’t you just come and stand for me, like you are now.” He beckoned her with a come-hither finger.

She nodded again and approached, stopping a few paces from the table and clasping her hands in front of her navel, as if waiting at a teacher’s behest.

“Turn around,” Max said with a twirling gesture.

Fallon shuffled in place and focused her attention out over the green hills to the sea. She wondered if she was doomed to still be naked when the postman eventually dropped off the mail at this remarkably window-laden residence.

Max addressed her back. “I am glad you’ve decided to cooperate.”

“It’s worth it,” she said evenly. “It’s worth the discomfort. If that poor girl is brave enough to do it with everything she’s been through, I’ve got no excuse.”

“Well, that’s certainly an improvement.”

Fallon glanced at him over her shoulder. “Did you know she’s like half in love with you?”

“I did not know such a thing,” he said, sounding disinterested.

“Well, she is. And she’s thinking about not going to college so she can stay here.”

“That is a very stupid thing to do.”
Fallon spun back around, putting her fists to her hips but feeling silly doing so with her clothes off. “You have to say something to her, when she comes by here, next. You have to tell her to go. Don’t just offer her a ticket home. You need to scare her off.”

“How is that my job?” Max scraped dried clay off the table with a wooden blade.

Fallon’s blood came to a rolling boil. “It’s not your job. But it’s what a decent person would do, if they knew they could keep someone from making a big mistake.”

He met her stare. “Is it also my job to tell you not to be here, to not compromise whatever it is you clearly are? Why does the onus fall on me to tell people the mistakes they’re making?”

“It’s different with her. You asked her to come here, and she’s enamored of you, though God knows why,” Fallon added acidly. “She’s seventeen. She needs you to scare her off. You’re the only person who’s got the influence to change her mind.”

Max sighed and thrust his hand out impatiently. “Fine. Give me your phone.”

Fallon was taken aback by his sudden surrender. She suspected he was more annoyed by her argument than morally swayed but she grabbed her cell from her bag and handed it over. Max rifled on a shelf for a scrap of paper and went outside. Fallon crossed her arms carefully over her breasts and stared out the back windows for a couple of minutes, feeling ridiculous.

Max came back in with a furrowed brow and handed Fallon her now-dusty phone.

“What did she say?”

“She is not happy. She called you a very nasty name.”

Fallon’s jaw dropped. “Me?”

“Oh, yes. Seventeen-year-old girls are a mystery to me, but I suspect you are the other woman, as they say.”

She rolled her eyes. “God, you try and do the right thing…”

“There is no reasoning with teenagers,” Max said, smug. “You see why I mind my own business?”

“Well, is she going, then?”

“Yes, I believe so. She said she would come by later for the last of the money I owe her.”

“Good. That’s what matters.”

“Let’s do some work now, yes?”

“Yes, let’s,” she shot back. She put the phone away and took her place before him.

“Turn around again, please. Thank you.” Max’s voice took on the far-off quality of a distracted man. Fallon felt his eyes on her skin, her back, her butt. She listened to the rhythmic sound of the clay being turned, of tools being selected and put away. The sun warmed her front, her breasts and belly and legs, the languid eddies of stone particles in the streaming light calming her. She surrendered her awareness to their dance.

“Your body is quite extraordinary,” he repeated, as if closing a debate he’d grown tired of. “I will be very happy to render it. Even without any scars,” he added, his smirk designed to show he’d understood Fallon’s earlier contempt perfectly.

“Well. Good.” She prayed he’d stop staring at her.

“Match?”

“My butt and my legs belong to some other body.”

“They clearly belong right where they are.” Max took a step back to fold his arms and scrutinize her further. He didn’t look pervy as she’d feared, or even critical. He looked impressed.

“Your body is quite extraordinary,” he repeated, as if closing a debate he’d grown tired of. “I will be very happy to render it. Even without any scars,” he added, his smirk designed to show he’d understood Fallon’s earlier contempt perfectly.

“Well. Good.” She prayed he’d stop staring at her.

Max’s eyes caught hers then, making her feel more exposed than they had perusing her naked body. He smiled and they crinkled faintly at the edges, half-kind, half-mischievous. From this close, Fallon thought she could smell his scent even after the bath, and the image of his raw, tight body flashed across her mind. He left her to return to his study.

Max wedged the stoneware for far longer than was necessary. Before him, bathed in the steadily strengthening
daylight, he could sense Fallon tensing and relaxing in uneven intervals. Her backlit outline glowed like citrine.

Before she’d said that—that slight against her own body—he’d been grudging about this arrangement. Before that statement he’d been willing to take this commission if only for the challenge of working with this uncooperative woman. The money was amazing. The fun of unnerving someone as cold as the aptly named Miss Frost was a bonus. But now… He narrowed his eyes at her, still turning the clay.

“Did you know,” he said to her back, breaking a long silence. “I have studied dozens, perhaps hundreds of people, all examples of the utterly imperfect. The damaged.”

“Oh?” She didn’t turn and her voice sounded tight.

“Yes. Erin, and many others. Amputees, burn victims. People bearing every physical anomaly I have been able to track down. Bodies that have suffered tremendous amounts of loss. And pain, and humiliation, and self-hatred. Some wear it proudly, others, not as much.”

“I see.”

“But the ones who are still ashamed, still stinging from the wounds of their imperfection,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “It is in these people’s honor that I long quite potently to grab you by the shoulders and shake you.”

She turned her head halfway. “Pardon me?”

“I think you have a hell of a nerve, Fallon Frost.”

“I wasn’t suggesting—”

“No matter.” He cut her off, making his voice intentionally sanctimonious. “I am making a choice to forgive your callousness. We will not speak of it anymore. However, if you utter another criticism about your wholly satisfactory body in my presence again you may consider yourself dismissed.”

His hands began recording her contours. That long torso, the exaggerated flare of her body at the hip. Gorgeous. Infuriating, but gorgeous.

Fallon remained silent and Max didn’t suspect for a second that she was pleased.

“Hold your hair up for me,” he said, and Fallon obediently piled her curls on top of her head and secured them with an elastic. That rusty shade of brown—iron oxide. He studied her long neck, sloped but strong shoulders. He beckoned her to turn. Small, perfect breasts, miniscule waist, soft belly. Botticelli would have killed for such a model.

“I thought you were only doing a bust.” Fallon pointed at the clay between Max’s hands.

His eyes were fixed on her, fingers recording her contours from the mid-thigh up.

“Your body is too much fun to waste focusing on just the head and shoulders.” His thumbs raised the ridges of her hips from the mound.

“Fun?”

“Oh, yes.” He met her eyes and smiled. He liked the way her pale irises seemed to grow even wider when he stared. She was easy to unnerve, this one. “When you are eating, and there is one part of the meal you like better than the rest, do you eat it first or save it for last?”

“Save it.”

“Well, not me.” He released her eyes. Against his fingers, he could begin to feel her—that essential race in his pulse that signaled he’d found a tiny foothold, a connection, an entrance into the core of this woman. Hers was one of vulnerability, not openness, but it would do. For now.

“What are your tattoos?” Fallon asked a short while later. This was a different voice than Max had grown accustomed to in the past twenty-four hours—more demanding and less inhibited. This woman ought to get her clothes off and boss people around more often.

He abandoned the clay to peel his shirt off. He turned dutifully, letting Fallon see the black lines that graced the right-hand side of his torso. Skeletal anatomy, the outlines of bones tracing his humerus, shoulder joint, collarbone, the backs of his ribs and his vertebrae from the middle of his back to his neck. Tiny script lettering labeled each with its Latin name.

“Wow.” He couldn’t interpret Fallon’s tone. “Is that from Gray’s?”

He turned. “Biologist,” he teased. “I prefer Vesalius. But it is from nothing in particular.”

She nodded, looking thoughtful and, for once, not intimidated. “That’s cool.”

“Thank you.” He dropped her gaze to return to his work. Midday was approaching and he didn’t bother replacing his shirt. It seemed to make her edgy anyhow, which was fine by Max.

“Why bones?” she asked.

He decided he rather enjoyed the sound of her voice. Lush and full and almost aggressively feminine, like her lips. Like the bottom half of her fascinating figure. He’d almost forgotten what an undamaged woman looked like, it had been so long since he’d sculpted one. He hoped Fallon might prove more interesting than her unmarrared body suggested.
“Why bones? My trade is in surfaces,” he explained, fingers working. “My fascination is with the hidden. The internal.”

He stopped his study to approach, watching the look of predictable uneasiness tensing her face. But she didn’t step back even as he drew close.

He rapped a knuckle softly on her temple. “And not just bone and muscle.”

Her cheeks and neck flushed bright pink, round eyes darting between each of his.

He narrowed his gaze and gave her a conspiratorial smirk. “I’m going to chip away and uncover your secrets,” he whispered.

Fallon swallowed and looked away, and he knew he’d pushed her as far as he could without scaring her outright. He returned to his work feeling extremely satisfied.

Fallon spent the remainder of the session trying to recover the relative comfort and friendliness she’d found earlier, albeit briefly. It was no use.

She was happy for Max to assume it was his comment about uncovering her supposed secrets that had thrown her, but in truth it had been his closeness. His body, tight and lean and no doubt powerful, was a distraction from several paces away. Up close—close enough almost to feel his breath in her hair—it had been a shock. She wished he’d order her to turn around again, or at least put his damn shirt back on. It nearly made her adopt his obsession with the internal, watching the sinuous muscles of his stomach and chest and arms flexing with each skillful movement of his fingers against the clay. She didn’t like it one bit.

Max had tanned skin, darkest on his arms and neck and face but none of it, save a tiny strip just above his jeans, so pale that Fallon imagined his working shirtless was a new phenomenon. She wondered if—or perhaps more realistically how often—his professional relationships overlapped with carnal ones. It was a difficult question not to ponder. He oozed sex the way other men oozed privilege or rage. It clung to him like moss. Like sweat.

“I think it is lunchtime,” he announced finally, unbuckling his tool belt and stretching his arms. He slipped his undershirt back on and sauntered to the kitchen area.

Fallon’s own clothes felt strange against her skin after three hours’ nakedness.

“How are you liking it here? In Nova Scotia?” Max assembled cold rotini and shrimp and vegetables into bowls, sounding as though he’d forgotten how angry she’d made him earlier.

“I haven’t had a chance to explore yet,” she said, willing to engage. “But I like Pettiplaise. It’s amazing to be on the coast, but have it be so quiet and open. Where I’m from, every last square inch of this place would be somebody’s beachfront property. It’s nicer here.”

“Indeed. It is a pleasant town.”

“It must be handy that everyone speaks French,” Fallon added. Most of the people in the little seaside village addressed her first as “mademoiselle” before switching dutifully to “miss” once they caught her hesitation.

Max laughed. “I suspect I understand Acadian about as well as you do. Do you speak regular French?”

“I took it in high school but I’ve forgotten most of it now.”

“Do you know what Pettiplaise means?” He handed her a helping of pasta and a predictably large glass of wine.

“Um, not really. Little pleasure?” she guessed, dredging her memory for fragments of French II. “Little place?”

He shook his head. “Petites plaies,” he said with careful enunciation. “Another Acadian mangling. ‘Little wounds.’ For the scars the coal mining left on the mountains.” He sat and pointed his fork out the windows toward the black streaks that marred the hills in the distance.


He smiled, that grin making his striking face turn patently seductive. “Yes, I suppose.” He abandoned the conversation in favor of the food.

When he ate, Max had a habit of resting his elbows casually on the table and leaning forward. He held his fork upside down and the way his lips slid each bite of food from the tines struck Fallon as downright obscene. After several minutes of this culinary striptease, he set his bowl aside and took a deep draught of wine.

“So,” he said upon swallowing. “You live in New York?”

“Yes. I own a house there with my best friend. A little ranch house.”

“On the water?”

“Ha—no way. I can walk there but Metro waterfront is insanely overpriced.”

“It’s not so expensive here.” He refilled her glass and Fallon wondered why she allowed it.

“No, probably not,” she said.

“Did you grow up in New York?”

“I grew up all over the region. Connecticut mostly. Not the ritzy part, but on the coast.”

“Why New York, then?” He leaned back as if he expected this interrogation to go on for quite some time.
“Well, as you guessed, I studied biology. In New York. I’m a conservationist, half-time, and an environmental advocate, half-time.” She moved her food around in its bowl. “The Hudson and Long Island Sound need my help more than a lot of other places. I probably couldn’t make a living doing what I do unless I was near a big city, with big problems. It was there or Boston, and my friend wanted to go in on a mortgage with me, and her job’s there. Plus it meant I was near my aunt. It made sense.”

“I see. And this friend—this is not some code word for lover?” Fallon laughed, almost spilling her wine. “No, just my best friend. She’s quite happy with her boyfriend, thanks.”

“All right. I am going to ask you for this friend’s phone number.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if something happens to you, I can call her,” Max said, sounding very much as if this wasn’t the real reason.

“I guess. But don’t think for a minute I believe that. You don’t even seem to own a phone.”

Max found a pen and pad and weaseled the digits out of her.

“Why are you here, then?” Fallon took a drink, staring at him over the glass, succumbing to that familiar, alcohol-fueled sensation of boldness. “Why didn’t you go back to France, after you stopped being…famous, or whatever?”

He made a face, looking as though he’d never considered this before. “France would be too painful. I think here is as close as I can get to that, without all the bad memories. It’s quiet here. People leave me alone for the most part. Canada is a very fine country, ice-hockey obsessions aside, and Cape Breton is an excellent place to be a has-been. There is very little pretension.”

Fallon smirked, trying to decide if she still found Max Emery pretentious or not. It was becoming less cut-and-dried than she’d originally suspected.

“Why is France so painful?” She drummed her fingernails against her glass, not bothering to hide her curiosity.

“My childhood ended very suddenly, and very dramatically. When I left the village I grew up in, it changed. Because of me. I went back and everything was different. Strange. And I lost both my parents by the time I was twenty-five. It’s not home anymore.”

“No brothers or sisters?”

Max shook his head. “My grandmother still lived there until she passed away five years ago.” He crossed himself in an absent way.

“That sounds very sad,” Fallon said.

He tweaked one corner of his mouth like a shrug. “There are many stories in the world sadder than mine. I’m fortunate, you know, that I have made enough money to live this way.”

Fallon stared, taking him in. It was true—he was a free man. She couldn’t think of another person she’d met who wasn’t beholden to a bank or a spouse or a career path, to some stressful notion of how their life was expected to unfurl. She most certainly couldn’t think of anyone who could freely take or leave hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Max went on, echoing her thoughts. “Many people are much sadder, because they spend their lives making money for other people, doing things they hate. In places they hate, with husbands and wives they hate. I’m lucky. I get paid to do something that to me is as essential a part of living as eating or sleeping.”

Or screwing, Fallon added to herself, the addendum seeming inherent from the way he stared at her. As if to punctuate the close of this topic, Max took their empty glasses and bowls to the sink. In the wake of the relative intimacy of the conversation, Fallon suddenly dreaded taking her clothes off again.

“Should I keep doing what I was doing before?” she stalled, picking nonexistent lint off a sleeve.

He shook his head. “I think we should go outside. I want to study you by the ocean. I think that is more your habitat, yes?”

“Are you going to make me get naked in public? There’s a lot of boats out there.”

He laughed, the sadness seeming to leave him. “Of course not. I’m difficult, not cruel, you know.”

She nodded, deciding this was probably true.

Max breathed in the smells of the pines and the sea as he and Fallon waded side by side through the overgrown grass of his back lawn, descending the wooden steps that wound down to the strip of coarse sand beyond the rocks. He’d brought a pad and a pair of charcoal pencils but set them aside on a driftwood log. He held his palm out to indicate Fallon should sit down on the beach. He joined her, already thinking this was a very good idea, feeling grateful the sand flies were gone for the season. Feeling grateful in general.

“What am I doing?” Fallon asked, pulling strands of wind-whipped hair from her mouth.

“Whatever you like.” He crossed his arms over his knees expectantly, increasingly curious to see how this woman dealt with his demands.

“Right.” She unlaced her shoes and stripped off her socks, rolling up her pant legs and digging her toes into the
Max followed suit beside her. “Tell me about your childhood,” he said, staring across the inlet to the opposite shore then off into the endless Atlantic.

“I’d rather not. I don’t know you that well.”

“Well, tell me about something else, then. Tell me what you would be doing if you did not have to be here with me.”

“I’m here by choice,” she corrected him carefully. “And right now? It’s Saturday. I guess I’d probably be making a casserole or something for dinner, listening to PJ Harvey in my kitchen. Returning phone calls, waiting to move the clothes from the washer to the dryer.” She smiled, seeming to miss such things.

Max studied her eyes in the white light of the overcast sky, so clear they unsettled him. “And what would you be doing for these three months that I’m keeping you away from your kitchen and your laundry?”

She shrugged. “Work, mostly. Probably a couple trips into the city with friends. Not a whole lot.”

“You lead a quiet life?”

She nodded. “I guess so. But my job is really physical—the conservation side of it. And the other side, the advocacy, it’s stressful and I have to deal with all sorts of obnoxious people. I probably work about fifty or sixty hours a week, and when I’m off, I just want to be off, you know? Well, maybe you don’t,” she added, looking him over. “Your schedule seems pretty loose. Did you even realize it’s Saturday?”

He grinned, glad for her contrary side to flare up again. “I did. I know these things. Tuesday is recycling day and on Friday evenings I walk to the pub for a drink and watch the live music. I pay attention to such things as days of the week.”

“I see.”

“So. Tell me more. You must be passionate about something aside from crossword puzzles and finding fault with me.”

She pursed her lips. “My work is important to me. It’s important to defend the things and people that don’t have a voice.”

“Of course. But nothing else? Nothing frivolous?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yeah. Old movies. I love old movies.”

He nodded, pleased. “Black and white?”

“Doesn’t matter. I lived with my aunt when I was a teenager, and that’s what we did together. Especially in the winter, when it was too crappy to go outside for whole weekends. Big, long marathons of classic movies.”

“Which is your favorite?” Max asked.

“Ooh… It’s probably a tie between My Fair Lady and Singin’ in the Rain.”

“You like musicals?” Max would have thought her far too practical to care for such things.

Fallon nodded and bit her lip, stifling a grin.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

She blushed and grinned down at the sand. “I always smile like that when I think about Gene Kelly.”

Max smiled back. “Now we’re making progress. Do you date?” He immediately felt Fallon slip back into her invisible shell.

“Eh, not much, lately. Too busy.” She clawed absently through the sand until she reached water. “It’s not on my priorities list.”

“What is, then?”

She dug deeper. “Making my mortgage payments. Saving up for whatever’s next, for when my housemate eventually gets engaged or one of us decides to move away or what have you. And being good at my job. I’m where I want to be, for right now. In my life. I just want to do good, and be around other decent people.”

“You’re too close to Manhattan for that,” Max said.

She met his eyes, unimpressed. “So you think. But there are good people and lousy people everywhere. You can’t write an entire place off because of the few a**holes you encounter.” She brushed her hands off on her jeans and lay back on the sand, staring into the cloudy mantle. “I think you’re too quick to condemn people.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Would you like to hear my theory about you?” she asked, and Max realized from her tone that she must be tipsy from the wine.

“Yes, I would. What is your theory?”

“I think you find it very difficult to believe that anyone can be decent and worthwhile unless they’re damaged goods.”

“Damaged goods?”

“Yeah. Wounded or traumatized. Like no one’s good enough in your book unless they’re a victim of something.”
“That’s a lot to infer from knowing me for a day,” he said, mildly indignant but nonetheless curious. His gaze lingered over the deep valley of her narrow waist, the sharp rise of her hips. “What else?”

“That’s all I’ve gathered. It’s just my theory.” She closed her eyes and interlaced her fingers atop her ribs.

“It is an interesting theory,” he admitted. “Perhaps you should be a psychologist.”

She smiled, as if to herself. “Doctor Frost and Inspector Emery…”

“I have theories about you.”

She opened her eyes. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

He stared into the bright patch where the sun hid behind the clouds. “I think I’ll be keeping them to myself for now.”

Fallon blinked, looking exasperated. “Suit yourself.”

Max lay down beside her, propping himself up on one elbow, bringing his face close to hers. For the briefest moment he imagined climbing on top of her, knees sinking into the sand beside her hips, his body pressing into hers. Fascinating.

“How do you think you will you like it, being the object of my scrutiny for the next three months? A whole season of your life?”

Her eyes darted between each of his. “It’s hard to say after only two sittings.”

“How is it so far?”

“It’s odd. It’s a bit like being the subject of a scientific experiment, I guess. Except you don’t necessarily want to study me.”

“I don’t mind. You might prove interesting,” he said, teasing.

“I don’t have any scars or disfigurements.”

“I might not be doing this if the money wasn’t so very convenient, I admit that. But this is not torture for me, either. Perhaps you’ll prove to be some middle ground for me.”

“Middle ground between what?”

He thought. “Between the insanity of the commercial art scene and the insular, self-indulgent little world inside my own head, yes?”

“I suppose.”

He cleared his throat. “I have something I must break to you, now.”

“Oh?” Her lips pursed, distrustful.

“I already know that you will hate it.”

“Just tell me.”

He looked at her squarely and wound one of her curls around his fingers. “I will have to touch you.”

She jerked upright, making him yank her hair, hard. “Ow! What? Touch me how, exactly?” She rubbed her scalp.

Max sat up too, hugging his knees and studying her. “Just that. My hands on your body. Not sexual. Just touch.”

“Now?” she asked, glancing frantically around the beach.

“No, not now. Not even this week. But eventually.”

“God.” She looked anxious but not horrified. “Is this another of those ‘this is just the way I work’ caveats?”

He nodded.

“You touch all your models, then?”

He nodded again.

“God.”

“I did not think you’d be pleased about it.”

Fallon shook her head. “Jesus, you are really weird, you know that?”

“I am whatever way I am.”

“See? You say things like that. You’re very weird.” She fell silent, seeming to meditate on her contempt for his weirdness.

“Well, I have warned you now.”

“Fine.”

“Would you like to end this sitting for the day? To go and contemplate the ways in which I displease you?” Max made no attempt to hide how entertaining he found her discomfort.

“I would, as a matter of fact.” She stood and he led them back to the studio, where she rinsed her hands and shouldered her bag.

“Ten o’clock?” she asked, arms crossed protectively over her modest chest.

“Yes, perfect.” Max held the door open and she departed.

He stood on the front steps with his hand in his pockets, watching her stride up the dirt road toward town until she was out of sight. Above him, the clouds broke open and the sun streamed down like some cheap imitation of the
divine. He smiled.
Chapter Four

“You are going to kiss my feet for this,” Max said smugly. From across the studio he waved a pair of still-fidgeting crabs at Fallon.

“You haven’t made a lousy meal yet.”

“And I never shall.” He busied himself with pots and pans, and soon the air smelled of shellfish and sherry and rosemary.

The afternoon of the second Friday in September found them breaking for a late lunch. Modesty was a distant memory for Fallon, at least with the strange man she’d grown so oddly accustomed to these last two weeks. She pulled her sweater on as Max smiled from where he stood at the kitchen counter, his face almost belonging to a friend now. Almost.

Fallon had slipped into a routine of sorts. Though she was bound by her own desperation to spend the first six hours of each day at the studio, evenings were hers. At Rachel’s prompting, she’d made a conscious decision to view the experience as a sort of vacation. Technically it was unpaid, though on the other hand, what she stood to gain from Donald Forrester by cooperating was invaluable.

She tossed a drop cloth over the clay-encrusted worktable. This had become her customary chore, as had gathering the utensils and napkins. On the whole, she was comfortable here now. The only exception was the dust from the dried clay. Since Max had switched exclusively to sculptural studies from sketches, Fallon found it necessary to ditch her contact lenses in favor of glasses.

“I like those.” Max pointed at her cat-eye frames as he set a bottle on the table.

“Thanks.”

“They are very you.”

Fallon didn’t bother challenging his authority on this topic. She took them off and examined them a moment, rubbing away a smudge. “I found them in a thrift shop in the Village.”

“It is only too bad that they hide your eyes.” Given his accent and the formality suggested by his lack of contractions, Fallon thought Max sounded like a lothario when he said things like this.

“Better hidden than bloodshot.” She accepted a dish of crabmeat and wilted greens and fennel. “Goodness.”

He sat and poured them each a healthy measure of red, lifting his glass.

“À la votre,” they said together, the ritual ingrained. The sittings had become times of relative silence, though lunch was for socializing. Fallon found herself anticipating these meals.

“Shouldn’t we be drinking white wine?” she asked after a bite, pointing her fork between the merlot and shellfish.

Max smiled. “You think because I’m French I should be a snob about these things?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, I’m Canadian now. And white wine gives me a headache,” he added, grimacing. “Would you prefer it? What do you usually drink?”

“Beer, actually. But red is fine. I’m not choosy.”

He clinked his fork against the bottle. “This is the finest California vintage nine dollars can buy. I save the decent stuff for special occasions.”

“French?”

He grinned. “Naturally.”

“Now there’s the snob I was expecting,” Fallon said, surprised as ever by the playful tone in her voice. She wondered if this might be something beyond mere tolerance and familiarity. She wondered if Max Emery wasn’t growing on her. He looked a little taken aback himself.

“When do you think we’ll start the marble?” Fallon was curious to watch the process. She’d come to know the menagerie of marred statues in Max’s garden intimately in the past two weeks. What he did was breathtaking, astounding. She could admit that now. She wanted to see him at work.

“Soon. We are close. Closer. But we’re not quite there yet.”

“You mean the touching bit?” she asked, body tensing. Since bringing it up Max hadn’t pressured her about it, but she’d been living in fear of the inevitable day when it couldn’t be put off any longer.

He nodded. “I know you’re not thrilled, but I hope you trust it is necessary now.”

“Yeah. I do.” She shivered nonetheless. She wasn’t a great fan of being touched, handshakes and the platonic hugging of friends aside. It was probably why her relationships never made it past the three- or four-month mark. She dreaded to think how uncomfortable Max’s touch would be—his eyes alone often felt like a brand on her skin.
“Perhaps this afternoon we will try?” He cocked a cautious eyebrow across the table at her. “It must be soon if you wish to stay on schedule.”

“Yeah, I do.” Fallon frowned. It had become startlingly easy sometimes to forget why she was here, whose statue she would ultimately be posing for. “But don’t expect me to be comfortable or anything. You may have to sculpt me wincing.”

“I am sure I won’t. It is all that energy nonsense I am sure you’re sick of hearing about.” He held his hands up and wiggled his fingers like a close-up magician. “Nothing personal. In your job, when you’re working outside, what is it you do?”

“A lot of plant and animal collection...checking on populations of weeds and algae and mollusks and things, looking to see what’s declining and what’s thriving in a given area.”

“And what if you had to do that with your eyes closed?”

She nodded. “I get it. It’d be really difficult.”

“And I understand you do not want to be treated like a specimen. But you see what I’m saying?”

“Yeah.”

He smiled deeply in his wicked way. “So you better keep drinking.” He refreshed her glass and gathered their dirty dishes.

As Max pattered, Fallon sipped her wine and tried to imagine what it would be like, having Max’s hands on her. She shuddered, though not entirely from trepidation.

For over a week now she’d been having dreams about him, the sorts of dreams she’d never been disposed to before. Dreams that had her waking up in cold sweats in the early hours of the morning. Stark visions of this man’s predatory body and dark eyes, rough hands, rough voice. Dreams about commanding him and being commanded.

Across the room she could see the long ridges of muscle flanking each side of his spine, his shoulder blades, his shirt pulled taut against these shapes as he washed dishes. In her dreams those muscles twitched and tightened with other kinds of labor. Fallon hadn’t felt the protracted touch of his skin since they’d shaken hands her first day at the studio, but neither had she forgotten it. Calloused fingers and palms on her bare body. She swallowed.

Max dried his hands on a dish towel. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she said, heart pounding. “Can we do this in baby steps? Can I keep my clothes on?”

He nodded.

“Good.” She shrugged her sweater off and stood in jeans and a tee in her usual space near the center of the studio. She trembled harder with each step he took toward her. By the time Max was directly in front of her, Fallon was shaking.

“You look terrified,” he said, hands tucked safely in his pockets.

“I’m fine.”

“You look like you might cry.” As he said it, Fallon felt the pressure mounting in her tear ducts.

“I won’t cry.”

“You can if you want, you know.”

“Well, I don’t,” she snapped, more surly toward him than she’d been all week. “Just get started, already.”

Max slid his hands from his pockets and held them out, inviting her to do the same. Her fingers shook visibly. She held her breath as he sandwiched them gently between his palms, and the heat and roughness of his skin made her flinch.

“This is very hard for you,” he said softly, eyes on their hands as his thumbs rubbed her wrists.

“Yes, it is.” She could admit that. What she couldn’t admit was that it wouldn’t be nearly this hard with anyone else on the planet. “Only because it’s been built up so much.”

It felt as though Max had been warming his hands by a fire, his skin was so hot. “I hope it is not triggering any bad memories.”

“No.” It was triggering something much different. A breed of sensation Fallon had spent her entire adult life avoiding.

“You’re very cold.”

“I have low blood pressure,” Fallon offered. “Unless you meant that figuratively.”

“No, just your hands,” he said carefully, focused on their point of contact. His fingertips traced small circles over her knuckles. He slid them up to her forearms, raising all the tiny hairs, raising the fear bubbling in her core. She began to shake hard.

“Oh.” Max’s eyes widened and he yanked his hands away, holding them at a safe distance. “You’re not ready for this,” he said, alarmed. It wasn’t an expression she’d ever seen him wear before.

“No, I can do it. I have to. I’ll do whatever we have to do to get this statue made. Keep going.”

“That’s enough for today.”
“No. It’s fine.” Fallon’s anxiety spiraled. “If this ridiculous project fails, it’s not going to be because of me.”
“I understand. But understand too, that this is useless to me right now. I don’t need to feel your body. I need to feel you, all that energy. I cannot do this if you are a mess. You’re not ready yet.”
Anxiety spiked to anger. “I’m doing my best.”
“Well I’m not carving you when you’re like this. I may as well sculpt you out of sand, you feel so unstable.”
Fallon pressed her palms to her neck. “God, this is so stupid.”
“What is stupid?”
“This. All your energy nonsense. The way you make everything so freaking intense and complicated and weird.”
“I can’t help that.” His calmness looked as if it was taking a concerted effort.
Fallon groaned.
“Why are you angry?” he demanded. “I’m trying to make you as comfortable as I can, yes?”
“Well, you’re failing.” Fallon narrowed her eyes. “You make me very, very uncomfortable. You’re going to have to work around it, because it’s not going to change.”
Max stepped away, scraping a chair across the floor and sitting, burying his head in his hands, defeated. He rubbed his eyes and stared up again. “I thought we were making so much progress.”
“We still would be if you’d just keep going. I’m going to be uncomfortable, doing this. Deal with it. I am.”
“You have no clue what this is about, do you?”
“I’m proud to say that everything about you is incomprehensible to me,” Fallon cut back. “Especially all this touching BS. But I’m going along with it. Try and extend me the same courtesy, okay?”
Max stood, face steely, patience abandoned. He leaned his back against the rail of the spiral staircase and held Fallon’s eyes.
“What?” she said.
“Touch me, then.”
“You?”
He nodded, neutral.
“That’s supposed to help?” Her gaze zigzagged over him.
“Maybe. Maybe not. But try it, Little Miss Scientist. Suspend your empirical disbelief for me.”
“If that’s what it takes to keep this project moving forward, fine.” She nodded and took a couple of steps closer, studying his face, his arms, the black hair at the collar of his shirt.
“Fine,” Max agreed, that wicked gleam coming to his eyes. “Fair is fair.”
He peeled his shirt up from the waist, revealing that body so maddeningly adept at making Fallon’s heart skip a beat. Tossing it aside, he reached down and unbuckled his thick belt. Fallon felt her eyes widen, embarrassed but transfixed as he lowered the zipper and eased his jeans down over slim, toned hips. The garment dropped to the floor and Max stepped out, toying with the waistband of his gray boxer briefs, eyes glued to Fallon’s, demanding her answer to an unspoken question.
“No. Stop there.” Even as she said it, her eyes roamed to his arms, his navel, the bulge between his thighs. She stopped breathing for several seconds.
“Go on, then.” His voice was shallow and sharp, a challenge. “Touch me. You can bind my hands if you like.” As if to illustrate this offer, he crossed his wrists and raised them, grasping the iron bars of the staircase behind his head, so disturbingly reminiscent of Fallon’s dreams. A slow smile overtook his lips.
She swallowed and shook her head. “No, thank you.”
He caught her eyes with his. “This isn’t about sex, you know.”
Like hell it wasn’t.
“This is about sensation,” he said. “Connection.”
“Fine,” she muttered, feeling as though she was both winning and losing this strange battle of wills. With a steadying breath, she fanned her fingers and set them on his shoulders. The heat of him shocked her anew. Max kept solemn, eyes following her hands as she grazed his neck then traced the tattoo along his collarbone. Clavicula, read the miniscule label. She ran her palms up and down those powerful biceps. His chest was hard and warm under her palms, and she felt his heart beating fast, giving him away behind his veneer of self-control. She melted into the act as she surveyed his tight abdomen, flesh tensing at her touch. She cupped the crests of his hips, feeling the power there, finding it so very easy to picture these muscles pumping hard, flanked by her own legs.
“Keep going,” he whispered, the rasp in his voice sounding unintentional. “Do you feel what I’m talking about? Do you feel my energy?”
She nodded, awestruck. His entire body was vibrating, imperceptible but nevertheless unmistakable. “I can feel it.”
Fallon’s curious hands explored his ribs and waist, the outsides of his thighs. She blushed, then let herself touch
his backside. Hard, like the rest of him. His hips tensed. Behind the soft cotton of his briefs, he was growing for her. Her blush deepened, warming not just her cheeks, but her breasts and belly and down between her legs. Her fingertips flirted with the dark curls that trailed from his navel down, mere centimeters from the rigid curve of his erection.

“You still say this isn’t about sex?” she asked softly.
Max’s mouth quirked to one side.
“Do you want me to keep going?” As her thumb edged along his waistband, she wasn’t sure what answer she was hoping for.
“What do you want?” he asked, breath short.
His body was so close and ready. No man had ever made Fallon feel this way so...violently before. Ever. Not even close.
“Have you proven your point yet?” She feigned contempt, studying his powerful body as haughtily as she could muster.
“Nearly.”
She moved on, palms surveying his chest and shoulders again, up to the powerful arms bracketing his face. Those arms... She wanted to see them like in her dreams, tensed and fearsome and struggling against restraints.
From this close, all Max had to do was close the few inches that separated their faces. Fallon gasped as his lips took hers. Heat flooded her chest, but her body’s curiosity was no match for her shock and she pulled away.
“Don’t ever do that again,” she warned, voice low. She hoped her tone would read as anger, not arousal. She swallowed.
Max stared at her for a few breaths, then released the bars of the stairway. It took a concerted effort for Fallon to wrestle her attention from the flexing contours of his bare torso, and elsewhere. She glued her eyes to his.
“You’re walking a very fine line.” She ran her hand over her lips. “And cooperation-wise, don’t think for a moment you just did yourself any favors.”

“How many lovers have you had?” Max asked, apropos of nothing. So typically Max.
Fallon kept herself cool, casual, unscandalized. “None of your business.”
He smiled. “You’re not a virgin?”
“Of course not.”
“But you seem unimpressed by the whole idea, yes?”
She shrugged even as her cheeks heated. Having these questions posed was unnerving enough but having them posed by this man, practically naked, still noticeably aroused, his body—his mere proximity—so adept at flustering her...
She composed herself. “It’s a bit overrated. I’ve got better things to pour my energy into.”
“Why is it you so dislike being touched?” Max asked, eyes narrowing with curiosity.
“You lack a certain amount of tact, did you know that?”
“I hope no one has mistreated you,” he said.
“No. It’s just...it’s like being pawed at. It’s a mess. Sex is just a big, overrated mess.”
“How Victorian you are. Do you know what I think, Fallon?” Goddamn, why did it always feel so raw, hearing her name in this man’s scratchy baritone?
“I’m happy to say I’ve got absolutely no idea what you’re thinking.”
“I think you have had poor men,” he said.
“And I think you’re getting too personal.”
He dropped his dark gaze. “Very well...”
Fallon hissed out a breath, exasperated. “No. Go on. You’re obviously dying to share your opinions on the topic of my sex life.”
“I’m sure I know nothing of it.”
“Of course you don’t,” she snapped, staring him down. Why didn’t he put his frigging clothes back on already?
He raised his eyes again to meet her angry ones, face placid. “But I wonder if maybe you oughtn’t be on top?”
“Oh?” Her hands clenched into fists at her hips.
“You seem worried. Uncomfortable about these men’s hands on you. I think maybe you need your man, your lover, flat on his back. Hands tied. At your mercy.”
Get out of my head. “Do I?”
“It’s only a guess.” He crossed his strong arms over his chest, businesslike. “How do you please yourself?”
“Excuse me?”
“When you touch yourself—”
“That’s too far.”
He paused, running the very tip of his tongue over the corner of his lips. Then, “Your fingers?”
“Don’t.”
“A toy?” he pressed on, brazen. “The bedding?”
“If you don’t shut your mouth I’ll shut it for you,” she said coldly—as cold as her cheeks were blazing hot.
He smiled tightly. “Of course.”
“Good.”
“Just promise me that you do.”
She made her eyes into slits, a warning.
Max pursed his lips a moment. “Have you had a man’s tongue?”
Fallon fought a short battle between pride and shock. “Of course I have.”
“And it couldn’t make up for all those clumsy, pawing hands?”
She shrugged, trying to appear blasé. “I wasn’t all that impressed.”
“That is a real shame.”
“Don’t look so smug. I bet you think you can fix me, don’t you? What, one night in your bed and I’ll transform into some enlightened nymphomaniac?”
“I am not so presumptuous.”
“Your smile says different. And you’re the most presumptuous man I think I’ve ever met.”
“Who is this statue for?” Max asked, surprising her. He hadn’t asked that in over a week. “Who is Donald Forrester to you?”
“It doesn’t matter.”
“I doubt that. He’s someone who wants you very much. An old lover? A prospective one? I wonder why it is he cannot simply settle for the real thing.”
“Because he can’t have the real thing,” she said through quaking lips. “Ever.”
He finally stepped into his jeans and hiked them up his legs. “Ah.”
“Ah?”
“You don’t love him?” he asked.
“No. And you already knew that.”
“Do you love someone else? Someone who is gone, or who you cannot have? Another woman’s man, perhaps? Or another woman?”
“I don’t love anyone,” she said. “Not like that.”
He buckled his belt. “Have you? Did you?”
She hesitated, feeling the warmth in her cheeks again. “No. Never.”
He nodded, somber. “But this man, he loves you?”
“No. I don’t know. Not love… It’s very complicated.”
Max nodded, slowly, and turned away.
She studied his tattoos. *Infraspinatus fossa. Scapula.* She addressed his back. “Don’t act like you pity me.”
“You read so much into the spaces between words.”
“My sex life is none of your business, anyway.”
He turned to face her again, catching her eyes in that inescapable pull. “Right now, and for the next ten weeks, your body and its history are the center of my universe. *Everything.*” He gestured, fingertips to his chest then waving out to encompass the studio. “It is all in your orbit. And you—your body—you’re as cold as the stone I’m using to render it.”
Fallon bit back a hundred retorts as a flash of heat and anger coursed through her pulse points. She took a deep breath, and slapped him.
Only a slight flare of his nostrils and a coloring where her palm struck evidenced Max’s surprise. He didn’t speak for several breaths.
He licked his lips and cracked a tiny smile. “Better.”

Max let Fallon luxuriate in her anger for some time. He let himself luxuriate in what had happened. She’d surprised him—he hadn’t expected her to agree to touch him. He certainly hadn’t expected to catch her enjoying it. *Reveling* in it.

For the past two weeks, he’d been easy on her. She was good company, he’d discovered. Clever, and a pleasurable if contrary conversationalist, the sort of person he’d been missing for a long time now. He’d dismissed his inclination to unnerve her at every opportunity. Whatever reward brought and kept her here, it was strong, and she wouldn’t be scared off by him. She’d be a challenge, but she wouldn’t waste his time, he didn’t think. Not on purpose, at least. He’d get there with her. Professional and symbiotic, he’d concluded. Acceptable.
But then dear God, those hands on his bare skin. Max hadn’t seen that coming. He wasn’t a prurient man. He
wouldn’t have pushed her to that if he’d known how...affirmatively his body would respond. But then those hands—
smooth and cool, like glass lost at sea for unnumbered years, the opposite of his calloused, scar-rasped ones. He
clenched and unclenched his fists in wonder, remembering how impossibly soft her fingertips had been.
She’d set him on fire with that cool touch. The contact had made him give in to fantasies he’d been diplomatically
suppressing for two weeks. His wrists, actually bound. Her hands, touching, teasing. Peeling his briefs down, taking
him in her hands and stroking until his cock ached for relief. Her eyes on him, equally greedy. He’d caught those
eyes on him before, curious and carnal, but always cold. But this time...this time she’d looked so hungry he’d just
about felt her lips wrapped around him.

Across the studio, Fallon stared out a skinny louvered window, one of many Max had scavenged and installed in
his unending quest for better light. She toyed with the mechanism, the wooden slats casting shadows in wide stripes,
than narrow ones, then wide again, across her head and shoulders. She looked calmer but she still buzzed with that
electricity he’d felt in her fingertips. He walked over as casually as he could affect.

She turned to look up at him for a moment. She flipped the slats closed with a snap and wandered to the front of
the house.
“Aren’t you going to apologize for hitting me?” he asked provocatively, following her.
“Aren’t you going to apologize for enjoying that experiment just a little too much?” She turned enough to
showcase her condemning expression and stopped before the bay window beside the front door, keeping her back to
him.
“Don’t act like your halo is so polished,” he murmured, letting her hear how close he stood behind her. “That
touch was not so scientific.”
“Think whatever you want to. But don’t ever kiss me again.”
“I said I wouldn’t.”
“I’m not convinced you’re a man of your word. Now that I’ve seen what passes for ‘connection’ in your book.”
Max put his fingertips on her shoulder. She spun around slowly, more in search of a face-off than to be agreeable,
he suspected. She glanced at his hand as if it were a spider.
“You aren’t shaking.” He pressed his palm flat against her.
She watched, unreadable.
He contemplated his next move. He rubbed his thumb along her clavicle. She was steady. He watched her
swallow then traced a curled finger down her jugular. Her chin started to tremble.
Max gave her plump earlobe the briefest tweak and took his hands back, tucking them into his pockets. “What did
you feel when you touched me?” he asked, stripping any challenge out of his voice and steeping it in pure curiosity.
Fallon looked down, at either his crotch or his safely pocketed hands. “You’re very warm,” she offered with a
shrug. Her cheeks and lips flared pink.
“When I touch you.” Max reached out his hands again, inching them forward until he touched her elbows. “You
are like fireworks.” He slid his palms up, slipping them inside her T-shirt sleeves and cupping her smooth shoulders.
That skin. As petal-soft as a cliché. “You are like those little sticks, dipped in magnesium. That children use?”
“Sparklers,” she said, breath short.
“Yes. Your hands felt like sparklers, running up and down my body.”
“That sounds very painful.” She faked flippancy rather poorly, in Max’s opinion.
“Well, perhaps to you. I thought it felt very nice.” He kneaded the balls of her shoulders tenderly, daring her to
start shaking again. When she didn’t, he let her go, satisfied that this was progress. Dissatisfied that such a caress
wasn’t allowed to culminate in another kiss.
“It’s probably nearly four now.” He knew perfectly well it was two-thirty. “Why don’t we call it a day?”
“Fine by me.” She skirted past him to gather her jacket and bag.
“You did very well today, you know.”
“Yes, at least one of us can keep things professional,” she said evenly.
He was charmed by her nerve. “How delightful for me that obedience is a requisite of your position. I admire your
work ethic.”
She narrowed her eyes a final time and let him open the door for her.
“Thank you for lunch.”
“Thank you for dessert,” he said, so happy to be flirting with a woman for the first time in a very long while.
She shook her head, pantomime frustration. “Whatever.”
“See you soon,” he called to her back as she descended the steps. The door eased closed, and he pressed his face
into the screen, grinning. He felt the cat rub against his leg and reached down to gather it into his arms. With a
wicked thought he pushed the door back open and stood on the top step.
“Hey, Fallon!”
She turned from ten yards down the drive and stared at him.
“So we’ve finally found something you and the cat don’t have in common!” He rubbed its head demonstrably.
“What do I have to do to make you purr, eh?”
She gave him the finger and resumed her walking.
“Ooh, she’s feral!”
“And you ought to be fixed!” Fallon shouted over her shoulder.
He watched her walk away, shaking her head. He set the cat down and exchanged a blank look with it. “You’re fixed, aren’t you?” He glanced back up the drive as Fallon disappeared behind the pines, the mere sight of her making his body itch with unprofessional curiosity. “You lucky bastard.”
Chapter Five

“One for dinner.”

Fallon followed the bistro’s hostess and sat in a small corner booth. She scanned the menu with gusto. Hungry, yes, but she also craved anything that might take her mind off the tension that afternoon’s sitting had set loose in her body. When a middle-aged waitress appeared she ordered a beer and a bowl of chowder. The menu was taken away and Fallon studied the tabletop.

She was shocked to find Max staring up at her.

In lieu of a tablecloth, various Cape Breton postcards and brochures and local newspaper clippings were arranged beneath a thick layer of Lucite.

The front-page cutting in question had the Pettiplaise Gazette’s masthead at the top. The yellowed article was dated over four years ago and its headline read “Controversial Artist Calls Pettiplaise Foyer Doux Foyer”.

The main photo was editorial, and Fallon guessed it must have been taken back when Max lived in New York City, perhaps for a magazine pictorial. In it he was seated in a straight-backed chair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together, dressed the same sort of way he did now, same hair, same tired eyes, but a slightly younger-looking face. A cigarette was pinched between two fingers, its plume unfurling. His bare arms were on show, just as powerful as they were today. Out of focus behind him loomed white statues and other trappings of a studio. His eyes looked as haunting and raw on aged newsprint as they did in real life, and he stared the camera down, seeming intelligent and dangerous.

World-renowned classical sculptor M.L. Emery gains Canadian citizenship, retains Pettiplaise address, the caption read.

The waitress approached with a sweating bottle of Keith’s and a glass, and Fallon stopped her before she could pop the cap. The craving hit her hard and fast.

“Sorry—could I change that to a glass of the house red?”

Beneath the main photo were two smaller ones. Each made Fallon’s breath go shallow. The left-hand one was grainy, depicting a boy, unmistakably Max. Skinny and wiry but already with those dark-rimmed eyes that belonged to a man ten years older. He was outside in a tumbledown graveyard, standing beside a statue of an angel as tall as he was. Emery at age twelve, posing beside the monument that made him famous overnight. Beside this was another shot, Max seated in profile, a few years older, smoking hands-free, at work with a chisel and hammer. Shirtless. Still lean and wiry, but more muscular, older. Emery, seventeen, in his first London studio. Fallon turned to the article.

Maxence Luc Émery (pictured above), better known to the art world as M.L. Emery, was born the only child of René-Luc Émery and Céleste Bedeaux Émery in the coastal village of Manent, in France’s Brittany region. By the time he moved to Pettiplaise a quarter-century later, Emery’s life and hometown would undergo radical changes. Some say miracles.

The circumstances surrounding Emery’s first known sculpture (photo lower left) are mired in rumour and hearsay. All that is known for sure is that he carved the piece in his mother’s likeness. It still stands in the Catholic cemetery in Manent today, despite several thefts and subsequent recoveries. The full-sized marble statue would have been an achievement for any stone craftsman, let alone a child. It was treated briefly as a hoax until Emery was documented creating a second, equally exquisite piece and declared a prodigy.

Once news of the child’s achievement reached Paris and beyond, thirteen-year-old Emery was moved to London to study his craft at the Slade School of Fine Art, among students many years his senior. He never fulfilled the requirements needed to attain a degree. Following a dismissal for “academic noncompliance”, Emery went on to establish a small studio…

Here the article jumped to an interior page, one not included on the tabletop. Fallon read the opening again, then again, nearly five times through before her supper arrived. She didn’t taste her wine or her soup as she ate. All she could take in was the image of Max from over twenty years ago, staring out from that photo. The thin, sour-faced child, the arms and eyes and scowl of his adult self already evident.

When the waitress appeared to collect the empty bowl and glass, she caught Fallon’s fixation.

“People are always staring at that one.” She tapped the plastic above the clipping with an acrylic nail, her hand heavy with costume jewelry. “Our celebrity neighbor.”

“Oh?” Fallon asked, deciding to play dumb.
“Yeah, he lives up the hill in a crazy house with all kinds of funky windows and no rooms. Turned it into Swiss cheese when he moved in. You can’t see it from the road, which is probably best for property values.”

“What do the locals think of him?”

“He’s all right,” the woman said with a shrug. “Quiet, but friendly enough. He doesn’t come here but he goes to the pub every week. Bachelor. Bit odd, but a hell of a looker. Brings in a few well-heeled tourists, so no complaints.” She smiled. “Anything else you want?”

“No, just the bill, thanks.”

When the waitress returned with the check she gave Fallon a conspiratorial glance. “It’s Friday. If you’re looking to take in the local art scene, you should swing by The Shack around ten, for the music.” She nodded off in the general direction of the rundown bar Fallon passed each morning and afternoon, walking to and from Max’s. “Every Friday. You might find the crowd intriguing.” She winked, snapping her gum.

“Maybe,” Fallon murmured, and the waitress left her alone. She set her bills and coins on top of the receipt and slid the pile over to hide Max’s time-capsule face.

Max slid a bill across the wood to the barman for his wine and swiveled his stool to face the band, leaning back on the bar. As he crossed his legs and settled into the evening, a finger tapped his shoulder. Fallon plopped down next to him.

“Well, hello.” He returned her smile, surprised. Not so surprised to find her at the town’s only bar on a Friday night, but surprised to find her looking so pleased. Particularly given their parting that afternoon. She leaned close to his ear to compete with the furious fiddling coming from the corner. “Hey. I thought I might run into you.”

She’d put makeup on, a little shadow and mascara, something to make her lips shiny. She smelled faintly of lilies and her wild hair was down. She ordered a beer and joined Max in watching the set.

They didn’t speak but he surveyed her with blatant glances from time to time. It seemed to amuse her. Between songs she said, “Your eyebrow’s going to fall off if you keep all that surreptitiousness up. Is there food on my face or something?”

“No. Just looking at you. You look much shinier at night.”

“I see.”

He reached over to touch the space between her collarbones and her eyes grew wide. He flipped her backward pendant over.

“Thanks.” She wrapped her fingers defensively around the chain as he took his hand away.

Another song began and Max reveled in the little waves of energy tossing Fallon about beside him. He gave her a pointed glance, a warning, then reached around and grazed the nape of her neck with his fingertips. This time she turned, clamping her palm over the spot.

“You tag was out,” he lied.

“What a mess I am tonight,” she said, skeptical but unmistakably permissive.

She faced forward again and Max snaked his hand behind her to lay a palm at the small of her back. She straightened up as though shocked.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes darted between his, angry or very close to it.

“Working.” He turned his eyes back to the music and sipped his wine, but kept his hand and consciousness firmly on her waist. Her body hummed against his palm.

Fallon glanced around, looking embarrassed.

“Who are you wearing makeup for?” he murmured into her ear.

“It’s Friday night. I can wear makeup if I want to.”

“Is it for me?” he asked, shameless.

“In your dreams,” she cut back, but still she didn’t remove his hand. She looked at him openly, and there was something new in her assessment, as though she was reconsidering him. For what, he couldn’t tell. She turned her attention to her beer.

“If it is for me, you don’t need to bother. I like you fine without it, you know.”

“Jesus,” she said, exasperated. “I came here to try and have a normal evening. A weirdness-free evening. Can we just try and be friends? Like regular friends, like normal people do, without this being some study of me?”

He considered her request and withdrew his hand with polite regret.

“Thank you.”

“You’re right,” he said. “We’re not at the studio. That was rude of me.”

“Thanks. Let’s forget it now.”

His lips twitched. “But that was better, you know. You did very well just then.” He took a drink to hide his smile.
Her own mouth pursed in disapproving amusement.

For many songs they sat together, exchanging neither looks nor words. Occasionally one would turn to order a fresh drink, or lean over to allow another patron to speak to the barman. After an hour the band wrapped their set and the lights came up for an intermission. Max swiveled his stool around and Fallon followed suit. Together they leaned on the bar.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked. It had been many years since he’d flirted tipsily with a woman in the languid neon of a bar. It made him ache for a cigarette.

“Yeah. It’s nice.”

“Try to not be too hungover for your sitting tomorrow,” he teased as her fourth drink arrived.

“Ditto.”

True, Max would feel the wine when he stood next, but he craved the intoxication. He needed that with Fallon. She’d made her boundaries crystal clear, and he needed at least another glass before he could disregard them.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” he asked.

“No. Why? Are you going outside?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t smoked in many years. But I would have enjoyed breathing in your seconds.”

She grinned, nose crinkling in the most delicious way. “My best friend quit a couple years ago. She still tails smokers on the sidewalk to get a fix now and then. ‘Nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy,’” Fallon added with a private smirk.

“This is from something?”

“It’s from The Big Sleep.” She took a deep drink of her beer. “You know how I love those old movies.”

He stared at her, wishing he were somehow allowed to grab her by those full hips and yank her into his lap, wrap those legs around his waist—

“You’re staring again.”

He turned his attention to the corner where the next band was setting up. The bar suddenly lost its appeal.

“It’s very loud here.” He watched his cheap cabernet as he swirled his glass. “Why don’t you come for a walk with me?”

“Where to?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I could walk you home. I haven’t seen your cottage.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s dark out. There are bad men in this town, with bad intentions.”

There was a smile in her voice. “I’m sure there are.”

Fallon was drunk.

She’d had about five drinks in last few hours, and although she felt perfectly coherent and charming, she knew she was lacking substantially in the inhibition department. Strolling beside her on the barely lit shoulder of the main road, Max kept his eyes on his feet. He was wearing his running shoes and a fitted gray hoodie whose arm bore the green and yellow insignia of some French soccer team. He looked hip in that enviable, effortless way only Europeans can muster.

“What are you thinking about?” She asked it partly so she could stop wondering for a moment what would happen when they reached her lodgings. She wouldn’t invite him in, that was for damn sure. Or reasonably damn sure.

“I am thinking I am drunk,” Max said with a small laugh.

“Me too.”

“I am thinking, I have to remember not to try to kiss you when we say good night,” he said, conversational.

“Yes, do remember that.” She stifled a very un-Fallonish giggle, amused by how maladroit this elegant man could be sometimes.

“It is only because I’m drunk.”

“Oh, thanks very much,” she shot back, faking offense.

“No no—you know it’s not like that. You know you’re beautiful.”

“If you say so.”

His pace slowed, and she could make out his face, feel his attention turned to her. “You really don’t think so?”

“I’m all right. If you like a wash-and-go kind of woman.”

“I am not sure what that means, but you are beautiful for any kind of woman.”

She ignored the instinct urging her to contradict him.

“I have been with a lot of women,” Max began, and Fallon interrupted him with a caustic laugh.

“Wow, way to go.”

“But you are more beautiful than all of them,” he continued. “I do not know why, but you are.”
“Sure. Let’s just get you a breathalyzer and I bet we’ll get to the bottom of it.”
“You’re so lousy at accepting compliments,” he said. “Is this yet another thing that makes you uncomfortable?”
“Probably. But I’ll remind you again, it’s you that makes me uncomfortable.”
“I know. I so enjoy it.”
She laughed again. “Jesus…”
Max’s warm, rough hand enveloped hers. A breath stuck in Fallon’s throat and she sobered by a degree, but didn’t pull away. His broad thumb stroked hers with an alarming familiarity. All the signs and buildings along the road seemed sharper, the late-summer chill in the air more acute.
“You know,” Max said, “I’m not even attracted to beautiful things or people. Not usually. That I find you so attractive is worrisome to me.”
“Oh. Sorry.”
His hand squeezed hers tighter. “I want to go to bed with you.”
For once, Fallon could think of nothing snide to say. She let her hand go limp, the tiniest protest. The sign for the cottage property appeared in the distance.
“I won’t ask you to,” Max continued. “Because I do not want to want this. And because you told me never to kiss you again.”
She considered revoking this ban but held her tongue.
“And because we are equals in this, I am realizing. We’re both in this situation seeking to profit from it. I don’t understand what is in it for you, and I won’t ask anymore. But you are doing what I ask, like you said, so I will do the same.”
“Thanks.”
He gave her hand a last squeeze and let it go. They walked in silence, turning down the long dirt drive and walking all the way to end, to the little red cottage closest to the water. Fallon was the only renter, now that the tourist season was over.
She fished in her jeans for her key, unlocking the door and reaching around to flip the sickly porch light on above them.
“Thanks for walking me back,” she said lamely, looking down at their shoes, the toes nearly touching.
His voice was very near her temple. “You’re welcome.” He sounded somber. He sounded as though he wanted to say more.
Fallon stood still, anticipating. No words came but Max raised a hand, cautious, and she let him run it over her neck, fingertips tangling in her hair. The contact prickled like static. He held her head the way he might while kissing her but his lips stayed safely above her ear.
“Good night,” Fallon said.
He let her pull away and tucked his offending hand into his jacket pocket. His smile was sheepish as she slipped inside the screen door. She met his eyes as it shut.
“Walk safe,” she said.
“Fais de beaux rêves.”
“No clue what that means. But I’ll see you tomorrow.” She closed the interior door softly on him.
After a couple glasses of water, insurance against a hangover, Fallon tucked herself into bed. She pictured Max again, the shapes and shadows of him as he’d walked back up toward the main road, the width of his shoulders and the lilt of his hips as he moved between the streetlights. She’d watched him from the dark bedroom until he was out of sight. He hadn’t looked back.
When she eventually slept, Fallon dreamed of him again. Explicit dreams that didn’t belong to her, or not to any version of herself with whom she was acquainted.
In the dreams she was greedy and demanding. In them Max was obedient, blazing hot, his body urgent and needy but submissive to her wishes. She remembered them with perfect clarity when she woke and found a hunk of the bedspread strangled in her fist. His earlier offer to have his wrists bound for her as she explored him—in her dreams she acted on it. In her dreams she wanted things that left her cold in practice, or had.
Fallon turned the hot tap off completely until the water came out so icy she clambered from the tub in retreat. Better. Slightly better.
“Good morning.”
When Fallon arrived at ten o’clock, she was different. Max sensed it. There was a rigidity to her that was troubling, though unsurprising. When she disrobed, it was the doctor’s office all over again, and Max’s clay studies
that morning came out as stiff and contrived as her imitation of indifference.

“Let’s break,” he said, the hour hand not even at twelve yet. It was frustrating. Frustrating more so because this was most certainly his fault. He’d meant to tease her, not alienate her. It could take another couple of weeks to regain her trust. Weeks, he had. He suspected, however, that she did not.

Fallon redressed and joined him for cold shrimp and pasta. He forewent the wine.

“You look like you need a day off.” He picked through his food, unused to these anxious feelings.

She shrugged.

“I think this is more than a hangover, yes?”

Fallon rubbed her temple and sighed heavily, clearly not interested in having this conversation.

“I went too far last night, yes?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” she mumbled. “I’m just tired. I slept really crappily. Don’t worry about it. It’s my own fault for staying out late and drinking so much.”

“Well, I apologize if you feel offended by anything I said to you.”

“I said don’t worry about it. I’m not offended.”

“That is good…” His blood hummed with agitation. He felt unable to fix this and it was upsetting.

“I don’t want a day off.” Fallon propped her head in her hands and exhaled, sounding exhausted. Max studied her long fingers and tidy, short nails, the elegant little knob of her pisiform bone at the corner of her slender wrist.

“Well, I’m afraid I am not making any progress today. You may as well have the afternoon to yourself,” he said, tempting her defensive side.

She glared at him.

“I’m not accusing you of anything. But you will be of more use to me—and yourself—if you go and spend the rest of the day doing something you actually enjoy.”

“I don’t want to lose any more time. You were supposed to have started the marble by now… You know,” she went on, that old edge returning to her voice, “you’re getting paid a ton for this time, but I’m not. I’m on an unpaid leave right now, and I’ve got a mortgage, and bills, and a roommate who’s depending on me to kick in my share. I’ve got a pushy, unpleasant patron to please with what for you is just a convenient commission. This has to work, okay? This has to be worth my time and it has to succeed. I have to get back and take care of my life. I have a life.”

“I know that.”

She groaned. “Then we have to stay on track. If you care about me in whatever weird, not-quite-platonic way you seem to, then just… do what you were hired to do. I’ve suspended all my disbelief about how it is you say you need to work, now please meet me halfway. Sculpt. Please.” She pushed her uneaten food around in her bowl. “I’m not on vacation, here. I’m here to do something I really don’t want to do because it’s important to me. This is a sacrifice. Don’t make it be for nothing.”

“You are going to hate what I am about to say.”

“Fine, just say it.”

“I have no control over what it is I do. I can’t speed it up at will—”

“Well, you told me twelve weeks,” she cut in. “Why give me a timetable if you can’t stick to it, for crying out loud?”

“Look. You are the worst model I have ever had,” Max said, and she flinched. “You started off uncooperative, and you can be so defensive sometimes that I may as well try to sculpt you from two towns away, you’re so distant. You can be hell to work with.”

She opened her mouth but he plowed on.

“And what’s worse, I did not choose you. You don’t want to be here. The one person who even wants this sculpture is some mysterious man who you clearly dislike, and I am having an impossible time feeling excited about him receiving my work. I am doing this as a favor to you.” The words tumbled out, fast and impatient. “At first, for the money, and because I like a challenge. And now, because I like you. I want to help you.” And because he couldn’t sleep sometimes for the thoughts of her that haunted him at night. “But do not for one second treat me like I’m not trying to make this work. I would like nothing more than to please you. Though God knows why.”

Fallon blushed, held his eyes for a moment then began to eat. They finished the meal in silence, and she took their dishes to the sink and washed them.

“I’m going, then,” she said, organizing her bag. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Good.” Max tried to stay as even as she was being…but at the same time his body wanted to spin her around and shake her by the shoulders, scream at her to get out of his head before he went crazy. Instead he held the door open to let her by. He changed his mind at the last moment.

He grabbed his wallet and locked the door behind them, jogging to join her in walking up the gravel road toward town.
She cast him a suspicious look. “Are you coming with me on my afternoon off?”
“No. I have a phone call to make.”
“Well, you can use my phone. You don’t need to go all the way into Pettiplaise.”
His mouth twitched. “Thank you, but it is a private call.”
“I won’t listen.”
He smiled tightly. “I don’t want you to see the number after I give you your phone back.”
She shook her head. “Whatever.”
They walked together, the quiet disrupted by their footsteps and the caws of Cape Breton’s prolific crow population. When they reached the edge of town, Max stopped at the co-op market’s pay phone, letting Fallon walk on without him. He didn’t bother saying goodbye.
When she realized she’d lost him, she turned, and he raised his brows playfully. Her pale eyes narrowed with irritation. He caught her shake her head to herself as she continued on her way.
Max dug the number out of his wallet. He slid a few coins into the slot and punched the buttons. Voicemail picked up immediately.
“Good afternoon. You do not know me, but my name is M.L. Emery. I have a rather strange favor to ask you…”
Chapter Six

Fallon rang Max’s bell at ten sharp. She collected herself on his doorstep, feeling a thousand times better than she had yesterday at this time.

He opened the door and smiled, leaning casually in the frame and crossing his arms. “Good morning.”

“Morning.”

He looked her up and down with characteristic mischief and nodded. “I am so glad you dressed practically.”

Fallon frowned with a low-level panic, taking an inventory of her favorite jeans and her NYU sweatshirt, feeling suddenly inadequate.

“Don’t look so offended. That is just perfect for today.” He ceased blocking the door and went inside. Fallon followed, taking in the familiar earthy smells of the studio with its predictable undertone of steeping coffee.

“Did you enjoy your afternoon off?” Max asked, gathering mugs.

Fallon stared at him, still confused by his critique of her clothes. Any other man on earth would look like a slob, dressed the way Max was: filthy jeans and shoes so crusted in clay she couldn’t even make out their color.

Something about him could transform such a wardrobe. Even with four days’ stubble and an industrial particle mask hanging around his neck, Max looked styled. Men like him could make burlap potato sacks couture.

“It was fine, thanks,” Fallon finally said. “I rented a bike for a few hours and did some reading. It was very relaxing.”

“Excellent. Can you tell what I did on my afternoon off?” he asked, looking eager.

Fallon studied him again then turned her scrutiny to the studio. She noted the relatively dust-free tabletops and floor. “You cleaned.”

“Not just that. I selected your marble, as well.” He nodded to a block of white stone, streaked with pale gray veins. It was a little smaller than a refrigerator, turned on its side and laid across two dollies in the center of the floor.

“Wow. Does that mean you’re done with the studies?”

“Nearly. By the end of the day, I will be.” He smiled deeper. Sometimes Fallon wished he wouldn’t. It felt like he was removing an item of clothing in front of her when he grinned like that.

“Well… Great. I’m glad.” Relieved was a more accurate word. It was already mid-September and Fallon estimated they should have begun the marble over a week ago. “So, do I have to start posing now? Instead of just sitting around naked for you?” She felt a spark of their old levity, touched by the proof of his respect for her deadline.

He shook his head. “No posing today. No sitting today.”

“Oh. What do you do now? Do you not need me until the stone is carved down to a certain shape or…?”

“Today we are going on a field trip,” Max announced.

She accepted the coffee he handed her. “Oh? Where to?”

“You tell me.” He took a seat on the edge of the worktable. “Today you are going to take me out of my dusty little world and we will do Fallon things. I have kept you in here like a caged animal until now.”

“It hasn’t been that bad.”

“So today you give me not just your energy, but your time. Your environment. And by the end of the day I promise I will know your pose for the final piece.”

She nodded, impressed by this sudden flexibility. “Well, okay. We’ll have to go somewhere we can walk to, I guess.”

“Wherever you like.”

“Or actually…can you ride a bike?”

He smiled. “I think I can remember. It’s been about twenty years, but there is that saying, after all.”

“Cool. Let’s finish our coffees and go rent some bikes.”

He nodded and Fallon tried to picture him on a bicycle. It wasn’t a likely fit but it touched her. Max Emery, more than anyone else she’d ever met, led an exceptionally self-designed existence. She felt flattered that he was willing to violate this lifestyle to conform to her wishes.

“Let me bathe. I’ve been cleaning the vents.” He nodded to the ladder propped near the opening of the ventilation duct. He pulled the particle filter mask off his head and sauntered to the tub, running the taps.

“Turn around now if you do not want to see me the way I see you.”

Fallon couldn’t calculate the exact meaning of the statement. She swiveled her chair around loudly and grabbed a
magazine. After a few minutes the taps turned off and she heard sloshing.

“You’re safe now,” he said.

“So,” Fallon furrowed her brow. “Does the mailman, like, love delivering to this house? He must be used to seeing naked women traipsing around here every afternoon.” She turned and thought she could make out Max’s backlit face smiling from where he reclined in the water.

“My postman is a woman.”

“Well, does she make it a point of dropping the mail off at nine-forty-five every morning?” she asked, meaning the time Max normally bathed after his runs.

“The box is at the end of the road.” His warm tone told her he was charmed by her awkward attempt at flirtation.

“What about your…fans, or whatever? You’re pretty famous. Do people ever come here and peer into your many windows?”

“It has happened. But not for several years.” He dunked his head, scrubbing his hair.

When he resurfaced Fallon asked, “Has anyone ever stolen any of your statues? The broken ones in the backyard?”

“They have not. Not yet.”

“That’s surprising.”

“Well, my work, the popular pieces, are perfect. So they say. I am meant to be very, very good at rendering the human body, to create lifelike figures. Humans made of stone.”

“Yes, well, you are,” Fallon said.

“So the people who make a fetish of my work, they fixate on the perfectness of it. Every piece of mine that has been stolen—and there have been a few—were like that. The ones out back, they’re all rejects, as it were.”

“Geological tragedies?” Fallon asked, borrowing his earlier phrase.

“Exactement. They’re not worth as much to the collectors who think my work is synonymous with the flawless imitation of flesh. Perhaps when I am dead they will be more valuable. Perhaps, too, the pieces from my so-called ‘disfigurement period’, as some call these past eight years. But it does not matter to me. Like my patrons, I will be gone someday. My work, for as long as it is destined to, will travel around without me, ending up goodness knows where. As I have said, the process is what matters to me. Like breathing. Or perhaps like sex, rather, to some people,” he amended thoughtfully. “I would not die if I could not work, but I would be miserable. That’s what matters. Not the finished pieces.”

She nodded.

“I’m going to stand up now,” he warned.

Fallon nodded again but only turned partway, keeping him in her periphery. She indulged in the vague impression of his silhouetted body as he dried himself, those long muscles, the forbidden shadows of him. He secured the towel around his waist and Fallon abandoned her voyeurism as he went to dress.

When he returned he was wearing cleanish jeans and a black sweater.

“Heavy? You’ve ever done a self-portrait?” She’d seen a few statues of men when she’d done her initial search for M.L. Emery online, but that was long before she’d been able to recognize him.

“No. And I doubt I ever shall. Unless you would like to pay me seven hundred thousand dollars to do so? As a souvenir of your trip, maybe?”

“No.” She swallowed, unsure why she was about to say this. “But anyway…you’re certainly built for it.”

“Oh?” He looked intrigued. “How so?”

“You know. You’re very…sculptural.”

“Like a Greek god,” Max said through an outrageously self-satisfied sigh, clearly kidding.

Fallon laughed. “Well, no, maybe not. More like a rugby player,” she said, trying to qualify his raw, lean, muscular body. Like an underwear model, she added to herself.

He smirked. “I remember being very lousy at rugby as a child. But my job… If I carved monuments and not people, I would be a laborer. You aren’t here much of the time, to see me really at work. Lift, lift, lift,” he said.

“Stacking and shelving and moving twenty-kilo boxes of clay and great hunks of rock. Chiseling, sanding, polishing. I am just a mason with a prettier job title. You come back and find me in thirty years, when my lungs and wrists and back are a broken old man’s. Then you will see what cruel trade owns this body.”

She nodded.

“Ready to go?” He stood and took their cups.

“Yup.”

“Excellent. Show me what you like, Fallon Frost.”
Max tore his mesmerized eyes off the waves at the sound of a loud splash, in time to see Fallon getting back to her feet after slipping and dunking herself. She’d been wading around in the knee-deep water with her pant legs rolled up, collecting and examining the rocks and shells, looking as contented as a four-year-old. Now she was soaked head-to-toe, though not a bit less charming. She turned to where he stood on the shore, sheepish, hair and clothes dripping.

“Smooth, huh?” She wrung her sleeves out, sloshing toward him.

The beach was their final stop on Fallon’s day out. After they dropped the bicycles off, Max had insisted on it. He liked to observe her near the ocean. She made sense near the ocean. The sun was beginning to fade, the early-autumn evening bringing its chill.

“You must be freezing.” His lips couldn’t hide a smile, and his mind couldn’t help but wonder what this might mean for tonight.

“I’ll be fine.” She laughed as she pulled back her wet curls. Already she was shivering. “I’ve had worse.”

“Perhaps, but I would prefer you didn’t catch pneumonia while you’re my guest. Let’s get you back.”

She pulled her socks and shoes on. They walked up the beach, mounting the weather-beaten steps to the grass at the edge of Max’s property.

She glanced over at him. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

She grinned and Max felt something alien fluttering in his chest.

“For letting me have a day off,” she said. “It’s been nice, you know. Not being your model for a change. You’re not as bad as I thought you were at first.”

“Oh?”

“Nah. You’re okay.”

He appreciated the effort he suspected this compliment took. “You’re okay too.”

“And thanks for the movie. I miss that stuff.”

He nodded. Neither of their cottages had a television but Max had taken them past the library so Fallon could select a film, and he’d convinced the bartender at The Shack to play it on the TV mounted behind the bar during lunch. They’d been the only customers, anyway.

“How accurately would you say *An American in Paris* reflects the typical artist’s lifestyle?” Fallon asked studiously as she squeezed the water from her sweatshirt.

“Quite accurate. When you’re not here I am forever dancing about with Parisian school children.”

When they reached the studio Max ran a hot bath beneath the rear windows. As the tub filled, he got the fireplace going and unfolded a wooden clothes rack in front of it.

Fallon’s eyes darted between the fire and the bath, shy.

“Afraid of the water?” he asked, teasing.

“No.”

She undressed slowly with none of the businesslike resolve she mustered for the daily sittings. Max took her wet clothes and rinsed the salt from them in the sink. Fallon was reclining in the tub when he returned to hang them before the hearth.

He could sense her cautiously relaxing into this new realm. They’d never been together in the studio past dusk before, and he knew how it transformed once the sun set. No longer flooding the space with light, all those windows became dark mirrors, reflecting the fire, skylights revealing the stars as they came out. He didn’t bother turning any lamps on, letting the flames be the only illumination. He found two glasses in the dark pantry and filled each with wine.

Fallon accepted her glass. “Thanks. For that too.” She pointed to her drying clothes and the fireplace. Max’s eyes in the darkness were like passages to a black, fascinating, unknown destination.

“Not a problem.” He meandered to the opposite end of the tub and set his glass on a stack of books. He sank to his knees, resting his arms on the rim of the tub above Fallon’s feet, his chin on his crossed wrists.

She sipped her wine. “You’re staring.”

“And you’re naked.”

“That’s nothing new to you.”

“Do you see a chisel in my hand? Am I working?”

She bit her lip. “Oh. So if you’re not working this is suddenly sexual?”

He merely smiled, his eyes roaming over her shoulders and knees above the surface.

“And this.” She held up the glass. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

He nodded. “Yes.”
“To what end?” she asked, trying to downplay how shameless she found his honesty.
Max shrugged. “Maybe you’ll answer questions. Maybe you’ll stay the night, in my bed. By yourself, of course.”
“Oh?”
“And tomorrow my sheets will smell like you.”
Fallon stared into her wine. “I want to know something about you.”
“Shoot.”
“I only know a little about your life before you moved here. How were you discovered so young?”
He took a deep drink and nodded, somber. “Well, I was discovered, as you put it, shortly after my mother died. She is the reason I am how I am, I think. And my father as well, in a more obvious sense.
“In our village, he was the monument maker. He made gravestones, mostly. His father too. Very glamorous, yes? And maybe I would have as well, if things hadn’t turned out the way they did.” He stood to retrieve the bottle and refill his glass.
“So,” he continued. “I am twelve. My mother has been sick for several years—a degenerative neurological disease. She is an angel, my mother. I know, that sounds so Catholic of me, and I am such a poor Catholic now. But she was everything to me. For the last three years of her life, she lost her eyesight, gradually, until she was totally blind. Some hearing too, and she communicated through touch, you see?” He held his hands up, fanning his fingers out, then took another deep drink.
“I’m beginning to,” Fallon offered.
“So, my mother dies.” He knelt again, closing his eyes for a moment and crossing himself in a reflexive fashion. “And my father is too distraught to make her gravestone, so I do it. I had never carved marble before, not even granite. I only watched, ever, and handed my father tools. And I carve her not only a stone, but a statue.”
“An angel,” Fallon said, picturing the haunting monument from the newspaper article.
“Exactement. It consumed me, for perhaps two weeks. No food, no sleep. Like a possession, almost. And they did a story about it in the village paper, and someone in Rennes hears. Then Paris. Then suddenly, I am being taken away to London. My father, he insisted, otherwise I would have stayed. And before you know it, I am in New York.”
“Which you hated,” Fallon said as he paused to refresh her glass.
He nodded. “I did, but I didn’t realize that right away. It took me many years to understand that success and fame are not synonymous. Or even desirable.
“My father, he gave up, after my mother died. They were very close, my parents. Always very much in love, even when she was too sick to leave her bed. He went downhill for the next decade. I was making good money, then. Too much money, really, but it was no help. When he passed some years ago, I saw it coming. I went back to France for several months to be with him as he died, and I looked around and I said to myself, what am I doing in this life? And that was when I left New York for good.”
“Is it true…the rumors that you faked a heroin problem?” Fallon felt nervous asking that, felt raw having this conversation and seeing Max as more than two-dimensional, as more than a footnote in this bizarre chapter of her life.
He laughed and waved a dismissive hand. “It was nothing so elaborate as that. I left, and people demanded to know why. I was fed up with everything to do with the art scene. I said all sorts of things. I was sarcastic. I said yes, I am going to rehab. I am joining a cult. I am having a sex change. Anything but admit that I was grieving and disillusioned, that I couldn’t take the pressure anymore. The heroin lie stuck, though I never really tried to make anyone believe it. It was a joke to me, because you have no idea how little these people actually care. They probably wished I would overdose, so my work would be worth more. Plus, you know, I wasn’t so innocent with drugs then. It wasn’t such a stretch, that rumor. Compared to the others.”
“I see. So you haven’t lived in France for…over twenty years?”
He nodded.
“You’ve still got a heck of an accent.”
“I know. When I first left, I didn’t speak very much. Not English or otherwise. I didn’t need to, and I didn’t particularly want to. I wanted to be left alone, though that was not to be. Plus everyone in the classical art world, they’re always so eager to show off their French. But you’re right, I haven’t done a very good job assimilating.”
“That’s okay. It’s sort of charming… It goes,” she said, waving her hand to encapsulate Max as a package. She stared at him a long time, sipping her wine, watching his black eyes glittering across the water into hers. He trailed a lazy hand through the surface, making the refracted firelight bounce and shatter, and finally looked away.
“What is this?” Fallon asked.
Max met her gaze again and his lips tightened. “This?” He pointed a finger at himself, the tub, Fallon, the fire.
“Yeah, this.”
“Your clothes are drying. We’re warming you up,” he said, sinister.
Fallon shook her head, exasperated but deeply enjoying flirting with him, thanks mainly to the alcohol. “You’re a very bad man.”
“Oh? And what sort of man do you prefer?”
“Romantically?” She thought for a moment. “Safe men, I guess.”
Max looked amused, flicking his fingers in the water, his smile in the firelight pure mischief. “Safe men? Who are these safe men you speak of?”
“You know. Responsible guys. Reliable guys with normal jobs and student loans and mortgages. And golden retrievers.”
“And what am I then?” He grinned deeply, clearly pleased to be in a separate camp from the breed of male she was talking about. “Unsafe? Dangerous?” He reached both arms into the water and took hold of her toes.
“You’re… I don’t know, Max. You’re something different.” A tide of intimacy seeped over her and he caught it too.
“That is the first time you’ve addressed me by my name.”
“Yes, well. I’m quite tipsy.”
“Too tipsy to walk back to your cottage?”
“I’m not going to sleep with you. Literally or figuratively.”
“I know.”
“You’re probably not used to hearing that.” She hated the bitterness that edged her voice.
His brows rose. “Pardon?”
“I bet you sleep with all your models, don’t you?”
He drew his arms out and slumped to one side, propping his chin on a wet hand on the tub’s rim, looking puzzled.
“You sound like that Carly Simon song. And you might be surprised by how many of my models I’ve slept with.” Fallon fell silent, knowing the flirtation had cooled. Her fault. Against the many windows, tiny winged bodies struck like raindrops.
Max stared thoughtfully across the studio and didn’t speak for several minutes.
“You are a biologist,” he said eventually, looking squarely at her. “The moths. Why are they forever slamming into the glass, trying to get to the light?”
“Because of the moon.” She felt the bath go tepid. “It’s called phototaxis. A lot of people think they use the moon to navigate. Man-made lights screw with their orientation.”
“They’re trying to fly to the moon?”
“Not to the moon. Toward it, I guess. But when they bump into a window or a porch light, they get confused.”
“Interesting.”
“I suppose.” She shivered. “The water’s getting cold. Do you have a towel?”
“Of course.” He made a quick trip up to the loft and turned away politely to stoke the fire as Fallon left the water for the cool air.
“What do you normally sleep in?” he asked once she was dry and safely shrouded.
“Boxers and a T-shirt.”
“I’ll see what I can do.”
She followed him up the staircase, the metal slats like a stony beach under her bare feet. She peered around the dimly lit landing. Max had a smallish bed, a double, covers a mess. The loft was angled sharply on both sides beneath the roof, with just enough room leftover for a bedside table and a small dresser. Too oddly shaped to be of any other use, the triangular corners were piled with books. He dug through a drawer and handed her a threadbare tee and stood close, waiting.
Determined not to appear prudish in light of their increasingly blurry relationship, Fallon dropped her towel and tugged the shirt on, grateful it fell safety past her butt. Max made no attempt to hide the fact that he was watching her. And enjoying it.
She sat at the edge of his rumpled bed. “Where are you going to sleep?”
“I’ll figure something out.”
She glanced behind her, measuring the mattress and its implications with her eyes.
“We could share. Just don’t try anything.”
“Is that okay with you?”
She shrugged. “I wouldn’t offer if it wasn’t. Our boundaries are so messed up anyway. And we’re both single. I don’t mind. But like I said, don’t try anything.”
“Can I suggest things?” he asked, grinning.
She laughed to herself, shaking her head. “Jesus, Max.”
“I like it when you say my name.” He took a seat beside her. “Do you think we’re friends?”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” She turned away and suddenly she could smell him. In the linen and pillows and right there, next to her. His shirt was soft on her clean skin. She felt his fingers on the nape of her neck and turned to him.

“That time your tag really was out,” he said.

Their eyes flickered together for a moment, and she could feel the question of a kiss crossing each of their minds. Max put a hand to her damp hair and pressed his lips against her temple.

He pulled away. “I have to tidy up a few things. I’ll be up shortly.”

Fallon lay down, feeling his weight lift from the mattress and the vibrations as he descended the steps. She buried her face in his pillow and breathed him in.

Max spent ten minutes pretending to care about the state of his home. He tidied the kitchen and added enough firewood to keep the studio warm for another hour, let the vagrant cat in when it mewed at the back door. He did these things without thought, the whole time vexed by the question of what might happen when he joined Fallon in his bed. He thought of how rattled she’d been the morning after he’d hit on her during the walk back to her cottage. He didn’t want that to happen again. But he wanted so many other things far worse.

By the glow of the fire he climbed the staircase, finding Fallon beneath the covers, curled on her side facing the open studio, eyes shut. The light played across her face until his shadow passed over it, making him feel predatory.

He sat and kicked his shoes aside, stripped off his socks and sweater, and lay down alongside her in his jeans and undershirt, safely above the covers.

“Fallon,” he whispered, knowing she wasn’t asleep.

“Yeah?”

“What is that stupid English term for when you lie back-to-front with someone?”

“What? Spooning?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“I guess that is a stupid term.”

“May I spoon you?” he asked, grin unseen but probably audible.

She sighed theatrically and didn’t answer right away. “Yeah, fine. But stay above the covers.”

He complied happily, turning and wrapping an arm around her cocooned waist, resting his head so his mouth was close by her ear.

“Thank you,” he whispered and he felt her shudder in a tiny, pleasurable way. Her damp hair smelled of some long-forgotten seaside. “Just pretend I am Gene Kelly.”

Another sigh. “Good night, Max.”

“Fais de beaux rêves.”

Fallon woke at an indeterminate dark hour, long after the heat and the light of the fireplace had died. Max’s strong arm was clamped tight around her middle, though he’d made no further attempts to come on to her.

“Max?” She turned her head toward him. “Max?”

He made a sleepy mmmm sound.

“It’s cold.”

“Sorry. I’ll start the fire again.” He untwined his arm and made to rise.

“No no—I’m fine. I mean aren’t you cold? Do you need some covers?” she asked carefully.

His reply was equally cautious. “That’s up to you.”

“It’s okay.”

She held her breath as he accepted the offer, rolling over and slipping beneath the comforter. Fallon tugged the long shirt down her hips. Against her bare legs she felt his denim-clad ones, felt the cool metal of his belt buckle through the cotton at the small of her back. He wrapped his arm around hers, skin to skin.

He spoke against her neck. “Is this still okay?”

“Yeah, it’s okay.” Lord knew why. She always prickled at his touch, though this time it felt like electricity, not alarm. His warm hand cupped her clasped ones in front of her heart and she felt one of his silver rings click against hers.

“You feel good.” His voice was low—sleepy or seductive, she wasn’t sure which. A very strong part of her wished it was the latter. The same part wished he wasn’t wearing jeans so she could feel whether or not he was turned on. She wished he was. She wished he was wearing nothing so she could feel his strong leg slide between hers, feel his erection brush the insides of her thighs. She wanted to hear what noises he’d make when he found her already wet for him. She blushed, wondering whose thoughts these were.
“Fallon?”
Her eyes opened slowly, taking in red—Max’s comforter. Oh God.
She sat up, bumping into him where he sat behind her back. “Sorry. Hey.”
“I see you slept all right, then.”
She turned to find him already dressed for his morning run. “What time is it?”
“Only eight thirty. Keep sleeping if you want. But I didn’t know if you needed to go back to your cottage before
the sitting begins…?”
“No, as long as my clothes are dry,” She did her best to sound as casual as he did. She’d only had a handful of
lovers, all of them boyfriends, and she’d never suffered a properly ambiguous morning-after before this one.
“What do you normally have for breakfast?” Max asked. “Should I pick something up on my run?”
“Um, cereal, usually. Or oatmeal?”
“That’d be nice, thanks. My bag’s by the door if you want cash.”
He glanced at her, eyes crinkling faintly with some breed of fondness. “I’ll be back in an hour or so.” He put a
hand on the back of her head and brushed his lips against her temple, looking uncharacteristically shy as he pulled
away. “See you soon.”
“See you.” She sat still, looking down into the studio until the back door closed behind him. She released an
almighty exhalation then toyed with the idea of calling Rachel. It would be seven thirty in New York, and she’d
probably be preparing for another tough week at work. No. As much as Fallon would have liked a kind, female
voice to assure her she shouldn’t be panicking, she could handle this by herself.
Max had left her clothes at the end of the bed. As she dressed she wondered how it was so many of her friends
could do casual dating. How often did they wake up in situations like this—well, not like this—with people they
didn’t know all that well, not knowing how they felt about those people or how those people felt about them? She
couldn’t imagine doing it herself with any regularity. And she’d only slept with Max in the most technical of senses.

Downstairs, she found the cat sitting pointedly at the door and let it out. The studio was odd without Max…like a
grocery store without any music or a living room without windows. Something elemental was missing.
She grabbed her eyeglasses from her bag and went to the bathroom. She considered using Max’s toothbrush then
decided it was one intimacy too far. Instead she smeared toothpaste on a clean washcloth and used that, rinsing it
thoroughly after. She peeled off her sticky contact lenses and washed her face, studying it in the mirror. Her freckles
were fading with the close of summer. She wondered where the past few weeks had gone.
She wandered around the studio, lost. She poked through Max’s metal shelves, among the tools and books and
supplies and the many, many clay studies he’d created of hers and other people’s bodies. They weren’t polished and
perfect like his finished statues, merely sketches—rough and gestural, quick and intuitive. Sometimes Max didn’t
even look at his hands as he worked.
On one shelf stood a long line of black Moleskine notebooks, perhaps close to a hundred of them, all identical
save for the different dusty finger marks smudging the spines. Fallon pulled the leftmost one down and opened it.
Sketches in Max’s elegant style. Pencil, charcoal, ink. Dated close to seven years prior. The drawings on this page
were of a woman with a severely hunched back and a pronounced nose. So Max, as she was coming to realize.
“You’re a strange man,” she murmured and replaced the sketchbook.
She climbed back up the staircase to peruse the ramshackle library piled in the corners of the loft. Lots of books
but sadly most of them in French. On the table beside the bed, beneath an old analog alarm clock, lay another
sketchbook.
Fallon slid it out and opened it to the first page. Herself. Her face, plus she’d know those hips anywhere. She
flipped the pages, watching the progression of his renderings as they transformed, gradually, from exacting, rigid,
anatomical studies to fluid figure drawings. Transforming as Fallon had, day by day. Each new series was dated and
by the time she reached mid-September Max’s hand had relaxed, just as she had herself.
She flipped a few pages onward and gasped.
The date was Saturday’s, the day he’d forced her take the afternoon off by herself. Drawn before her on the page
in fine, classical lines was both of them. Herself and Max, together. Together. And it was clearly Max, tattoos and all.
Her body buzzed hot with adrenaline.
The first of the highly erotic sketches had them wound in a deep embrace, kissing, him sitting cross-legged with
her legs wrapped around his waist. This wasn’t pornography—nothing properly obscene was depicted, but still. She
flipped another page, nerves jolting anew. The image of his body above hers. The next page, her on top of him.
She swallowed. “Holy shit.”
Fallon went back a few pages, confirming that these “studies” had only begun a couple of days ago, after the charged night at the bar and her doorstep. She was relieved he hadn’t created these images before then, before she’d flirted back.
She took another look at those most recent pages. He clearly knew his own body as well as she did hers. Fallon didn’t know which unnerved her the most—the subject matter or his undeniable talent.
No…she did know what disturbed her the most.
It was exactly how much she liked these drawings.
“Oh my God—what are you doing here?”

Two days after the tipsy spooning episode, Fallon opened the door of her rental cottage and gaped, shocked to find her best friend standing on the little porch at nine in the morning.

“Surprise!” Rachel held out her skinny arms and drew Fallon down into a warm, sister-quality hug.

“Whoa. I’ll say it again—what are you doing here?”

They hadn’t spoken for several days and Fallon had never mentioned where she was staying. She stood aside to let Rachel in, dumbfounded.

“Your mysterious sculptor called me a few days ago. Or he left a message.” Rachel set her purse down and glanced around the humble accommodations. “Do you have a coffeemaker? I just drove an all-nighter.”

“Yeah, hang on.” Fallon prepared a fresh filter and addressed Rachel through the kitchenette doorway. “Max called you?”

“He told me he was macking you cray-zee,” Rachel said in an overdone imitation. “And that you could use a familiar face. And he said to bring your CDs. I tried to call him back but the dude that answered after like fifty rings said it was a pay phone. I came anyway.” Rachel flashed her gigantic white smile, as big as she was small.

“He called you?”

“He did. Is that his actual accent? It sounds like a put-on.”

Fallon nodded and gathered mugs. “Yeah, that’s authentic. Did it sound like he was coming on to you?”

“A little bit.”

She nodded again, secretly disappointed.

“Not as much as I’d’ve preferred.” Rachel yawned deeply.

“So, he doesn’t actually know for sure that you’re here, now? Do you think I’m supposed to introduce you?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “He said come soon and this seems pretty soon.”

“Well, he doesn’t have a phone so we’ll have to swing by his studio. You may as well meet him, so when we explain this to friends over drinks someday I won’t sound like I made him up.” Fallon poured their coffees and they sat down at the rickety dinner table. “Where are you staying? And for how long?”

“Two days. That’s all I could get a sub for. And here, I hoped. Car’s out front.”

“Oh, man, vehicle access. I never thought I’d miss that.”

Rachel smirked. “Shame on you and your carbon footprint.”

“I’ll make an exception.” Fallon smiled, gratitude washing over her like warm water. “Well, I usually start the sittings at ten. Until four. But we can just drop by and let him know you’re here.” She breathed a sigh of relief. Deadline or not, she was glad of a day off this well timed. After the wine-fueled spooning and discovering Max’s NC-17 sketchbook, her cautious side wanted a couple days’ distance. Yesterday’s sitting had been a challenge—she’d been unable to rid her mind of those images.

Fallon’s phone buzzed to life on the counter.

“Wow, since when am I so popular?” She jogged to answer it, noting a New York area code. “Must be work. Hello?”

“Fallon, darling.” Donald Forrester’s voice drifted into her ear like a cloud of noxious swamp gas.

“I told you never to call me at this number,” she said, icy.

“Now now, don’t be like that,” he said, patronizing as always. “You probably don’t know how much I have invested in this project, but trust me, it’s considerable. I think I have a right to ask after the progress…?”

“I told you November. Now fuck off.”

“Fallon, really—”

She pushed the end call button and tossed the phone onto the sofa, rubbing a hand across her forehead. She made a disgusted noise.

“Forgester?” Rachel asked, incredulous. “God, what a skeez.”

“I know. He makes it sound like some amazing favor he’s doing me.”

“Instead of extortion? What I’d pay to give him a hard kick in the—”

“Listen, we’re not talking about him. This visit’s for us, okay? I’ve been dying to explore more of Cape Breton.”

Rachel nodded, obediently dismissing her anger. “And so you shall. Good thing I learned to drive in the city—the narrow roads here are crazy.”

Fallon looked at the microwave clock. “We’ll head over to Max’s soon. He runs in the mornings. I’m sure you’d
“I love to catch him in the bath but let’s wait ten more minutes. Then you’re taking me on a little trip into civilization.”

“Artists go running?”

Fallon grinned to herself. “This one does. This one’s full of surprises.”

Max did a little dance of uncertainty, caught halfway between the ringing door and the whistling kettle. He chose the door, pulling it open and then dashing across the studio to flip off the burner.

“Good morning,” he shouted to where he assumed Fallon would be. Then he sensed something different about her energy—she wasn’t alone. He turned to find her standing alongside a tiny woman with a halo of kinky, curly dark hair, even wilder than Fallon’s.

“Why, hello.” He returned their matching smiles and crossed the studio. “I’m Max Emery.”

“Rachel Stein.” She came forward and shook his hand warmly with her child-sized one, black eyes smiling. She was five-feet-nothing and at least three inches of it belonged to her authoritative heels. Pretty in a quirky, bohemian sort of way.

“It is good to meet you,” Max said.

“You too. Thanks for the invitation. Wow, this place is rad.” Her eyes scanned his sunny little empire. “I could get a tan in here.”

Fallon shouldered her bag, looking uncertain. “Do I get the day off, in light of this underhanded surprise visit?” she asked Max.

“Yes, I suppose.” He frowned internally, sad to lose the momentum of the last couple of days, the trajectory of both their rapport and his progress on the statue. He suddenly wished he hadn’t made that call. “Will you stay for coffee? So that I may grill your friend for personal information about you?”

“Um, sure. We don’t have anything scheduled.” Fallon put her bag down and dragged a pair of folding chairs over.

Max prepared the mugs and joined them, leaning on the edge of the worktable. “So Rachel, you are Fallon’s flatmate?”

“Housemate, yes. And therapist,” she added with a smile.

“Don’t listen to her,” Fallon said.

Max glowed to see her so clearly pleased with this morsel of normality. “What do you do for work?” he asked Rachel.

“I’m a teacher. High school life sciences, in Queens.”

He tried to picture this petite thing exerting authority over a classroom of rowdy urban teenagers. Strangely enough, he found he could.

“Fallon and I went to grad school together,” Rachel added.

“I see. And how is she as a housemate?” He caught Fallon shifting in her seat, torn between protest and permissiveness.

“Oh, she’s a dream. Clean, dependable, fabulous cook?” Rachel looked to Fallon for confirmation.

“I suppose.”

“Her eggplant parmesan is famous. And she wears seamed pantyhose and lipstick when she vacuums,” Rachel added. Fallon kicked her ankle with her sneaker. “Just kidding. She wears a French maid costume.”

Max smiled and turned to Fallon. “What else don’t I know about you?”

“Nothing terribly interesting,” she said, sounding shy.

“She’s very modest,” Rachel said warmly. “Although that’s probably not the side of her you see—”

Fallon interjected. “So, anyhow. What will you be doing while we’re off exploring?” she asked Max.

He shrugged. “I could do some gardening. Does Fallon do any gardening?” he asked quickly, knowing she’d happily supply any information he asked for. She clearly enjoyed teasing her friend as much as he did.

“Oh, a bit. Our yard’s about as big as a napkin, but she does some veggies. I’ve managed to kill all the cucumbers she planted back in August. Sorry,” she added to Fallon.

“I don’t suppose you brought any of the music I requested?” Max asked.

Rachel nodded, curls bouncing. “Oh yeah, I grabbed all the albums out of her car. I sure hope you like Elliot Smith and Van Morrison.”

“It’s not for me.” He aimed a smile at a pinked-faced Fallon.

“We should get going.” Fallon looked around, seeming to realize she was the only one who’d finished their coffee, or even started it. “Soon, I mean. There’s a lot I want to see.”

“What do you think of Fallon’s boyfriends?” Max plowed on, shameless.

Rachel pondered this question a moment. “They’re not bad, actually.”

“Thank you,” Fallon said graciously.
“Most of them are named Paul,” Rachel added.
“Only two of them.”
“A decent percentage. Anyway, they’re all right. Quite academic, I’d say. Quite a few engineers.”
Max smiled. “That doesn’t surprise me. She seems rather analytical.”
“I am actually in the room,” Fallon said.
Max ignored her. “So who exactly is this man who wants a sculpture of Fallon with her clothes off?”
Fallon stood so brusquely her chair toppled over backward. “We better go and start our day.” She aimed a pointed look at Rachel before politely righting the chair.
Rachel set her untouched coffee on the table and picked up her purse. “It was great meeting you.” She offered her hand again.
“Would you like to come back for lunch?” Max asked. “Fish chowder?”
“As seductively un-Kosher as that sounds, I was hoping to take Fal out for a girl’s lunch. We’ve got some catching up to do.”
“Very well. Perhaps some other time.”
Fallon smiled tightly and fairly dragged her friend from the studio. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to check in,” she shouted through the screen door as it swung shut.
“She likes bass players!” Rachel added as they disappeared, then made a noise like she’d been pinched.

“Thanks a lot for that,” Fallon said once the door creaked closed behind them. She smiled, flustered but relieved to have gotten away with any dignity still intact.
“Oh my God, is he not the sexiest person you’ve ever been in a room with?”
“I think he is,” Fallon agreed, only half-reluctantly. “You should see him with his shirt off.”
“Damn. So have you…you know?” Rachel wiggled her eyebrows lewdly.
Fallon worked hard to suppress a smile. “What?”
“You know. Voulez-vous…couchez’d avec him?”
Fallon laughed. “No. I’d call you if that happened.”
“Yeah, you better. He obviously likes you, though. He likes you, likes you,” Rachel teased. “Have you done anything?”
“Not really. I mean, apart from him staring at my naked body all damn day. And we did sort of…spoon. But I was pretty drunk.”
“Ooh, Fallon. Drunken spooning counts. Hell, anything counts with a man who looks like that one.” Rachel pulled her phone out of her purse and took a snapshot of Fallon blushing. “Did he grab your boob or anything good?”
Fallon snorted, so happy to have her friend here, to be having this sort of ridiculous conversation again. “No, no boob-grabbage. He kind of kissed me, once. A while ago.”
“Kind of? And just once?”
“It was a bit inappropriate. Not super-sketchy or anything, just a little too pushy for me, at the time.”
“Damn. I’d let him push me onto just about any old thing he fancies. Good kisser?”
“Couldn’t tell you,” Fallon said. “No tongue or anything.”
“Well, he is French, right? You should do a little cultural anthropology. Straight from the source. I’m telling you, Fal, you should sleep with him.”
“Technically, he’s Canadian now. And I don’t know if I even want to.”
“Why the frig not?”
“He’s too good-looking.”
Rachel pulled a skeptical face.
“Think about it this way,” Fallon said. “Firstly, where do I go from there? I can’t just go sleeping with some controversial French artist with a six-pack. What if it breaks me? What if I never meet anyone after who can…”
“Cleanse your palate?” Rachel offered.
“Yeah, pretty much. He might ruin me for normal guys. And secondly, he’s so out of my league it’s like he’s playing a different sport.”
“Oh, shut up. You’re gorgeous!”
“Yeah, thanks, Mom. But it seriously bothers me. I feel like some insecure junior high school kid around him sometimes. He reeks of sex like that guy from our ethics course reeked of Drakkar. He’s like some different species. He’s probably into things I can’t even pronounce.”
“That’s such bullshit,” Rachel said. “You need to think about it differently. I was just hypothesizing about this the other day, right? You need to fuck to the competition.”
“What on earth does that even mean?”

Rachel cleared her throat in a teacherly way. “So, you know that phrase people use when they’re talking about sports or darts or any sort of competitive thing—‘playing to the competition’? If they’re playing against someone lousy, they don’t try. They don’t need to. But if they’re playing against someone really good, or better than them, they play way better because they have nothing to lose, right? It like raises the bar?”

“Sure…”

“So you think he’s out of your league—and you’re wrong, obviously—but fuck him anyway, Fal, and I’m sure while you are you’ll feel like the only woman in the world who’s qualified for it. I bet it’d be great for your sexual self-esteem.”

“That is a weird-ass theory,” Fallon said as they reached the cottages.

“Whatever. I was up all night driving. Just send me the pictures.”

An hour later they sat down at a table in an Indian restaurant in Sydney.

“Wow, I never thought I’d miss being in a city,” Fallon said, staring out the window at the passing cars.

“If you can call this a city.” Rachel perused the menu.

“So. What have I been missing back in New York?”

“Well…” Rachel trailed off as a waiter came to fill their water glasses and take their drink orders. “There is one thing.”

Fallon leaned forward on the table, intuition already twisting her stomach into a knot. “What?”

Rachel reached for her purse and rifled through the contents for a moment. She did something to her hand then held it up. A small diamond winked from her ring finger.

“Oh my God!”

Rachel nodded, smiling so wide it looked painful.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Fallon reached over to dutifully manhandle her best friend’s wrist for a better look.

“When did Josh ask?”

“A little over a week ago. I didn’t want to tell you over the phone.”

Fallon sat back against her chair, giddy with fear and near-unconditional happiness. “Wow. So, do you know when? You know, the wedding?”

“A while. I mean, there’s that middle step missing, still.”

Fallon nodded. Rachel had already passed on a couple of invitations from Josh to move in. She wouldn’t be able to put it off much longer now.

“Wow,” Fallon said again. “When do think you’ll move out?”

“Not for a while—don’t worry.” Rachel’s spirited reassurance made it clear she understood how much Fallon was dreading this inevitability. “I told him I need plenty of time for us to figure out the house. You know, to sell it or for you to find a renter you like or…”

“Wow. Well, that is awesome. That’s the awesomest thing I’ve heard in months. Lunch is on me, then.”

“No, this is your early birthday lunch, Madam Unpaid Leave of Absence. I insist.” A deep yawn eclipsed Rachel’s smile. The adrenaline of the announcement seemed to have tipped her over the edge into exhaustion. “Plus, just wait until you’re a maid of honor. I need to get busy kissing your ass, pronto.”

“Yeah. Wow.” Fallon fell silent. She tried to study the menu but her panic blurred the words. She’d lived with Rachel for nearly four years now, the longest she’d ever lived in any one place, ever in her life. She felt like her world was being tipped upside-down like a snow globe and shaken.

Being here in the calm and quiet of Nova Scotia made her dread the thought of returning to New York, now that the one thing that made the chaos of living there bearable was going away. Having to drive in that hateful traffic, to fight day in and day out with assholes like Donald Forrester and lose those battles more often than not…”

Her heart ached suddenly. It ached in advance, for how she’d miss this place once she left. Homesickness, in reverse. Withdrawal.

Max glanced at the clock on his oven and frowned. Five forty. Who would be ringing his bell at five forty?

He found Fallon on his doorstep, looking pale.

“Hello. I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow.” He held the door open but she didn’t come in.

“Hey. I was hoping I could borrow your beach…?” She smiled halfheartedly.

“Of course. Where is your friend?”

“Asleep. She drove all night to get here and she’s down for the count now, back at my cottage.”

“Well, please, use my beach. Would you like a towel or a blanket?”

“Yeah, sure. That’d be good.” She nodded in a way that told Max she wasn’t far from tears.
“Come in. I’ll find you something.” He closed the door behind them and watched her from the corner of his eye as he dug an old blanket out of a cupboard. He’d never seen her look this fragile before.

“Can you give me a couple of minutes?” he asked.

“For what?”

“You’ll see.” He smiled at her, keeping his flirtation safely in check.

“I’m not really in the mood for guessing games tonight.”

“Sorry, but this is the price of using of my beach.”

She nodded, seeming to resign herself to him.

“Doesn’t your cottage have a beach?” He pulled a saucepan from the fridge and flipped a burner on beneath it.

“No, just a dock. No sand.”

“Well, you are welcome to all the sand you find out there.”

“Thanks.”

A few minutes later Max filled a Thermos with chowder and grabbed a camp lantern from a shelf, tossing the blanket to Fallon. “Let’s go.”

“Oh,” she said, hesitating. “I’m sorry. I meant I wanted to be alone.”

“I know. But I’ll walk you down.” He nodded in the direction of the back door.

“It’s still light out. I’ll be okay.”

“Price of admission. Come on.”

Fallon seemed fresh out of resistance. She exited and Max closed the door behind them.

“So,” he said as they kicked their way through the long, overgrown lawn. “Can I ask why you seem so sad?”

She shrugged. “I got some bad news.”

“Ah.” They descended the steps to the little strip of his so-called beachfront property. “Hold this. It’s your supper.” He handed her the Thermos and unfurled the blanket.

Fallon sat, clutching the Thermos like a talisman, staring off over the water, the tide half out.

“May I sit down?” Max asked.

She turned to stare up at him, eyes wide and tired. “Fine.”

He gave her a couple feet as a buffer and reclined against the lumpy ground. “Did you lose someone?” he asked softly.

“Oh, no. No one’s died. It’s nothing that bad. I lied, actually. It’s really good news… I just wasn’t ready for it.”

“Pregnancy?”

“No—oh, God no. Rachel got engaged.”

“Ah.”

Fallon unscrewed the cap and poured herself some chowder. She was quiet for a long time. “This is really good,” she murmured.

“I used some of your cream. Sorry.”

He caught her smirk with one side of her mouth, looking as if she didn’t want to.

“Do you not like this man she is marrying?” he asked.

“No, Josh is great. He’s probably the only guy on the planet who can keep up with her.”

“So you are sad because you are losing your housemate?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry. It is hard to lose someone, once you grow accustomed.” He turned his head to study her, thinking about the day when hers wouldn’t be the first voice to greet him in the morning.

“It’s more than that. She’s like my family. But I’ll be okay. I just feel…lost, I guess. I’m so sick of wandering around, you know?”

“You move a lot?”

“Yeah, a hell of a lot.” She cleared her throat. “It was just nice, being in one place for that long. I’ll have to find a renter I guess, or sell the place. It’s not the most amazing house ever. It’s okay. But now I feel like, why even bother staying in Metro New York? It used to mean I was close to my Aunt Gloria, but she passed away this year. Now Rachel. I don’t feel like I have the energy to do this anymore. To do anything.”

“This Aunt Gloria—she’s the one you used to watch old movies with?”

Fallon nodded.

“Tell me about her.”

She hesitated a long time before she spoke. “I went to stay with her when I was fifteen, until I finished high school. In a big old house in Connecticut, just a short drive from the coast. It was really pretty. Sort of idyllic. A huge back lawn and a porch and this big granite cliff rising all along the edge of the property, so you felt you were in
a little protected kingdom."

“That sounds very nice.”

Fallon’s face tensed and her lips quivered until she pursed them.

Max chose to let this topic slide. “How long do you have to decide what you want?”

“At least six months.”

“You know,” he said, “you can go home, if you want. You can go home with your friend and deal with all these things. I was only kidding about you being my prisoner.”

She nodded. “Thank you, I know. But this is important too. And the longer this takes, the longer I’m not bringing home a paycheck. It’s too messy. Plus… it’s good, my being stuck here. I should be thinking about this stuff now while it’s quiet and I’m not working. Don’t worry about it.”

Max clasped his hands over his ribs and stared into the darkening sky. “What do you think it is you want?”

“Like, in my life? I’m not sure. Is anyone ever sure of that?”

“They can be. But then sometimes they change their minds.”

“Well,” Fallon said with a sigh. “I envy you. You seem to know. And you’re able to just have it. You do whatever you like, in a beautiful place, in a house that you own, and you don’t have to answer to anyone.”

“I have freedom, that is true… But that’s not everything. Sometimes I feel very angry about my life, actually.”

“Oh.” She ate a bit more. “What’s wrong with your life? I mean, I don’t think I’ve ever met someone who lives as… uniquely as you do. Why are you angry?”

“Sometimes I feel like… I was unconscious. For over a decade. Like a coma. Like I fell asleep when I was twelve and woke up in this other life that didn’t belong to me. I feel a bit cheated, if I’m honest.” Incensed was a more accurate word, but Max didn’t want to come off too self-pitiful.

She nodded. “It sounded like it was really chaotic.”

“Yes. This life I have now, I am grateful for it. And I think I earned it too… Did you know, after my mother died and I was plucked out of my childhood home and taken away to London, I was called a visionary.”

“Oh?” She sounded cautious.

“Also while I was there I was given cocaine and Ecstasy, and I lost my virginity and stopped believing in God, all in one year.”

“Whoa. You were busy.”

“And do you know what else happened that year?” he asked, looking over at her.

Fallon met his eyes. “No. What?”

“I turned fourteen.”

“Oh, God.”

“I won’t even bother telling you how New York went. So now I need everything to be simple. And quiet. And just less. If I ever have a family someday, I will be one of those obnoxious, overprotective parents who do not want their child to ever lose its innocence.” He smiled, amused by this, charmed by thoughts of such extraordinary normality, of family.

“You want children?” Fallon asked, clearly surprised.

“I would. Very much. But it’s hard for me to relate to people sometimes, in those normal ways. I spent my formative years high on praise and success and drugs and all those endless changes. I never did the normal things normal people do between twelve and twenty-five. I suspect I’m quite maladjusted,” he added, grinning at her.

“I feel sort of stupid now. Being upset about my roommate moving out.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do.”

“No, of course not. But you know… I dunno. It’s good to hear that, I guess.”

“Lie down with me,” Max said.

She surprised him by replacing the cap on the Thermos and complying. She lay down facing him, tucking her knees into her chest and pressing her forehead into his shoulder. He unclasped his hands and stroked her upper arm through her jacket.

“It’s so quiet here,” she mumbled.

“I know. That’s part of why I love it. You know, you should cry, if you want to.”

She shook her head against him.

“All right.”

“I have to get back to my cottage tonight,” she said.

“I won’t keep you.”

“Maybe in a little bit.” She yawned. “After the stars come out. When it gets too cold.”

Max gazed blankly into the darkening sky, running his palm up and down her arm. He wondered if she had really come for the beach. Probably. He took his hand away, tucking it politely below its mate. He cleared his throat and
listened to the ocean, tried to keep from wondering again about the man who'd sent this woman to him.
Chapter Eight

“Tonight,” Max said, putting away the morning’s coffee cups. Fallon shed her clothes as though it were nothing, then marveled anew at how much she’d changed since first arriving here. “What about tonight?”

“It is your birthday.”

“It is indeed,” she confirmed, returning the mischievous smirk that curled his lips. “What about it?”

“Do you have plans tonight?”

She shook her head.

“I thought maybe you would be willing to sit for a couple of extra hours, stick around until suppertime? I would like to take you out. My treat. Thirty is such a nice, round number.”

“I don’t really want to make a big deal about it,” she said, all at once shy.

“I won’t make a big deal. No cake. No singing.” He crossed his heart and it seemed sincere.

In the two weeks since Rachel had come to visit, things between her and Max had cooled back down to manageable levels, leaving Fallon both relieved and disappointed.

She shrugged. “Okay.”

Smiling triumphantly, he began setting up the materials for the day. He wheeled the steadily winnowing hunk of white marble over from the corner and fetched a spray bottle and his tools, strapped on a pair of safety goggles. He wrapped the pads of his hands and his wrists in cotton bandaging, like a boxer. Apparently the chiseling was murder on his joints. He tossed Fallon a particle mask for when the dust began to bother her. Max always wore one when he worked and Fallon thought it made him look like a postapocalyptic surgeon.

“I hope you aren’t sculpting me with this thing,” she said, hanging it around her neck.

He grinned. “You will have to wait and see.”

Wait and see. A philosophy Fallon had been getting all too closely acquainted with since Rachel’s visit. She’d spent a few days in a state of panic over the inevitable upheaval of her life back home, followed by a week of lower level anxiety. In the past few days she’d reached a state of grim but steely acceptance. She hated not knowing how things would turn out, but she’d be okay. Many more disruptive changes had rocked her life and she’d lived through those… It still felt like grief, though. After an entire childhood spent moving around, Fallon had grown very attached to her routines and the stability of her living situation.

She took her seat on the worktable and found her pose. Funny how all of this had become normal to her. It was the strangest episode of her life, yet today felt like any other day. She’d adjusted to Max, to her own nudity, to this strange daily schedule. She could adjust to a new housemate or a new apartment just as capably.

Max strode to his dust-covered stereo and punched some buttons, Fallon’s CDs whirring and clicking in the changer. If he’d prefer not to be working to the sounds of PJ Harvey’s mournful wailing, he was kind enough to hide it. It was nice having her music here, a taste of the familiar making her feel welcome, as if she belonged. She turned the thought over in her head as she watched Max setting up. She most certainly didn’t belong here, but now and then she nearly wished she might, somehow.

“It is quitting time,” Max announced at five sharp, pulling his mask down around his neck and unbuckling his tool belt. He strode to the stereo and switched off Fallon’s Simon and Garfunkel CD. “Let me get cleaned up. That was a long session.”

Fallon dressed and strolled outside to sit at the picnic table with a newspaper while he bathed. When he emerged twenty minutes later, he was dressed up. Well, for Max. He had on dust-free gray pinstriped slacks and an untucked white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. As he approached he propped a vintage-looking tweed fedora on his head, the picture of offbeat, roguish style, ready for a gallery opening. He sat beside her, smelling like bergamot. Smelling like temptation.

“Ready?”

She nodded. “Where are we going?”

“Just to supper.”

“You’re all dressed up. Kind of. And you smell really good.”

He smiled and stared off toward the ocean. When he rose she followed him inside to grab her tote. He locked the studio behind them and they walked in silence along the dirt road.
“What’s in there?” Fallon asked after a little while, pointing to the paper grocery bag swinging from his hand.

“All in good time.”

“Did you get me a present?” The idea intrigued her.

Max just smirked, eyes on the horizon.

The edge of the town came into view as the sun began to fade. Max stopped by a stand of pines and opened the bag, drew out a handkerchief and a small parcel and tossed the latter to Fallon. It was fabric—pale, green-gray silk, folded and tied with a white ribbon. Fallon pulled the bow loose and unfurled a gown, the most exquisite item of clothing she’d ever touched.

“Oh my God.” She studied it for a minute. When she looked up she found Max crouching, spit-shining his shoes with the handkerchief. The formerly clay-splattered items transformed into a very fine pair of hand-tooled black dress shoes.

He glanced up from his task. “Animal product,” he said with a nod to the silk. “But I hope you’ll make an exception. Go on.” He pointed to the woods.

“What?”

“Put the dress on.”

Fallon blushed. “Right here?”

“Go behind the trees.” He stood and began tucking his dress shirt into his pants.

Fallon glanced back and forth between Max and the woods, uncertain.

“It might not even be the right size,” Fallon said, but she acquiesced. Once hidden in the shadows she was shocked to discover how perfectly the dress fit. She’d never have picked this out for herself—yet more evidence that Max knew her body better than she did. Her bra showed behind the tiny spaghetti straps and deep neckline.

“Is it all right?” she asked nervously, leaving the cover of the woods. “My bra and shoes look ridiculous.” She hiked up the hem to show him her yellow Keds.

Max stared at her for a long moment before reaching into the bag a final time. He withdrew a pair of beaded silver flats and set them before her on the grass. A perfect fit, also, and Fallon could tell from the soft calfskin linings alone that these shoes probably cost as much as her monthly mortgage payment. She stared at them, bewildered.

Max broke into a wide grin. He reached around to slide the elastic from her ponytail, letting the curls bounce down to her shoulders. “Now you’re ready. Happy birthday.”

“Well. Thanks. This is…unexpected. I could have changed back at the studio, you know.”

“Where’s the surprise in that?” He took her clothes and shoes and put them in the bag, then offered an arm.

“Wait. I’m so close to looking the part, I may as well.” She reached behind and disentangled herself from her bra. She tucked it into Max’s bag and accepted his proffered arm, holding his strong biceps as they walked.

“Where did you get these things? And how did you know my shoe size?” she asked, not sure what else to say, or exactly how to interpret these gifts or this closeness.

He shrugged.

“Where are we going for dinner?” Fallon failed to think of any restaurant in Pettiplaise that warranted this kind of dress code. Moreover, every meal she’d eaten at the studio had been second-to-none. She couldn’t imagine what this man’s standards for actual dining might be.

“A very fine establishment,” he said evasively.

Five minutes later they arrived at one of the town’s many shabby fish joints, a bilingual sign in the window boasting five-dollar lobster rolls and draught beer specials. Max held the door for her, and she found them a booth with a table covered in red and white gingham vinyl. A candle flickered inside a cheap green glass holder and Maritime fiddle music drifted from the speakers. Tourist season was long over and they were the only patrons.

Fallon caught Max’s eyes as he sat down opposite her and she smirked. “Cute.”

He returned the smile. “This seemed more your speed than some snobby place. Not that we have many to choose from.”

“It is,” she said, registering her relief. “But the outfit’s a bit much, isn’t it? What if I get ketchup on it?” She glanced anxiously down at the silk.

“The world will keep turning.” He looked up to the menu posted behind the order counter. “What do you think?” She scanned the fare. “I’d like...haddock and chips?”

“Very good.”

He went to place their orders and she heard him ask the clerk something in incomprehensible Acadian French, something involving the words for “our wine” and “friend” and “birthday”. Fallon felt an odd glow in her solar plexus at this new title. She smoothed the silk over her legs and tried her best to dismiss her shyness.

When Max returned he was carrying a pair of disposable plastic cups. He conjured a bottle of wine and a
corkscrew from his shopping bag.

“I trust this is still potable.” He twisted the handle.

“How old is it?”

“This,” he said as the cork eased out with a faint pop, “would also have been turning thirty this year.”

Fallon’s eyebrows shot up toward the ceiling. “Oh my.”

He poured two cups, licking an errant drip as it slipped down the bottle’s neck then replacing the cork. He snapped his eyes to hers and slid a cup to her elbow. “What would you like to toast to?”

“To the first time I’ve had wine worth more than my car?” she suggested, still dumbfounded. She pulled the bottle close and studied the jaundiced label. It bore the designation *Pauillac, Bordeaux* and, indeed, the year Fallon was born.

“How about we toast to your birthday, instead?”

“Sure. Fine.” She held out her cup and Max tapped it inaudibly with his.

“Joyeux anniversaire,” he said and took a sip.

Fallon followed suit. The wine stung her tongue, dry and tart but unmistakably good. She tried to savor it, to record and preserve the memory of every drop. “This is by far the oldest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Try to keep it quiet,” Max said. “There are plenty of people who would have me drawn and quartered for opening this before the turn of the next century.” He smiled and took another sip. Their order was called, and he brought their steaming aluminum carryout trays back to the booth.

They spoke very little as they ate which suited Fallon just fine—he’d left her thoroughly speechless, anyhow. Across the table, dressed up and dust-free and treating her as a friend and not a scientific specimen, Fallon felt herself falling for Max a little bit. Perhaps a lot. As usual, she blamed the alcohol.

After they finished their dinners and tossed the trays, Max snatched the plastic cups off the table and they began the walk back to the studio. Overhead the sky had grown dusky and dark with rain clouds and the approaching night.

“Here,” Max said, and Fallon turned to find him holding out a half-filled cup for her.

“Thanks.”

“Happy birthday.”

She smiled and looked away. “You sure like birthdays.”

“I like you,” he said, point-blank.

“Oh.” She took a swallow to buy herself time. “Is this…is this a date?” she asked, as the thought occurred to her, perhaps naively, for the first time.

He shrugged. “This is whatever it is.”

Fat raindrops began to fall as a crisp breeze ruffled the grass on either side of the road. Fallon touched the silk at her waist. “I hope this doesn’t ruin the dress.” As she said it the drops came faster.

When she looked over at Max, he just grinned and took a drink, holding her gaze. Rain landed in the cups, darkened his white shirt and made Fallon’s dress cling to her legs. She gathered the skirt into a ball at her thigh to keep from tripping.

“I’m afraid I’m wrecking your shoes,” she said as the road turned mucky.

“They’re your shoes.” He took her by the elbow as the sky opened up, steering them under a tree to wait out the worst of it. Beneath the canopy he tipped his hat to sluice the water from the brim, then refreshed their cups. He stared at her with a very-hard-to-read expression.

“What?” Her heart sped in response to the intensity now blazing in his eyes.

Max cleared his throat. “You told me before never to kiss you ever again. I’m waiting now for you to tell me you’ve changed your mind.”

Ah ha.

“You can kiss me,” she said with a slow nod, her voice turning airy, eyes fixed on his lips.

He set the cups and bag on the grass and came close, so close his chest brushed Fallon’s breasts. He tilted his hat to the back of his head and kissed her. His eyes shut before hers did, and his mouth burned hot and wet and tasted of very, very fine wine. She felt his thumbs pressing into her cheeks, his rough fingertips cradling her jaw, and she parted her lips to invite a deeper exploration. He angled his mouth as his tongue slid to dance with hers, stoking the fire. His possessive hands held her head, making it seem as though he were consuming her, and each time they came up for air she wanted more. She wanted him deeper, and rougher, and more raw. She circled her arms around his neck, surrendering to whatever it was he had in mind for this evening.

Fallon climbed the spiral stairs, heart pounding so hard she feared she’d faint and topple over backward and break her neck. She sat nervously at the edge of Max’s bed in her damp dress, stroking her palm across the dark red
comforter, waiting. It smelled so deeply of him here in this space. Rain hammered the skylight above the bed and she lay back to take it in. Soon the faint tremors of Max mounting the steps arrived, jolting Fallon’s nerves, making her feel more drunk than she might already be. She closed her eyes, keeping them shut even as the mattress sank under his weight. Max’s rough fingers played along the length of her bare arm.

“Fallon,” he said softly.
She opened her eyes and stared up at him. He’d brought a fat beeswax candle and set it on the nightstand.
“Yeah?”
“Would you be doing this if you hadn’t had two glasses of very strong wine?”
“No,” she said, thinking about it. “But I’d wish I was.”
“I see.”
“Would you?”
“I would be doing this even if the studio was burning down around us,” he said.
“And what exactly is ‘this’?”
“It’s your birthday. I would like very much to please you.”
“Would you, then?” She sat up and leaned against his shoulder.
Max took the hint and kissed her mouth. “I would.” He kissed her deeper, deeper, until she felt so dizzy she had to lie back against the pillows. His scent, even stronger.

He joined her, settling his body down beside hers and propping himself on an elbow. “Tell me what you like.”
She pursed her lips. “You’ve done such a good job on the rest of this…date, why don’t you keep the lead? We can see just how well you know my body now.”
“Is that a challenge?” he asked, amused. “Very well.”

A breath hitched in her chest as he moved, resting his knees between hers. He gathered the silk of the dress and eased it up, pooling it around her hips, and he lowered, keeping their centers apart by the barest of spaces. Resting on his forearms, he slid a hand beneath her back to cup her shoulder blade. They kissed for seconds or minutes or hours, until his tongue slid to her neck, her ear, the hollow at the base of her throat. Deep in his chest Fallon heard breathing so guttural it raised the hairs all along her arms.

“Sit up for me a moment,” Max whispered, leaning back.
She let him slip the straps of the dress off her shoulders, his eyes darting across her skin. Fallon shivered and lay back. Button by button, she watched him shed his wet dress shirt, the lines of that tight body triggering a quickening in her pulse. He removed his necklaces and set them on the nightstand, peeled his undershirt off and tossed it on the floor. She studied the evidence of his excitement—the swell and contraction of his abdomen from his rapid breathing, the tendons twitching in his neck as he swallowed.

“You like looking at me?” he asked, grazing his palms over her thighs.
She realized at that moment that his touch and his voice matched: both rough and dark and thrilling. She nodded, eyes taking him in.
“I love looking at you,” he said emphatically. “And touching you. I’ve thought about this, about being with you here.”
“Have you?” Fallon knew full well what he’d thought about. She conjured the sketches in her mind’s eye.
“Yes. It is all I can think about, sometimes.” He blinked, looking meditative, then lowered himself back down. Fallon almost gasped aloud at the feeling his hard chest with its sprinkling of dark hair pressing into her soft, smooth one. His fingers stroked her temples, faces close.
“I’ve come to know you quite well in the past few weeks,” he said. “But not completely.”
She finally touched him, wrapping her fingers around the crests of his shoulders. Her eyes darted between his.
“What else do you want to know?”
A strong hand slid beneath her head to cradle it. He caught her lips for a brief moment before putting his mouth close to her ear, his breath warming her skin, the heat spreading down her body to settle between her thighs.
“You know me too,” he whispered. “You know what fascinates me.”
“The internal?”
The tiniest moan. “I want to be inside you.” His hips finally met hers, his arousal unmistakable, pressing gently against her pubic bone.
“I want that too.”
“I’m glad. But right now I most want to please you.” He reached a hand between them and Fallon heard the clicking of metal. He drew out his belt and tossed it to the floor with a clatter. There was the sound of a zipper and Max adjusted himself in some way. When he brought his hips back down, she felt him through his open fly and the cotton of his underwear, hard against the soft skin of her innermost thigh.

She murmured his name and he began to move. As his excitement stroked hers, Max’s hand and lips moved to her
breast. Calloused palm, soft, wet mouth. His tongue swirled until she was so sensitized she felt overheated. His other hand pressed into her back beneath their two bodies, possessive. She felt the vibration of a moan trapped against her skin, the heat of him growing until she thought it would consume them both.

His mouth broke away, hips still pumping softly. “You make such wonderful noises.”
She hadn’t realized she’d been making any. “Oh good.”
“I want to touch you,” he whispered, sounding equal parts awed and aggressive.
All her brain’s usual protests were drowned out by a desire so strong it pounded in her veins. Those hands. She’d watched them at work all those hours, fingers skillful beyond words. “I’d like that.”

He thrust himself gently against her for a few more beats, his grunts no longer stifled, the sounds and sensations of his power thrilling her. A sudden fear chilled her blood.

“I’m not the easiest woman to…navigate.”

He rose from the bed, shed his slacks and stood in candlelight, all lean muscle and unspoken promises.
“I’ll do my best,” he said.
“Okay. But don’t feel badly if…you know.”
He smiled at her artless escape clauses and crawled to her, his nearly bare body looming above hers. “If I seem to be struggling, I trust you will show me what you like.”

She didn’t reply but let him reach down and slide her panties from her legs. His eyes took her in.

“Fallon,” he said. Hungry.

He sat beside her, half-reclined on one arm as the other hand ran up her knee, her thigh, her hip. With a concerted effort she dismissed any disparaging thoughts about her body. Tonight was a lesson in acceptance, a lesson in accepting whatever it was he was going to teach her about herself. She clasped her hands nervously at her belly, clutching the silk as if it were a security blanket.

As if sensing she needed a distraction, Max leaned in to kiss her. As his mouth teased and flirted with hers, she felt his palm gently coaxing her leg open. She let it fall to the side, her official surrender. His warm fingertips grazed the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. His mouth broke from hers as he drew even closer. He turned his head to watch.

Like a match held to an open flame, Fallon’s pleasure flashed violently into life as his middle finger stroked her clit. She made a startled noise and he froze.

“Tell me to stop,” he said.
“No, don’t stop.”
He nodded and touched her again, just as lightly. She sucked in a breath, shocked by the feeling. He kept the stroking light, just a whisper of his coarse fingertips against her tender skin.

“That feels good,” she whispered. Understatement of the year.
“Good.” He added another fingertip, the tiniest amount of pressure. “You’re so soft.”
“You’re not.” She smiled at him, catching his eye. “Your fingers are…”

“Like sandpaper?”

“No. They’re wonderful.” She fell silent, awed by his continued exploration. Awed by her own willingness and pleasure.

His touch moved lower, then lower still, until he parted her gently, and moaned—a raw, animal sound.

“Max.”

His fingers returned to her clit, made it slick, rubbed her faster. The pleasure was alarming. Addictive. As her excitement grew, so did his noises. She heard him breathing, panting, deep sighs colored by that dark baritone. He sat up and knelt beside her, never missing a beat. He spread his free palm across her mound, his thumb picking up the refrain and freeing his masterful, wet fingers to find her core once again. He touched her with all the artistry she’d seen in his craft.

“Keep going,” she whispered.
He obeyed, rubbing her clit until she thought she’d catch fire. With his other hand he entered her—two fingers penetrating, cautious and slow, then exploring. She bucked against him, toes curling, hands clenching into fists.

He held her eyes with his. “Is this okay?”
She was lost for words but her sounds communicated her extreme approval. His touch went deeper, the slippery thrust of his fingers making her want him a thousand times more violently than she’d ever wanted anyone else, ever.

“So, this is where you hide your heat,” he murmured.
Fallon’s eyes flashed across every inch of his firelit skin. Between his strong, pale thighs she feasted on his cock. His underwear couldn’t hide his excitement and she snaked a palm up his leg, aching to know if he felt as thick and heavy as he looked. He surprised her, clasping her wrist, holding her back.

“Don’t.”
She withdrew her hand, disappointed and perplexed but pleased to be ordered around by this extraordinary man.
“Tonight is for you.” His fingers took her once more, showing her the most wondrous things.

“I can’t believe how good this feels,” she said, tempted to laugh. She arched her back, pressed her head into his pillow and revealed, “You are... goddamned. You’re Da Vinci.”

He laughed softly, “Is this hard enough?”

“Just do whatever you want.” She sighed, luxuriating.

“Anything I want?”

“Any goddamned thing you want, Max Emery.”

He grinned, “I have never heard you sound like this.”

“Me neither.”

“Well, I know what I want.” She caught him lick his lips. His eyes darted to hers, inviting a protest.

She wouldn’t have stopped him if the world depended on it.

He withdrew his hands and brazenly tasted the two fingers still glistening from her. He shut his eyes and made a noise of the dirtiest decadence. He slid the digits out and swore in French, delighted. “I can’t wait,” he said, eyes glimmering.

He knelt between her legs and lowered his body again to stroke her with his rock-hard cock, still hidden behind taunting gray cotton. The contact made Fallon gasp.

“Max...”

He rubbed against her, explicit. “What?”

“I want you.”

“You’ll get me, I promise. But not tonight. I’ve waited too long for you to rush now.”

The pleasure mounted against his thrusts, so powerful it scared her. He pulled away and edged back on the small bed, curling himself sideways to lean on one arm, draping one of her legs over his ribs. His hands spread her wider.

She bit her lip, momentarily intimidated. Her body could be so inept at relaxing into these kinds of caresses. But the fear dissolved as those now-familiar fingers returned, stroking then penetrating.

“You look beautiful,” Max said, gaze trained between her legs.

He leaned his face in close, nuzzling, taking in her scent. She caught him smile deeply and smiled herself. The steady thrust of his fingers made her ache in the most thrilling, impatient way, made her more excited, more wet than she could recall ever being. She wanted him so badly... She wanted things she’d never wanted before, like the things from her dreams these past few weeks. She wanted to see him, entering her—taking her. She wanted to see his face as it looked when he was excited, as excited as she was now.

His tongue flicked. Fallon felt her toes curl tight as fists from the sensation. Another soft lap. Her hips wriggled in his strong hands, craving more. He made a low, happy noise and his tongue set a steady, rapid rhythm against her clt. Wondrous. Miraculous.

“Max...”

His fingers explored her deeper, fueled her fantasies of being taken by him, here in this bed. That strong body driving into her, fast and rough and needy.

“Max.”

He glanced up, pausing for a moment.

“Take your underwear off. Please.”

He sat up and complied. She studied him hungrily as he lay back down, his fingers and mouth picking up where they’d left off. His cock looked stiff and dark, fairly long and quite thick. His eyes caught hers staring. He reached his free hand over to torture her, stroking himself with a few slow pulls, growing himself fully for her. Fallon felt things she never had before, like an urge to pleasure him so strong it could only have been the will of some primal corner of her brain. She lost her sense of reality as the sensations centered against his mouth and fingers became frenzied. She had to make a conscious effort to breathe deeply enough to keep from passing out.

“Max...”

He stopped touching himself, that hand holding her thigh tight, seeming to sense that she was nearing the precipice. His wet tongue fluttered, fingers strokes her inside, as if he knew how to play some instrument she’d never heard before, the most beautiful composition in the world. She moved against him, craving it all. Without warning, the pleasure came to a head.

Fallon felt a tightening in her core so alarming she grasped at him for solace. She clenched his free hand as deep, euphoric spasms rocked her body, so strong she could only gasp and hold on. Everything around her blurred, sounds and external sensations obliterated until she felt nothing aside from pure, blinding pleasure. Max slowed his fingers, tongue dialing down to the subtlest of pressures as she grew hypersensitive, each caress like a tiny shock now. He stilled as she did, and looked up at her.

Dear **God**.
Max extracted himself from her wobbly legs and drew up alongside her. He was smiling, looking very pleased indeed. He clamped an arm around her waist, burying his face in her neck and breathing deeply.

“Wow,” she said.

He laughed against her. “Oh, good.”

“No, I mean, wow.” She inhaled, taking in the smells of their two bodies. The rain drummed against the skylight.

Reality.

Then all at once, Fallon began to sob.

Max straightened and held her close, smoothed her hair with his palms. He spoke in soft, patient tones. “What’s the matter?”

She laughed through the tears, feeling idiotic, feeling high. “I’m fine.”

“Why are you crying, mon ange?”

“It’s so stupid.”

“I doubt that. Tell me.”

She laughed, then cried harder. She choked through her tight throat, “That’s the first time I’ve ever…”

Max pulled back to stare at her streaming face for a long moment, his eyes round. “That was the first time you’ve come?”

She nodded, tears redoubling.

“Never? Not even by yourself?”

“Nope. Not ever.”

He pondered this for a minute. “And you’re upset about that? That’s wonderful…wonderful for me, I suppose. What a very good birthday present that is, don’t you think?” He was teasing her, wiping away her tears and trying to get her to smile. “You don’t like it? You can’t return it, you know.”

She broke into a sloppy grin, chest still hitching with the sobs. “That’s so embarrassing. You must think I’m a freak.”

“A freak? Why would I think that?”

“It must seem so silly to you.”

“It’s not silly. Just surprising,” he said. “And you’re not a freak. I have seen a lot of things in my life. Including many people who are professional freaks, who use that word as a job title. Nothing is strange to me. Certainly not that.”

“I was worried. You seem like someone who’s probably used to being with women who are a lot more…adventurous than me.”

He made a shushing noise. “What women? Do you see women in this bed with us now? I don’t.”

“I know, it’s stupid.”

“Would you like to hear something scandalous?” he asked, playful, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Fallon nodded, even though she didn’t really want to hear any such thing at this moment.

“I haven’t been to bed with anyone in eight years,” Max said.

Her mouth dropped open.

“Not since I left New York.” He shrugged. “So what? You’re not a freak.”

“Seriously? Why not?”

He shrugged again. “When I was still the darling, innocent pet of the art scene in London and New York, I saw too much, far too young. I saw people destroying themselves for the stupidest reasons. It had nothing to do with why I create, why I’m here. When I left I just wanted…less. Less of everything. Fewer vices. So I gave up sex and smoking and lots of things. Wine, and a very self-centered lifestyle, I kept. The rest—” He made a dismissive gesture with his hands. “Good riddance.”

“Oh.” Fallon’s mind swam from this announcement. “But you said you ‘waited so long’ for me. What, like a few weeks? I don’t understand. That’s nothing compared to all that time.”

“I have waited years for you. It took eight years for someone to come along and make me need to be this way again. It took thirty-three to find someone who made it mean something.”

“Oh, wow.” She pondered this statement, blown away. The sincerity was too much to dwell on, as was the possibility that these were mere lines, used on any number of women during Max’s…active period. She decided to focus on the baser aspects of his proclamation. “Was it hard? Giving up sex?”

“Not really, no. Actually, it’s made me a better artist, I think.”

“I guess that’s one way to suffer.”

“And of course I’m lying—it hasn’t been easy giving up sex. It was, for all those years. But now I am clearly proving to be very bad at celibacy.” He kissed her lightly.

“Why now?” It felt unlikely that anyone would find her such a compelling sexual interest. She only knew of one
other man who’d ever seemed similarly enamored of her that way, and she refused to tar Max with the same brush as Donald Forrester.

“Because you’re so very seductive,” he said in a low voice.

Fallon laughed. “Your English comprehension must be way worse than I thought. I haven’t uttered a single seductive word to you since we met.”

“You may not think so, but you’re quite extraordinary. Did you know, you are the only person I’ve met in the last twenty years who doesn’t treat me like an anomaly or a commodity? It’s very refreshing. It’s very nice to be treated this rudely, you know. Makes me feel human again.”

“So many distinctions.”

“And you are the first person I have met in a very long time who I think it might be worth the effort to wring their neck.” He stroked a finger up her throat.

“That’s very romantic.”

“Of course, now there are far better ways of working out all that tension.” He bent to run his tongue up her jugular where his finger had traced.

“You really want to ruin your eight-year dry spell with me?” Fallon asked, her breath turning shallow.

“I very much would. But not tonight.”

“No?”

“No, tonight is yours.”

She smirked. “What? No condoms?”

“No, as a matter of fact.” He rolled his eyes. “But that is not why.”

“Then why?”

He smiled, so painfully handsome. “Because I quite enjoy suffering, I suppose.”

“So…”

“Yes?”

Fallon blushed, unseen in the dim light. “Did you give up everything sexual? You know. Like when you’re by yourself. Did you give that up too?”

He grinned again. “I’m not a saint. But I gave that up too, for the most part. With transgressions here and there over the years. Until you. You have dragged me back down among the sinners.”

She became aware of the bed, the sheets, the place where he surely lay, succumbing to the unlikely temptations she apparently brought upon him. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You should feel quite proud, I think. I am not an easy person to get the better of.”

She nodded. “Ditto.”

He held her tightly. “Well, I feel very proud indeed. I’m sorry you didn’t have the best sex before now. But I’m very pleased to be the man who changed that.”

“Not half as pleased as me.”

They lay together for a long time, exchanging soft kisses then yawns. She felt Max slipping away, his breathing deepening, exhalations warm against her shoulder.

“Good night, Max. And thanks.”

His arms gave her a final squeeze. “Happy birthday, Fallon.”
Chapter Nine

When Fallon awoke the next morning, Max was gone. She lay still for a long time, becoming aware of her body naked beneath his sheets, staring up into the gray expanse of cloud beyond the skylight. When she looked down, she found a piece of paper propped on the comforter atop her stomach. Unfolding it, she squinted through her sticky contacts at Max’s scribbly handwriting.

_Running. See you at 9.45 for coffee and awkward, post-coital niceties. MLE._

Fallon glanced at his alarm clock. She had twenty minutes to get herself cleaned up.

She crept down the stairs and found the paper bag with yesterday’s clothes sitting on the counter. She went to the bathroom and scrubbed her face and made use of the toothbrush and eye drops she’d been smart enough to start carrying in her tote. As she combed her fingers through her tangled hair, Fallon let herself dwell on Max’s revelation. _Eight years._ Eight years, if he was being truthful. Eight years of good behavior and he wanted her to be the one to ruin it. She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled so broadly it made her laugh.

Fallon was sitting at the table with the cat on her lap when Max got back. He eased the door closed and drew up a chair to sit diagonally from her. His clothes were soaked through with drizzle and he smelled exemplary. He slicked his hair back and crossed his legs primly, interlaced his fingers on the tabletop.

“How did you sleep?” His eyes were eager, lips tight from effort it took to suppress whatever happy emotion he was feeling.

“Very well, thank you,” she said, mimicking his formal tone.

“Excellent. I’m pleased to hear that.”

“How was your run?” Fallon asked politely, playing along with his charade of uncomfortable, morning-after small talk.

“Oh, just delightful. Such beautiful weather we’re having, yes?”

She looked out the front windows at the gloom. “Just gorgeous. Especially for so late in the season.”

“You would not believe what happened to me last night,” Max said conversationally, brushing his fingernails over the collar of his shirt.

“Oh, yes?”

“Yes…I gave the most extraordinary woman her very first orgasm, right up there, in my bed.” He pointed to the loft. “What did you do last night?”

She grinned and looked away, shaking her head, done with the game. “Thanks.”

“Still happy with your present, then?”

“Yes, very. And thank you for the note, although technically we didn’t have coitus.”

“You biologists…”

“Are you going to take a bath?”

He nodded.

“I’ll make the coffee, then.”

“What a pretty little picture of domesticity we make,” Max teased. He stood and kissed the crown of her head and scratched the cat’s ears before retiring to the rear of the house.

As Fallon prepared the coffee, she went on a mental search for reasons to feel distrustful about all this sudden coziness. She couldn’t pinpoint any, which was nearly as disturbing as the misgivings she’d expected to find. She’d have to call Rachel tonight to get sisterly permission to stop overthinking everything.

Across the studio, Max shut the taps off. “Do you know what I think would be a very good idea?” he called from the tub.

“What’s that?” Fallon poured beans into the coffee grinder.

“I think that at four, when your sitting is done, you should go home and get a change of clothes.”

“Okay.”

“And then you come back here,” he shouted, “and along the way you pick up some good bread from the market, and some condoms, and I will make us supper and then we will have sex all night. How about that?”

Fallon pushed the grinder down and made Max wait for her reply. She dumped the grounds into the French press and turned to him.

“What kind of bread?”
Just as the weak sun was fading and Max began dinner preparations, Fallon excused herself to go outside and sit on the picnic table. She opened her phone and held down the three key.

Rachel picked up almost immediately. “Heya, stranger! How was your birthday?” Fallon heard a television droning in the background, the applause and whistles of a sports broadcast.

“Hey. It was good…” She trailed off, smiling. “I got your card and the bracelet—it’s beautiful.”

“Awesome. Did old Maxie give you anything special?”

“Actually,” Fallon said in a hushed voice, in case Max could hear through the screen door. “He gave me an orgasm.”

“YOU CAME?”

Fallon heard a male whoop in the background. “Oh my God, was that Josh? Does Josh know about my defective junk?”

“He’s my fiancé,” Rachel said defensively. “We talk about everything. And your junk ain’t defective anymore, sweetie—”

“Go in a different room!” She lowered her voice. “I don’t want Josh hearing about this.”

She listened to the television grow faint as Rachel relocated. “Okay, I’m safely sequestered. An orgasm? He gave you an orgasm? How?”

Fallon recounted the previous evening’s events in best-friend-level detail. “So, you know, it wasn’t like he did anything spectacularly complicated. I think it’s…I think it’s just him.”

“How so?”

“I feel like…I feel like a person who was into something really specific, without knowing it, like…”

“Gerbil sex?” Rachel offered.

“Gross. But okay. So I’m some dude and I’m hardwired for gerbil sex. It’s the only thing that can get me going. But I don’t know it until I’m like thirty and I see a video of it online or something—”

“An accident in a nudist pet store?”

“Gross,” Fallon repeated. “But fine, something happens and boom! The whole world makes sense.”

“You think Max Emery’s your elusive sex gerbil?” Rachel asked.

“Let’s abandon this analogy, please. But yeah. He just…he fucking turns me on. Like somebody put batteries in me. I work! I finally work!”

“I’m so happy for you, sweetie. Do you think it’ll happen again? Between you and Max?”

“Yeah. In a couple hours.”

“Nice. Wait—so, does he know? Does he know he’s the only person who’s ever flipped your pancake?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he gloating?”

“In his way,” Fallon said, smiling to herself. “I better go soon. He’s making dinner. I can smell it.”

“I shan’t keep you. I can hear your mouth watering from here. Call me tomorrow. I want to keep tabs on your batting average. I’ll be yo’ sexual statistician,” she said in a jivey voice.

“Lovely. Well, I’m on deck now, so I better get going. Tell Josh he better not smirk at me the next time I see him.”

“You got it. Now go forth and spread your orgasmicosity.”

“Thanks, Rache.”

Rachel laughed. “What did I have to do with it? Go thank Max.”

Max didn’t taste a single spoonful of the stew he’d made for dinner nor a drop of the unremarkable wine, nor did he absorb a word of the conversation. Seated across from him at the picnic table, Fallon looked dreamy in the fading light of the day’s elusive sun. The breeze was brisk and cool, but Max was burning up inside his own skin.

When they finally brought the dishes inside, his heart began to pound, impatient. All day his fingers had been clumsy, as though he were drunk. Thank goodness he was still a week away from any precision work on the statue—he could easily have chipped a whole limb off in this artless state. Fallon had seemed exceptionally level all day, calmer than usual, and Max couldn’t imagine how that was. He was so edgy and eager he’d toyed a dozen different times with tossing his tools aside and taking her right there on the filthy wood of the studio floor. If he didn’t get this out of his system soon, he’d never get Forrester’s sculpture finished on time.

Fallon had been quiet since returning from her brief trip to her cottage after the sitting. Not nervous. Reflective, perhaps. She turned the faucet on in the kitchen sink and squeezed dish soap onto a sponge. Max reached over and shut the water off.

“I’ll do that in the morning,” he said. “My body is going to catch fire and burn this whole house down if we don’t do something soon.”
She smiled at him and replaced the sponge.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

She reached for her bag and pulled out a box of condoms. “Nope. Are you?”

“I’m impatient.” His eyes darted from her face to the box to the loft and back again.

“I can tell. It’s fascinating to see you so wound up about something—”

He cut her off, pushing her back against the counter and kissing her, tangling his fingers deep in her hair. Her mouth tasted like middle-shelf pinot noir and salt and bouillon. Like heaven. He lapped his tongue softly against hers in the way that seemed guaranteed to make the breath catch in her throat. He pressed his body close to make her feel the power she wielded over him. A tiny, distinct noise of approval left her lips, and he felt himself tumbling over the edge of sanity.

Mouths. Endless stairs to be mounted. Hands grasping. The edge of the bed and the sounds of shoes hitting the floor, of one falling from the loft to the studio below and the cat hissing with alarm.

They tumbled across the rumpled bedclothes, and Max lost track of whose hands were whose in the melee of frantic groping. He pushed her shirt up over her head and she returned the favor. He felt her hands in his hair as he struggled with her jeans and finally wrestled them away. He slowed his brain, ordering himself to savor these seconds and nearly obeying the command. All these moments just as he’d imagined them, only a fraction as artful and ten times more perfect.

He settled his knees between her legs and braced himself on one elbow. He willed the other hand to be patient as he reached down and grazed his fingertips between her thighs, against her panties. He found her already excited, the glorious little nub of her clitoris already taut and demanding. A flash of selfish possession gripped him as he realized all of this was his, all the pleasure he’d given her his exclusive, guarded prize. He rubbed her explicitly, high on such a thought.

Beneath him, Fallon transformed. She whimpered and fidgeted and muttered his name, hands wrapped hard around his arms.

Max stifled the groan rising in his throat. His cock ached to be touched, pounding so hard it hurt, just like the previous night when he’d sampled her with his mouth, made her come on his fingers. He craved those sensations, the tightness, the wetness, wrapped around his own pleasure. He prayed to a God he didn’t believe in anymore to make her ask him for it. Against the pads of his middle two fingers, he felt her desire.

“Max.” Oh, the sweetest possible syllable in the world.

“Yes?”

“I want you.” She emphasized the proclamation with a tug at his belt.

“You can have anything you want, mon ange,” he promised, pressing his lips against her forehead, slipping into words that felt as though they’d been spoken a lifetime ago. He felt unsteady fingers fumble with his buckle. He stroked her faster, the speed of his touch mounting with his excitement as she freed the button of his jeans then coaxed down the zipper. He moaned.

Fallon eased his pants over his hips and her fingers found him. He bucked from the shock of the pleasure, thrusting eagerly into her hands.

“Max.”

“Touche-moi.” Goddamn it, why did he always forget how to speak English at moments like this? Fallon’s slow, rough pulls were wiping his brain clean. “Ma peau—touch my skin.” He pushed his underwear down, releasing his cock into the cool, soft heaven of her palm. His hips convulsed from the potency of it, the sensation of her hand exploring him, controlling him. “Yes. You make me so hard.”

She moaned his name. Against his rubbing fingers, the cotton grew wet. The time for patience had passed. Max grabbed her underwear at either hip and tugged them down, peeling them off her legs before doing the same with his jeans and briefs. He leaned over her for the box on the nightstand and mangled the cardboard getting to a condom. He forewent the civility of trying to open it with slippery fingers, tearing the packet with his teeth.

“Dis-moi. Tell me you want this,” he said, unrolling it down his length and staring at her body in the fading light from the window above them.

“You have no idea.” Her eyes roamed him in return, growing wide as he knelt between her legs, looking transfixed by the view between their bodies.

He was awed by his own hardness as he guided himself to her center. Fighting the urge to plunge his cock as deep as she could take him, he eased in the first inch, gritting his teeth.

Her groan told him she was ready for more. Her hands held his backside as he gave her half his length. He drew back, then went further.

“Do you know what you need?” The words came out manicaf from the effort it took Max to stay in control.

“It doesn’t matter tonight. Just show me what you like.”
“Comme tu veux.” He abandoned his attempts at self-restraint. Inside she was as lush and deep as her full hips promised. In a matter of thrusts he was buried as far as he could go. “God, yes.”

“You feel so good,” she whispered.

And she was wrong—he felt amazing. The slick tightness of her made him feel even harder, even bigger and thicker. Inside her, he felt powerful. He leaned back on his haunches to watch their two bodies, to watch and feel her fingers and palms slide down his abdomen, slick with sweat. He grunted, animalistic.

“Tell me how I feel.”

Her hands gripped his hips, possessive. “You feel big. And hard—”

“No, tell me how it feels. Having me inside you.” He thrust deep and slow.

She seemed to consider her answer, closing her eyes, surrendering her body to his. “You feel…strong. And close. Like you’re more than inside me.”

“Like I’m a part of you?”

Her eyes opened. “Maybe.”

“Touch yourself,” he ordered, barely able to form the words. He watched as her fingers began to rub the point of her pleasure. “Good.”

She licked her lips as if parched, eyes on his surging cock. “Can you do it harder?”

“Oh, yes.” He lowered his body, braced a hand on either side of her ribs and gave her what she wanted. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he felt her tighten as gliding turned to pounding. The scent of their bodies, the slap of his hips on the backs of her soft thighs—it was a drug invading his bloodstream. Eight years since he’d last been like this with anyone yet he couldn’t imagine being any other way, now.

Fallon gasped. The fingers not touching her clit raked at his skin, frantic. She unraveled before him.

“Good…”

“More.”

He increased the length of his thrusts, leaving her warmth only to plunge deep, right to the base, again and again. As Max’s pleasure grew, reality slipped further and further away. He heard his own moans as if they belonged to some other man, some beast.

When Fallon came her body held him, tight and possessive, and a voice like an angel ascending unfurled from her lungs. If it hadn’t been for the rubber dulling the sensation, Max would have joined her—would have beaten her to the punch. As her body stilled and her cry died away he leaned back again, thrusting hard. His cock hurt, desperate for release, frustrated by the condom. He pulled out, stripped it off and stroked himself with a tight fist, frenetic with need.

Fallon whispered his name again and he saw through half-lidded eyes the hungry way she watched him. He came undone.

Lost in the sounds of his pleasure and the waves of ecstasy ripping through him, he released in hot slashes across her soft belly. He saw her fingers touch his come, rubbing it against her skin in a small circle as he gave her more. When the spasms finally subsided, Max felt close to fainting.

He collapsed beside her, wrapping them together into a tangle of limp limbs. For a long time he was aware of nothing apart from their two hearts beating.

As the moments became minutes, he reclaimed his sanity. Above them the sky had grown dark. Between them the atmosphere was warm and moist and deeply, achingly familiar.

“I have to tell you something,” Fallon said at length in a dreamy voice, lips moving against his temple.

“Oh yes?” He traced her spine with his fingertips.

“I looked through your sketchbook a couple weeks ago. At those drawings. The ones I didn’t pose for,” she said pointedly.

He smiled, hoping she was about to turn disapproving on him again. “Oh?”

“They’re…they’re quite beautiful.”

“Indeed? I wondered if perhaps you were about to call me a pervert.”

“Nah. Not now. You’ve grown on me.”

“Then I shall refrain from calling you a snoop.” He cleared his throat, trying to coax himself back to lucidity.

“Dear God.”

“Good?”

He grinned, blinking up at the evening’s first stars. “I can’t tell you how good.”

“Welcome back.”

“Back among the common fornicators,” he said in an unctuous voice and pulled her closer. “I so often call you an angel, but really you are a temptress. Delilah.”

She smirked. “No one’s ever accused me of corrupting them before.”
He grinned and made a luxurious, happy sound before burying his face against her neck.
Fallon pulled away a few minutes later, extracting herself from his sweaty arms and legs and the comforter, the octopus of sexual conquest. “I need a glass of water,” she said quietly and let him flop over in satisfied delirium. Max fell asleep immediately.

Fallon found a mug in the near-dark of the kitchen and filled it. She wandered to the rear windows and stared out over the back lawn, tall grass bathed in the weak, early moonlight. The broken statues in the garden glowed like opal, eerie if not for their familiarity. It was so quiet she could hear Max’s deep breathing above her, the padding of the cat’s feet as it made its evening rounds, doing whatever it was it did when the humans were preoccupied.

She refilled the cup and crept back up the steps. For a long time she stood beside the bed, gazing down at Max’s body beneath the skylight, curled into an S for satisfied. His ribs expanded and released in lazy intervals. Fallon’s eyes took in all this evidence—proof, finally, that she was a part of this club. The Society of the Sexually Successful. It bothered her that it had taken her so long to find her membership card.

What was the definition of a fetish, she wondered? An object—a something—that made sexual excitement or gratification possible. Something like that. She swallowed, anxious Max might be her something. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe she was fixed, now. Maybe she could go back home in another month and join the rest of the world in its glorious orgasmic pursuits. Or could this man be her elusive, singular something?

Lying before her could be the key that unlocked all that missing pleasure. Her own body tightened and warmed, remembering the visual—watching Max getting hotter, watching his face transform as he drove closer and closer toward release. She’d feasted on his strong body, those muscles clenched, voice a harsh rasp, uttering exotic words she didn’t understand but thrilled to hear.

Max tensed and then relaxed atop the bedclothes, adrift in some dream or other. She studied his shoulder and back, his tattoos. She wished she could stamp him with some permanent brand of ownership. She wished she could turn him over and find the diagrammatical outline of his heart etched across his chest, with her name in the center as its tiny caption.

She wished she’d stop thinking things like this.

“I’m going to knit you a scarf,” Fallon announced from her seat in the bay window the next morning as Max came downstairs, freshly bathed and dressed. She took him in again—hers, somehow.

“Are you?” He put the kettle on to boil.

“Yup. I just found an ad in the paper. There’s a woman in town who sells yarn and needles out of her home. It’ll be cold soon. And it’ll give me something to do all day aside from crosswords.”

He nodded. “I would very much like you to knit me a scarf. I will make sure the cat does not destroy it, like it did my old one. My mémère—my grandmother—made that one. I was very sad when it was ruined. You will make me one just as good, I’m sure.”

“Well, I don’t know if I can compete with anybody’s grandma. But what colors would you like? I can only do solid or stripes—no patterns.”

He thought for a moment, filling the French press. “Yellow and black. Like a bee. Une écharpe abeille. Very good.” He made a zuzzing noise with his lips and planted a kiss on her cheek as he passed by.

Fallon smiled, delighted and surprised by this playfulness. “You got it. I’ll start tomorrow.”

As the conversation died away, she noticed there was something different about Max this morning. He was smiling but there was a strange energy to him, an underlying baseline of strain and anxiety. Fallon worried it was because of the sex. She suddenly wished she hadn’t brought up the scarf, wondering for a moment if she was being too familiar, too much of an infatuated schoolgirl. She wondered for the first time what The Rules might make of her.

Max wheeled the marble to the center of the floor and gathered his tools. Then, as if reading her troublesome thoughts, he came over and sat beside her.

“I am having a very hard time concentrating,” he said, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Oh?”

She felt him nod.

“Because of the sex?”

Another nod.

She bit her lip for a moment, nervous. “Was it a mistake, do you think?”

“How do you define ‘mistake’?”

“Do you wish we hadn’t done it?”

He laughed, sitting up straight. “That is the best thing I’ve done in years. But I think we need to establish some
ground rules, yes? Otherwise, I won’t be able to think about anything else.”
Fallon glowed a little inside, released the fear and tension knotting her stomach. “What kind of ground rules?”
“We need rules so that I don’t forsake this commission in favor of attacking you every hour of every day.”
“That wouldn’t be so bad,” Fallon said.
“Here is what I think. I think that from the time we finish coffee in the morning until four o’clock each afternoon, we cannot touch. No flirting, no kissing. Less wine and more dry, political discussions over lunch. Very sad discussions about genocide and climate change. Very unsexy things like that.”
“Okay. I can do that.”
He nodded. “Good.”
Max stood and she asked, “What happens after four o’clock?”
He turned to fix her with a disapproving glare. “You are clouding up my mind,” he said, hands gesturing to illustrate their exasperation.
“We haven’t even started drinking our coffees yet.”
He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “You are right, that’s true.” He pulled her to her feet and turned her by the shoulders, pushing her back against the front door. A strong hand locked her thigh against his hip and he pressed tight against her, already hard. He caught her bottom lip between his and suckled it for a few moments. “We will do lots of things at four o’clock,” he said finally.
“Like what?”
He glanced away for a few seconds, thinking. “We will sit face to face on my bed with our legs wrapped around each other, and I will rock you in my lap until you come on my cock,” he said casually. He released her thigh and stepped away from her.
Fallon swallowed as she watched him walk back to the stove. Four o’clock couldn’t come fast enough.
Chapter Ten

Sex. Sex sex sex.

That was all Fallon could focus on or remember in the following two weeks. Somewhere in her periphery a statue was taking shape, meals were being cooked and eaten, a yellow and black scarf was growing longer and longer between her fingers. Sun was shining or wind was howling or the moon was rising or falling. Beach grass and birch trees were changing color, she suspected, but the only thing she was aware of was Max: sitting beside her, standing across the studio from her, lying beneath her back in a bathtub by the fire, buried deep inside her body in his bed once the sun went down.

Addict, she thought to herself accusingly, watching him from across a display of pumpkins in the co-op market one afternoon, three days before Halloween. She ran her hand over a particularly perfect one and caught his eye.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I bet you’re very good at carving jack-o-lanterns." She held it up to show him.

He raised his eyebrows. “It’s not my usual medium. But I can give it a try.”

Fallon smiled and hugged it to her chest.

How many nights since she’d slept in her own cottage? Twenty, perhaps. She was basically paying thirty bucks a day for a very big closet and washer-dryer access. Somewhere in her little rented fridge a carton of cream had probably long since curdled.

“How dangerous it had become to pretend all this house they were playing was real. Fallon paid for her pumpkin and preceded Max out the door of the market, welcomed by the cool autumn air.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked as the door jingled shut behind her. When Max didn’t reply, she turned to find him standing stock-still, a paper bag in each hand, eyes glued across the street on a curvy woman leaning into her car, rummaging for something.

“Max?" Fallon felt a fluttering of familiar, hateful emotion. “Max.”

His eyes broke away. “Sorry.”

Fallon frowned against her better judgment and hugged the pumpkin against her middle. “See something you like?”

“Hmm?” Max looked at her, then back to the curvy woman and her car. The woman finished her arrangements and slammed the door. She turned to cross the road and she was easily eight months pregnant. She smiled politely as she passed Max and Fallon and disappeared into the co-op.

“Oh,” Fallon said stupidly.

Max smiled, understanding. “Did you just think what I think you did?”

“I didn’t think anything.”

“You thought I was panting over some other woman, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t realize you were only ogling her insides,” she admitted. “Do you have some kind of pregnancy obsession too?”

“Obsession? No.” He smiled sideways at her, still looking triumphant. He set the bags of groceries on the grass and stepped behind her to wrap his arms around her waist. He fanned his fingers and placed his hands over hers on either side of the pumpkin. Her heart beat fast, and she felt both embarrassed and proud at this open display of affection. She hoped no one could see. She hoped the entire world could see.

“What are you thinking?” she murmured, turning her face to his.

“I’m thinking about how you might feel,” he said simply. He released her after a couple of seconds, picked the bags back up and began the walk to the studio.

Fallon followed, shocked. She had no clue whether to take his strange proclamation personally or chalk it up to his anatomical fixations. It sobered her.

She caught up and flanked him. “You’re so weird.” This time the observation was largely a fond one.

“Probably. I have learned not to ask strangers if I may touch their bellies.”

“Is it the baby or the biology?”

“It’s the miracle of it, I think. And the miracle of something so normal.”

Fallon thought about it—childbirth—as something simultaneously miraculous and mundane. “I guess it is normal.”

“You’re always telling me I am weird,” Max said, staring off into the distance. “And you’re right. Something as
normal as a family… Sometimes I wonder if I am too weird to ever have such a thing.” He looked over at her, and his eyes transmitted the most intimate warmth and vulnerability and sincerity she thought she’d ever felt.

She tried to picture Max with a toddler and was surprised to find she could. The idea made her feel oddly and acutely immature.

“I’m sure you could,” she said. “Even if you are weird, I mean, plenty of people weirder than you have marriages and kids. You’re as qualified as anyone else.”

“Thank you. That compliment means a lot to me. I began to worry a few years ago, after all the chaos subsided, if I had forfeited my chances at ever having a regular kind of life. Sometimes now I think maybe not.”

“Nah. You can have as boring and normal a life as you want.”

“Thank you.”

“You’d probably have to cut back on your art, though,” Fallon offered.

“Yes, I would imagine so. But I have a suspicion that if I ever found myself creating and cultivating some new life with some remarkable woman one day, I would feel quite fulfilled indeed. I do not think I would miss all of my selfish freedom very much.”

“No, maybe not.”

“But it is all beside the point. Finding the remarkable woman is the problem.” He gave Fallon a look so poignant that she chose to write it off as sarcasm. “I would have to find a woman who could put up with all of my weirdness.”

She nodded. “Yeah. That’s a liability, I suppose.”

“And we are having chicken fricot for dinner, since you asked.”

There was a twisting in her chest, as if unseen hands were wringing her heart. Not a good feeling. As unlikely a conclusion as it seemed, Fallon decided then that Max would make as good a parent as she would make a lousy one. Bingo, the comedown. The inevitable tree that snagged her kite from its thoughtless, happy drifting.

Fallon fixed her eyes on the long stretch of gravel as they turned off the main road. Max stopped at his mailbox and pulled out a few envelopes and circulars. So utterly normal, for an instant.

As they returned to the studio and Max flipped on the lights, the unfinished statue greeted him like a resounding accusation. He set the mail and groceries on the counter while Fallon arranged her pumpkin in the bay window. He wondered if she had any clue how far he’d fallen behind their schedule.

Next week it would be November. Soon after, December, and at this glacial rate that statue would still be weeks from completion, even then. He glanced fearfully from Fallon to the marble and back again. She smiled at him from across the studio. She wouldn’t be smiling like that if she knew how extravagantly he was failing her.

Each chip, bringing them closer to the end of this affair. Each sliver ticking away the moments until this statue was delivered into the hands of some horrible man that neither of them could stand to speak of. Each knock of a hammer against a chisel bringing closer to fruition some terrible, mysterious compromise Fallon was making for some unknown reward. Each little chip, grains of sand in an hourglass, draining slower and slower as Max stretched out these moments before the inevitable end arrived. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to fail her but neither did he want to succeed.

“Can I help with anything?” Fallon asked, approaching the counter. Max looked down to find he’d been standing motionless before the grocery bags for over a minute.

“No, thank you. I’m just trying to remember this recipe.”

She passed him and uncorked a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. There was a strain in her too. Fainter than his but there, nevertheless. Wine and sex—medication to help them forget these unspoken worries until the sun rose again.

Fallon sat on the counter and watched Max’s hands work as he prepared dinner. She fixated on them. Such wondrous things, strong and scarred and so talented it was unnerving. Those hands could render flesh so real it baffled the mind. They could make Fallon feel things her own hands were only just beginning to master. And they could save her childhood home. So goddamned powerful.

“You should get your hands insured by Lloyd’s of London.”

Max glanced up from the cutting board. “Like Keith Richards?”

“Ha—I hadn’t heard that. Yeah. Like Fred Astaire’s legs, I was thinking.” She sipped her wine.

Max shook his head and went back to chopping onions. “No amount of money would make life worth living if I could not use my hands.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic.”

“Well, it’s quite true. Maybe that’s why I have these thoughts about a family, sometimes. To fix my troublesome priorities.”
“A baby never fixed anybody.” A second too late, Fallon realized how callous her tone was.
Max held her eyes for a moment then began peeling garlic, seeming deflated.
“Sorry. I don’t mean you shouldn’t want those things.” Although she wished he didn’t.
“I know what you meant. I’m sorry I brought it up. We’re trying to have an illicit affair, and I’m ruining it with all
this talk about families… I miss my family. Having you here these last few weeks is the closest I’ve been to
anything resembling that in a long, long time. Nothing personal,” he added to the cat, perched on the fridge. “It
makes me sentimental.”
Fallon nodded.
“And it makes you uneasy,” he said.
Fallon hopped off the counter before he could begin to question her. She gathered utensils and napkins and set the
table, leaving Max to his sentimentality and vegetables.
She started a fire and drew a bath while dinner cooked, and Max joined her. As she melted into him in the warm
water, her back against his chest and her wet hair draped over his shoulder, she wondered if this—if they—could
ever work. That way. The two least qualified people she knew in some woeful attempt at domestic functionality. She
looked into the window at their reflection, tricked for a moment by the firelight that it wasn’t the worst idea in the
world.
Beneath her, Max grew hard. Whatever melancholy had been visiting him faded, replaced by lust. She reached
down to stroke his erection where it stood between her legs. He made seductive noises behind her ear and his hips
tensed against her backside.
“You’re taking away my sanity,” he moaned into her temple. Before she could reply he slipped her hand from him
and bade her to stand. “Dinner will burn.”
“Let it.”
“Up with you, temptress.”
She complied, smiling to herself as she toweled her hair.
“You never smiled like that when we first met,” Max said, studying her.
“No, probably not.”
“I like the person that you’ve become. And I liked you before, back when you still hated me.”
“I never hated you,” she corrected. “You just take a lot of getting used to.”
“And you take a lot of work, to break through all that crust.” He squinted an eye at her and mimed a hammer and
chisel motion with his hands. “Chink, chink, chink. And just look what’s underneath.”
She surveyed his dripping body for a moment before handing him the towel.
As he dried himself he asked, “Is it true…when you said you’ve never loved anyone?”
She nodded. “That’s true. Not romantically, at least.”
“Me neither.” He secured the towel around his waist. “Does that make us discerning or pitiful, do you think?”
“I always thought of myself as allergic.” Fallon smiled at him before turning away to dress.
They ate in near-silence and as Fallon washed the dishes Max stoked the fire. Above them, beyond all the glass,
the night was clear and inky-black and pulsing with stars.
She felt strong arms wrap around her waist as she stared skyward.
“There’s a better view from the bed,” he whispered and kissed her neck.
“I’ll bet there is.”
He took her hand and led her up the steps, fourteen of them. She’d learned each by heart, a countdown to her
favorite moment of these recent days.
Max tugged her down onto the covers and into his arms. His kisses were deep and slow and romantic but
deliciously obscene. Sometimes his kissing felt as explicit to her as penetration. She yanked his T-shirt up as he
unzipped her jeans, patience overpowered by excitement. She kicked her pants off her ankles and he pulled her
down to him.
“I want to know your fantasies,” he said between kisses.
She tensed. “My fantasies?”
“I want to make them real with you. I want to please you.”
That unrelenting dream flashed across Fallon’s consciousness. “You already please me. Obviously. I’m quite
happy.”
He moved to straddle her. The way he braced his arms made his shoulder blades jut up sharply, an animal about to
pounce. “Tell me what’s in there,” he breathed, brushing his lips against her forehead.
“You go first.” She touched her fingertips to his ribs, nervous for what he might say.
“You will shush me because it will be too sincere for you to hear. You’ll think I’m being too familiar. And it will
make you uncomfortable.”
“Tell me anyway,” she said, sick to death of her own predictable worries.
He closed his eyes, looking thoughtful. “I fantasize that you stay here, after the sculpture is done.”
She shifted. “You’re right. That does make me uncomfortable.”
His dark eyes opened. “There’s more, though. There are dirtier parts, if you want to hear those.”
“Yes, tell me those.”
“I fantasize that you stay,” he said, tucking his forearms tighter against her. “And every night after it’s dark, I
climb those stairs with you and crawl into this bed and I make you moan for me. Right here. And when it’s summer,
we walk to the beach at dusk with a blanket and I lay you down, and make you come against my tongue. Until the
only things I can smell are you and the ocean.” He smiled down at her.
“That’s pretty good,” she admitted. “Can I ask you something?”
“Always.”
“How can you tell so much about me? Like how you know what’ll make me uncomfortable. All the little things
you just know? Sometimes it feels like you’re reading my mind.”
“I have been told that before.” He thought a moment. “I think it’s because I spent so much of my life being told
whatever it was people thought I wanted to hear. Back when everyone wanted to be my friend or my agent or my
lover or my dealer. I had to get very good at finding out the truth without listening to the words people actually use.
You do that too, you know. You do it to me, except your guesses are always wrong.”
“So can you already guess what my fantasies are?”
He shook his head. “I’m a detective, not a psychic. So you will just have to tell me.”
“Well…it’s not really a fantasy, even. I don’t really sit around and think about sex like that. But
there’s this dream I keep having, almost every night.”
“For how long?”
“Since…since the first week I was here, I think. Since way before I wanted to dream about you. Then even worse,
after that day you made me touch you.”
“How do I compare in actuality?” he asked, grinning.
“Well, it’s hard to say. You don’t always get to do much in my dreams.” She bit her lip, embarrassed that she was
even considering telling him this.
“Oh, no?”
“No. You’re usually…tied down, in the dreams.”
She watched his reaction, a subtle raising of his eyebrows followed by another smirk.
“And what do you do, in these dreams?” He lowered himself and ran his tongue over her collarbone, kissed her
neck.
“Um, all sorts of stuff.”
“Tell me.” His voice so close to her ear was like a drug. “No, wait—show me.”
“I don’t know if I’m ready for all that,” Fallon said as he pulled away. She could see in his eyes that he was
already anticipating the scenario. He knelt wide, straddling her legs, and with a distinctly evil smile he reached down
and unbuckled his belt. He slid out the length of worn black leather and folded it neatly, handing it to Fallon.
She swallowed. “I don’t know.”
“Just try.” He moved to her side, lying down and looking expectant. “Right here? Is my bed okay?”
She nodded shyly. “Yeah, it’s always your bed.”
“That is very handy. What else?”
Her cheeks burned. “You…you have to talk in French.”
“I speak French in your dreams?”
“Well, kind of. Made-up dream French.”
“I wonder what it is I’m saying to you in these dreams,” he said, amused.
Fallon sat up and knelt. She ran her eyes over his bare torso and arms, baffled by what she might do with him if
she agreed to this.
Max shifted, raising his arms. He slid them between the metal bars of his headboard like an invitation. “Go on.”
She stared at him a moment longer then finally said, “Okay. But I might panic and just sit here, looking at you.”
“You do whatever you want.”
She swung her leg across to straddle his chest and leaned over the headboard. Her hands shook as she wound the
leather around his wrists and secured the buckle. Crawling backward, she knelt between his thighs, studying him for
a long moment. This man, all hers. She watched him, then said something softly in French that she didn’t understand.
Fallon ran her palms over his thighs, feeling all the strength there. Then his stomach, lean and muscular, and the
hips she’d watched perform for her so capably. She smiled. She touched his cock, rock-hard behind his jeans, and
felt his impatience mount with each caress, until the entire length of his body was tight and strained, just as she’d
dreamed. His voice grew deeper, muttering more exotic words between dark sighs and moans. Fallon felt high in a
day she’d never experienced before. Max’s arms tensed, tugging against the headboard.

“Wow,” she murmured, not meaning to say it out loud. She laughed. The reality of this situation energized her.
She moved aside to unzip his pants and tug them down his legs.

“Fallon.” His face in the dim, warm light was hungry.

She scooted close between his thighs, coaxing his legs over hers, laying them open, making him helpless. For a
long time she teased him, rubbing him through his underwear, fondling and pulling and reveling in the power she
held in her hand. With every passing second he lost more control. With each minute he grew hotter and more
desperate until his chest and stomach were damp with sweat and his hips were thrusting him into her hands, wild
with need. His words came fast and harsh and she could guess a good many of them.

When she thought he’d suffered enough, Fallon slid back onto her knees and slowly, cruelly, eased his briefs
down his legs. She breathed him in, his smell and his need and his mounting insanity. Intoxicating. She felt wicked,
still safe in her underwear while this strong, willful man lay naked and bound and at her mercy. Those brilliant,
helpless hands. She grinned at him.

His eyes were wild, jaw set. She watched his arms struggle as they did in her dreams. Between his legs she
studied the spoils of this intimate war, irrefutable proof of her conquest. Hard and thick and beading with the
evidence of his desire. She took him in her fist and stroked until he was writhing.

“Suce-moi.”

Fallon didn’t need a translation for that one. She teased him a few beats longer and took him.

Then she was lost. In his taste, in his guttural sounds, in a haze of the most divine pleasure she’d ever
experienced. All while doing something she didn’t normally enjoy. This pleasure should have been his but she felt it
selfishly in her own body. She took him, slow and deep and greedy, feeling invincible. She teased his head with her
tongue until his bound fists rattled the headboard.

Fallon was so far gone she didn’t recognize the sound of the belt buckle hitting the floor. When Max’s strong
hands grabbed her shoulders, she gasped. He pulled her up along his body until he was between her legs, hot and
still wet from her mouth, big and hard against her panties.

“That’s cheating,” she whispered. As his hands guided her hips she abandoned the protest. His mouth took hers,
rough and explicit as he made her ride him. When he finally broke away she stared at his face, his features
transformed. Possessed. His lips and cheeks were flushed, eyes unsteady, brow slick with sweat. Between her legs,
Fallon’s pleasure grew until she thought she’d catch fire.

“Oh my God.”

“Come for me,” he commanded, forcing the friction.

Her panties were drenched, her body aching for him, the motions so frantic, so rough. He drew her back a couple
of inches and teased her with his head, threatening the penetration her core demanded.

“Max—”

“Come on.” His voice was cruel and triumphant.

Fallon felt gravity reverse and suddenly he was above her. Strong arms flanking her shoulders, hard cock rubbing
with long thrusts then shattering her every last nerve as the climax not only arrived, but tore through her like a force
of nature. She heard her moans blend with his in animal harmony, felt him push her shirt up and then his hot, slick
release as he shot on her belly.

He stayed braced above her for several long, panting breaths, his eyes closed, chest heaving. Eventually he rolled
off of her to one side.

“Dear God, what are you doing to me?” He turned his head to hers, opened his eyes and smiled.

“Me? Doing to you?” She poked him inelegantly in the shoulder, still catching her own breath.

“You,” he confirmed. “More dangerous than silica inhalation and tendonitis combined.”

“How very poetic.”

Something in his expression as Max stared up into the skylight made her think he wasn’t joking. There was that
tension in his face again, a worried quality to his darting eyes.

“Max?”

“Hmm?”

“Everything okay over there? You look…preoccupied.”

He rolled over and pressed his forehead into her shoulder. “Everything is lovely,” he said, warming her arm with
his breath.

“You’re a crappy liar. Why do you look so anxious?”

He exhaled deeply. “Your statue is supposed to be done in the next month.”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”
He didn’t answer for a very long time.
“Max?”
“After I finish it, you’re going away.”
She closed her eyes. “Yeah, I am.”
“That makes me feel rather self-pitiful, you see.”
She ran her palm over his cheek and his hair. “I didn’t used to be the sort of person who’d say something pathetic like this… But why? What’s so amazing about me?”
He pulled his face back a couple inches. “What do you mean?”
“What is it about me that you seem to find so compelling? Shouldn’t you be with some Parisian cellist or something?”
“I could say the same thing to you. Where is your engineer? Your golden retriever…? What’s your answer? Why are we in this bed together?”
“Pheromones.” Fallon laughed to let him know she didn’t have a real answer for him. “We’re biologically predisposed to each other. How about that?”
“That is as good an explanation as any. How strong are these pheromones? Will they let you go all the way back to New York and forget about me?”
Fallon sucked on her lower lip and stared up into the stars.
“Oh, she has reached her capacity for earnestness.” Max tucked himself against her again. “Now we have to go back to fucking and talking about the weather.”
“Shut up,” she whispered.
“We can’t talk about what I want to talk about,” he said in a paper-thin imitation of levity. “We can’t talk about what happens after the statue is done. We can’t talk about the future or family or how much I’m bloody going to miss her—”
Fallon rolled out of bed and went to the stairs.
“Where are you going?”
“To clean myself up,” she said evenly, and he let her escape down the steps.
Fallon paddled through the dusty studio to the bathroom. She sat on the toilet lid for a long time, fists jammed into her cheeks like a four-year-old as the tears fell. After ten minutes she splashed her face with cold water and combed her fingers through her hair.
She crept back up the stairs and found Max exactly as she’d left him. His eyes followed her as she lay back down. After a few moments he pulled her close. He pushed his face against her collarbone, and she knew he was asking to be forgiven. She patted his hair in a lazy, permissive way, telling him she wasn’t angry. He kissed her throat, light then seductive. His tongue lapped her dried tears as his hand cradled her head. He kissed her ear, her jaw, her mouth. He crawled on top of her and kissed her until the intensity was almost too much to bear. When she started to cry again he pulled away, but she tugged his face back to hers.
Max was hesitant but he gave in to her insistence. She cried softly as they made love, her climax punctuated by a body-racking sob. Her tears tapered off then, giving Max whatever permission he needed to take pleasure in this. He took her deep and slow and in near-silence and as he came he breathed her name against her temple, so quiet it felt like telepathy.
When he lay down she turned him to face away from her, sliding her body along his, a hand on his ribs and her face by his ear. She felt his breathing deepen beneath her palm, listened to the sounds as he swallowed and exhaled. Such a perfect machine, the human body. The one fact their two disparate fields might agree on.
She felt him drift off to sleep.
“Max?” she asked softly.
He didn’t stir.
“I’ll miss you too.”
Chapter Eleven

Things got worse over the next two weeks.

Max was unraveling so tangibly that Fallon felt as if she were watching time-lapse photography documenting his decline. He looked pale and exhausted by the end of each session, physically unwell. At first she thought he must have the flu. Then he’d come back to life by the time dinner was ready, that same strong, self-possessed man returning until the following morning when the next set of coffee mugs were set in the sink and the work began again. He seemed so defeated sometimes that Fallon didn’t have it in her to point out that it was mid-November, that the statue still looked ages from complete.

*Two more days,* she kept thinking. *Two more days and she’d start making demands.* Then two days later she’d look at his eyes, as dark and worn and haunted as those of a man approaching death.

Presently she adjusted herself. The final pose that Max had chosen was seductive but tasteful. It called for Fallon to recline on one hip, propping her trunk up on an elbow, the other hand draped on her waist. She liked this pose, though the elbow in question wasn’t quite so fond of it. She was lying across the worktable, her body on par with the marble that separated her and Max.

“Hang on.” She refolded the towel she’d been leaning on.

“Let’s break.”

“I’m okay.”

They had this exchange about five times a day. Max pushed her to take breaks, she pushed him to keep working. He had the momentum of a man trapped hip-deep in quicksand. Every effort he made seemed both desperate and futile.

“You look so frigging tired, Max.”

He met her stare and held the particle mask up for a moment to show her a weak grin.

She pushed herself to sitting and slid off the table. “I’ll make some coffee.”

He nodded.

“Are you sure you don’t have mono or something?” She was teasing him, but he could no doubt hear the fear just beneath the surface, as surely as she could feel it in her chest. She crossed her arms and aimed a tense, frustrated smile at him. “You worry me sometimes.”

Max set down his chisel and hammer and pushed the mask to the top of his head. His eyes were trained on hers as he freed his tool belt, a wickedness turning his expression dark in the most inviting way, bringing him instantly back to life.

“What?” she asked, still standing between the marble and the table.

Max wheeled the statue to one side. “Come here.” A growl.

She stepped slowly to meet him and let him draw her into a deep kiss, his mask falling to the ground. His clothed body against her bare skin felt like some delicious game, their no-touching-during-work-hours rule be damned. It felt too good, too great a relief, just to feel his energy return like this. She let his tongue do all those wonderful things that brought a blush to her skin, and he made sounds for her, firing up all her hidden synapses. His mouth drowned out the voices of protest in her mind, the ones nagging her about schedules and dates and the responsibilities she kept conveniently forgetting.

Max pulled away, grabbing the hand towel he kept in a bowl of water on the edge of the table and mopping the dust from his hands. He tossed it aside and pulled Fallon against him again.

“Wow.” He’d been rough in bed with Fallon at her request, but his approach had always been cautious before. Not now. It felt so right—this energy matched his face and his eyes and their dark promises. She could already feel her body priming for him.

He spoke against her mouth. “Christ, I want you.” His stare was fiery and urgent, his lips parted, fingers rough on her back. Behind all the seduction and intensity, Max radiated unmistakable happiness. He drew her into his kisses and walked them backward until the edge of the worktable pressed against Fallon’s butt. With strong hands still wrapped in their cotton tape, he lifted her and set her on the table, pushing his hips between her legs.

Fallon caught their reflection in the mirror on the bathroom door several paces behind him. She yanked his undershirt up and over his head, forcing his jeans down enough to take himself out. He entered her deep, no hesitation. The thrusts came fast and hard and frantic.
“Max.” He felt amazing—even better than before, if such a thing were possible. She glanced down, taking in his skillful, explicit movements. Divine. His bare skin against hers—

“Oh shit, Max—stop.” She grabbed his shoulders.
He kept pumping. “What is it?”
“Stop stop stop. We need a condom.”
“In a minute,” he said in a distracted, desperate voice.
“No, not in minute—now.” She pushed him away, hard, and slid off the table. “You know I’m not using anything. And I’m not looking to have your artsy French love-child, so suit up.” She ran a hand over her forehead, trying to collect herself. Having sex with Max was like being intoxicated, and he was a dangerously hard drug to sober up from.

He looked to be struggling with his composure as well. “Would that really be the worst thing in the world?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“What?”
“A child.” His flushed face was impossible to read.
“Yeah, Max, it would. A baby right now would be just about the worst thing that could happen to me. Or you. Or…us.”

“Why?”
Fallon’s eyes widened, and she took a step back from him, feeling naked, naked, naked.
“Why? Because we’re…we aren’t…anything, really. And we live hundreds of miles away from each other.”

He replaced himself and buckled his belt. “We aren’t anything?”

She faltered. “Sorry. We’re lovers, obviously. And friends, sort of. I think. But we’re not…you know. A couple. We’d never be normal. Not normal enough to have a frigging baby, at any rate.” She took a deep breath and considered a horrifying possibility. “You weren’t trying to get me pregnant, were you?”

He shook his head, looking somber, and she knew he was telling her the truth. “Of course not.” His eyes lowered and his jaw tightened perceptibly.

“Well, thank God for that.” She wanted this conversation to go away—for it never to have happened to begin with. “Anyway…Maybe we should take that break.”

He nodded, still not looking at her. He turned away and replaced his shirt and began sweeping the marble chips from the floor.

“Have I hurt your feelings?” she asked carefully.

He still didn’t turn. “No. My feelings are just fine.”

“Good. I mean, I wasn’t saying having your baby would be the worst thing ever, just a baby. In general. I don’t know if I even want children.”

“Oh.”

She walked to her clothes, dusted her butt off and began redressing. “I’d be a terrible mother.” She felt his eyes on her, that tingling in her nerve endings.

“Why do you think that?”

She shrugged. She yanked her thermal shirt on. Armor.

“You have never mentioned your own parents to me,” he said.

“No, I haven’t. There’s a reason for that.” Her tone made it plain that she didn’t care to share that reason. She buttoned her pants and tugged on a sock.

“I’m not allowed to ask, then?”

“You can ask, but I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Did they hurt you?”

Something in Max’s voice broke Fallon’s heart. There was such a sharp, genuine concern in his words that it made her breath catch.

“No. They didn’t hurt me. They weren’t there to hurt me.”

“You were neglected?”

“No, Max. I don’t have any parents. I grew up in foster care.”

“Oh.”

She exhaled, staring down at the floor. “I don’t like talking about it. It wasn’t the most traumatic thing ever, it just isn’t my idea of a fun conversation. I’m not like you. I don’t get off on bad memories.” She felt her cheeks heat with regret a second too late.

Max didn’t reply.

“I’m sorry. That was harsh. But I’d like to drop it, just the same. Please.”

“Your aunt, who you’ve mentioned…”
“I call her my aunt. Her name was Gloria. Gloria Engels. She was my foster mother, but not until I was fifteen. I felt like I was too old to call anybody ‘Mom’ by then.”

“Tell me about her.”

“Max…”

“Please.”

“Fine.” She sighed and leaned on the edge of the table. “She took in lots of kids. She and her late husband. They couldn’t have their own, so they fostered dozens of hard-to-place teenagers, for years and years. Her husband passed away well before I moved in there. Gloria must have been in her midsixties by then. She was amazing, like something out of a frigging Disney movie.”

He nodded. “And this woman, she has something to do with this statue, somehow.”

Fallon maintained eye contact but didn’t reply.

Max leaned the broom against the wall and crossed his arms. “Tell me. Tell me why we’re here together. Tell me now what Donald Forrester is giving you in exchange for this statue.”

She stared at the ground, feeling disembodied.

“Tell me or I won’t pick those tools up ever again.”

Her head jerked up sharply. “Don’t you threaten me.”

“Tell me about threats, Fallon.”

She glared. “Fine… Fine. He owns Gloria’s house now—her estate in Connecticut. We’ve been fighting with each other for years, since way before she passed away and he bought it.”

Max crossed his arms. “Fighting over what?”

“Environmental things. Over all these development projects of his, ones I’m always trying to get halted because they’ll ruin wetlands or pollute waterways or erode some piece of coastline. We spent so much time in courtrooms together, we were almost like friends. Friends who hated each other, I guess. We weren’t close, just…civil. Familiar. We saw each other all the time and ate lunch together in the middle of these really ugly fights.” She took a deep breath. “Then he asked me out one day, and I said no. Then again, the next day. He asked me about a hundred times, and I said no a hundred times, and I thought he was just being a pain in the ass. Then Gloria died earlier this year and I missed a bunch of hearings during my bereavement leave. He knew what she was to me. When I got back after a couple weeks, I found out he’d bought her estate. Then he made a really disgusting offer and I hit him. Then he made a slightly less disgusting offer and I accepted. Then he contacted you.”

“What does he want to do to her home?” Max asked, one eye narrowing.

“If he gets his statue, he’ll give it to me. And I don’t know what I’d do with it. If he doesn’t, the idea is that he’ll tear it down, make it into a strip mall or throw up some condos, whatever will turn a profit. He’s not picky.”

Max gaped at her, the color draining from his face.

“So that’s why I’m here. Your work is the price of preserving my aunt’s memory.”

“How on earth do you expect me to be a part of this sickness?”

“How is this different from you wanting to preserve Erin’s worst memory, or any of the other painful things you’ve immortalized?”

“It’s different in a thousand ways.”

Her voice rose. “How?”

He shut his eyes tight, as though fending off a migraine.

“How, Max? Tell me how this is different. And don’t you dare say you’re not going to help me save her home—”

His eyes snapped back open. “I assumed this was about money. About you getting something out of the arrangement. Not you being exploited—having your own grief, or your family, used against you. This is different because you’re asking me to let some man take away your dignity in exchange for a scrap of human decency!”

“Bullshit.”

“This is different because I’m bloody in love with you and I can’t. Do. This.”

He was deteriorating before her eyes, every muscle and nerve strained to its breaking point. He picked the chisel back up, clutching the handle as though it held the key to his very sanity. “I can’t reward some piece of shit, heartless old man with my work and your body and let either of you think this is okay.”

“Goddamn it, Max, you don’t get it, do you? This is my only chance to save the memories of the three happy years of my entire, lousy childhood. Three good years out of eighteen! That’s all I got, and it’s because of her—”

“You think I can’t understand that? You think I, of all people, can’t understand how it feels to have your childhood ripped from you?” His eyes were wild, skin flushed, hand trembling.

“It’s not your business, Max. Why can’t you just stop with the drama and do your fucking job? What you promised to do?”

“You let me be a party to this?” His voice rose to a sharp bark. “You let me help someone blackmail you? And
now that you tell me, you just expect me to go along with this?"

“It’s not blackmail.”

“Oh! A thousand pardons. What then? Extortion?”

“What do semantics matter? I came here for your help. I could have saved her home, and now you’re fucking it all up.” The tears arrived, streaming down Fallon’s face and making her words come out thick and sticky. Through her stinging eyes he saw his nostrils flare, some tiny attempt to muster self-control.

“This is what you’ve been keeping from me? About your aunt? You thought I couldn’t hear that? After everything I told you about my childhood?”

“I never twisted your arm—"

“Do you know how many people I’ve shared that with? In twenty years, under the influence of alcohol and drugs and infatuation and ego?” He grasped the neck of his T-shirt, as if fending off an invisible, strangling hand. “None. None until you! Until I came under your bloody influence.

The hand holding the chisel shook. He met her eyes with his blazing ones and with a lightning-fast movement he flung the tool across the room where it collided with a shelf and shattered some anonymous clay figure in an explosion of ceramic shards.

“Max—"

“Get out of my house!”

Fallon felt her eyes go wide and her mouth drop open. Her body shook as she grabbed her bag off the floor and strode to the door with affected calm. She dashed down the steps to the driveway, gasping for air. Behind her, the screen door swung back open and struck the side of the house with a reverberating bang.

“Get out of my head!” Max screamed, maniacal.

Fallon turned her head the smallest fraction, enough to see him standing on his front steps, his chest rising and falling so violently she could make it out from ten yards away. She hurried onward, clutching her bag like an infant, fleeing what felt like a house engulfed in flames.

She nearly reached the main road before she realized he’d said he loved her.

After Fallon was out of sight, Max crouched down on the doorstep and held his head in shaking hands. He hadn’t felt he was going mad like this in years. Not since his grandmother died. Not since he’d last lost the sole person left in the world who meant anything to him.

He hauled his quaking body back inside and grabbed a four-pound sledgehammer and went to his backyard, to his assembly of broken figures. He hissed at the loitering cat until it fled across the lawn.

He raised the hammer and brought it down, whacking the perfect white arm off the nearest statue. Then the shoulder. The crown of the head. A hunk from the second arm smashed through one of his rear windows but he barely noticed.

Systematically, Max destroyed each and every one of the meticulously hewn souls that haunted his garden. He destroyed all the evidence of this curse—this so-called gift—that had left his life empty, driven away any and all decent people and drawn the toxic ones toward him like moths. He worked until the bandages wrapping his hands frayed and his skin grew raw. He worked until no single marble finger or toe or lock of hair was recognizable, until white dust drifted over his yard like fog and all that remained were hunks of meaningless, anonymous rock. Finally he tossed the hammer aside, feeling his body for the first time in hours, feeling suspended somewhere between dead and brilliantly alive.

He strode inside, then stopped in his tracks before Fallon’s statue. His eyes darted over her half-hewn features, a promise made to that reprehensible man. The man whose sick games had brought her here then ripped her away just as suddenly. He ran a blistered palm down her stone back, across the ridge of her shoulder blade, over the shadows cast by the dying sun. Nearly three months he’d been chipping away, stripping off the layers to try to uncover the essence of this woman. The hardest he’d ever worked, and surely the finest piece of his career, had he succeeded.

Exhausted, he barely had the energy to stagger to the kitchen, uncork the wine bottle and fill a glass. His hand shook as he carried it to the table. The cat mewed at the back door, he let it in. He took his seat and when Oscar grazed his shins he hoisted the cat into his arms and held it hostage, the thing he should have done with Fallon instead of driving her away.

It wouldn’t have done any good, though, keeping her here. If his temper hadn’t scared her off, his refusal to finish that hateful sculpture would have done the job just as surely.

Emotions pulsed through Max’s body like drugs. Ugly emotions he hadn’t felt in years, betrayal and hurt and grief, anger over feeling used and manipulated. Fallon didn’t deserve them. Forrester wasn’t worth them. If these feelings had any point at all, it was to tell Max exactly how different he’d felt these past weeks in Fallon’s company. Calm and happy. Passionate toward a complete person, not just their shadows or textures or scars. Living for something aside from his art and precious solitude, living for pleasurable shared moments and for hope over what
the future might bring.

He sighed and set the cat down, eyes caught once again by the stone shape of the woman he’d driven from this house. He stared at the sky, crisscrossed by a thousand mullions. At this moment his home looked an awful lot like a cage. Without Fallon it looked like ribs with no heart beating inside them. He rubbed that spot on his own chest, trying to ease the ache.

He’d let her down. Scared her off and ruined the plan she’d sacrificed so much for, just as she’d said. Max looked to the statue, wondering if he could make a sacrifice himself, ignore his ethics and finish it…

He’d sooner destroy it.

A cool breeze seeped through the broken rear window and Max knew then he wouldn’t sleep that night. That small bed would feel too huge without her in it, this entire space cavernous and cold. She’d ruined him, just as he’d ruined her plans to save her aunt’s home. Funny how that balance felt so deeply unsettling.

He gazed into the distance, past the backyard to the sea and the cliffs. Somewhere beyond all this Fallon was en route to Halifax, to New York. Even if he went after her, he had nothing to offer that could make this right.

He stared at the cliffs, ocean crashing.

He stared at the cliffs, so like an invitation to plummet, here…so protective, the way Fallon had described those surrounding her aunt’s home.

Max stared at the cliffs until daylight abandoned Cape Breton, and then he knew what to do.
Chapter Twelve

Fallon disembarked at LaGuardia glassy-eyed and dry-mouthed. Her head throbbed, reminding her of such things as sleep and food and water. Rachel found her at the baggage claim. There was hugging and kind words, then obedient agreements to not talk about things for a while.

In the car, watching Queens stream by the window, Fallon turned to her friend to speak for the first time in twenty minutes. “Thanks.”

“None needed,” Rachel said, smiling weakly. “Just let me know what I can do.”

“Call Donald Forrester for me and tell him I’m fucked, please.”

“You know I would, if you wanted me to.”

“I know. And I’ll be a big girl and do it myself.” Soon, Fallon thought. In a day, maybe two, when she wasn’t grieving so deeply that her body felt as though it were ripping open at the seams.

“Maybe he’ll change his mind,” Rachel said and it didn’t matter which man she was referring to.

Fallon gave her a withering look.

“We can dream, can’t we?”

“You, the worst Jew I’ve ever met and me, a congenital atheist?” Fallon asked. “Like we’ve got any miracles due to us.”

Rachel nodded glumly. “I’m so sorry, Fal. I know how much she meant to you. And that house.” Rachel and Josh had gone with her to Gloria’s twice for Christmas and once for the Fourth of July. She did know. “And all the time you sacrificed, trying to make this work.”

Fallon cried silently as Rachel wove them through the traffic. What business did autumn have, looking so sunny and cheerful this morning? She grabbed her bag from the floor and dug for a tissue. Remembering her phone, she switched it off flight mode. A minute later it vibrated into life. One missed call, the screen informed her.

“Rachel glanced over. “The devil himself?”

She shook her head, squinting at the area code. “Nova Scotia.”

“Oh.”

Fallon held down the check message button with shaking fingers and that voice she’d heard shrieking at her only the previous afternoon sounded as though it were speaking from a month ago, calm and cool.

“It’s Max. Don’t tell Forrester we’ve fallen out. I will fix this.” The click of the receiver being replaced. Fallon flipped her phone closed.

“Max?” Rachel asked, glancing nervously between Fallon and the road.

“Yeah.”

“Was it bad, when you two…parted ways?”

Fallon nodded. “It was ugly.”

“Was the message ugly?”

“No,” Fallon said. “But it’s the last fucking thing I need right now.”

Fallon was plied with pizza and a stiff vodka and tonic and sent to bed early. When she awoke the next morning, the sky was still blue, the world still turning. Her bedclothes from the last couple of years felt as unfamiliar as a motel’s.

Rachel had departed for work early as usual and left a pot of coffee warming in the machine. Fallon caffeinated herself and ate a half-frozen bagel and spun her phone around on the counter for five minutes before dialing.

“Donald Forrester.”

“It’s Fallon.”

His voice transformed. “Hello, Fallon! How is it on Cape Breton today?”

She paused. “It’s fine… Did Emery get in touch with you?”

“He did. I’m just thrilled! Don’t tell me the details. I do love a surprise.”

“What…what exactly did he tell you?” Fallon asked, brow knitted.

“Said he needed until the third week of December and some extra expenses. Can’t tell a living genius like that no, of course.”

“Of course,” she agreed, frightened to say too much or not enough and give away her ignorance. “I better go now. I just wanted to make sure he talked to you about it.” She ended the call before he could reply. She held on to the
counter and tried to figure out what she was supposed to be doing.

She couldn’t call Max directly. She could call the bar in Pettiplaise or the market, try to get someone to leave him a message if he stopped by. She could send him a note, asking him to call and explain to her what in the hell was going on. Or she could wait. In the end, she did all three.

The following month bore no resemblance to reality. Fallon couldn’t go back to her advocacy job as the chances of Forrester finding out she was back in town were too high. She picked up twenty hours a week of fieldwork, a little taste of normality, a little income. But always in the back of her mind was the question of what on earth Max was up to. And why he was refusing to acknowledge her pleas for an explanation.

He never replied to the messages she’d left or the note she’d sent. No phone call, no letter. She was so antsy she toyed daily with emptying her savings account to fund a flight back to Halifax to demand some answers. She was poking around online for airline deals when Rachel came home late one Tuesday evening, face pale.

“Hey, Rache. How was school today? You look wiped.”

“I have some bad news.” Rachel set her purse on the coffee table and sank into the couch cushions.

Fallon swiveled her chair around, fear launching her heart into her throat. “What?”

“Josh was in Connecticut this afternoon, coaching the varsity boys’ basketball game.”

“Oh, God, is he all right?”

“Yes, yes, he’s fine.” Rachel swallowed. “But he drove separate, and on his way back he swung by Gloria’s place, just as a detour? To see how it was holding up.”

“Oh. And?”

“Forrester lied to you,” Rachel said, wincing. “He’s already developing there.”

Fallon’s jaw dropped. “What?”

She nodded. “Josh said there’s scaffolding up. Whatever Forrester’s got planned, he’s not waiting for you anymore. I think he knows, Fallon. I think he knows there’s no statue coming.”

At eight the next morning Fallon pulled into the driveway of her first real home, kicking up gravel and swinging open the car door before she’d even got the key out of the ignition. The big white house was as it should be, looking as it had when she’d lived there as a teenager, plus a bit more peeling paint. The scaffolding she’d expected to find surrounding it was erected a hundred yards away, at the far perimeter of the huge backyard, butted up against the looming granite cliff at the edge of the property.

What was Donald doing? Dynamiting away the friggin’ landscape?

She flipped her phone open and found his number in the call history. He picked up after several rings.

“Fallon,” he said warmly.

“Fuck you.”

“Well, aren’t we a little wound up. Whatever’s the matter? And how is my statue coming along?” He sounded calm and casual. Infuriating.

“It’s probably coming along just fine. So tell me this—exactly what are you doing to Gloria Engels’ property?”

“My property,” he corrected. “And nothing, at the moment. I agreed to Mr. Emery’s extension, and I’m a man of my word. That gives you until…this coming Monday. So I am doing absolutely nothing. By then I hope to have my masterpiece and you will have my assurances that your precious childhood home will not be touched.” The last few words left his mouth dripping with acid and saccharin.

“Oh, yeah? Then why the hell are there cranes and scaffolds all over the yard?”

“Pardon me?”

“Don’t play coy, Donald. I’m right here. In Connecticut. Now. What are you doing to her property?”

“My property. And what are you talking about?”

Fallon sensed she was getting nowhere with Forrester and slapped the phone closed. She stalked across the lawn, green and tidy when it had been her teenage sanctuary, overgrown and strewn with construction debris now. She approached a beefy man in a hard hat studying a clipboard. He looked up, pink face blank.

“You can’t be out here without a hard hat, lady. This is a falling-rock area.”

“What are you doing here? What’s Donald Forrester doing to the cliff?” Her voice shook and she felt tears stinging her eyes.

“Some kind of memorial,” he said, clearly not impressed by her tone but intimidated by the crying.

“A what?”

“A huge friggin’ statue. Who’re you?”
She ignored the question, heart pounding. “Who’s in charge here?”
“He’s busy.”
Fallon was fighting to keep from hyperventilating. “Is he here? Bring him over. I have to talk to him, now. Tell
him Fallon Frost needs to talk to him, right now.” Her voice broke. A thousand thoughts jockeyed for her attention.
“I can’t interrupt him. His orders—hey!”
Fallon dodged the wide man and easily outran him. The cliff was hidden by three stories of scaffolding draped
with forest-green tarpaulin. The closer she got, the more chunks of granite littered the ground. Men were pushing
wheelbarrows and running long extension cords across the lawn. A loud, scraping screech like a band saw deafened
everyone to the foreman’s orders to stop her. She brushed past a dozen burly men, all too surprised to hold her back
as she ducked beneath the tarp and climbed through a jungle gym of metal tubing. All over the ground was dust—
gray, granite dust. It drifted in clouds from above and prevented Fallon from lifting her face. When she made it to
the base of the cliff, she was stopped dead in her tracks by a pair of feet. A huge pair of stone feet.
Fallon hooded her eyes with a hand and looked up to find ankles. Calves, knees, a waist shrouded in carved folds
of draped fabric, up, up. Behind the gigantic figure, wings. At the very top, forty feet up atop the scaffold stood a
very familiar body, blocking the head of the statue. He was laden with safety gear and busy with some kind of
industrial finishing machine. There were other men too, also at work with sanders and hoses.
“Max!” she screamed. She shut her eyes against the dust and cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted
until she was hoarse, useless amid the shrieking machinery and his industrial ear protectors.
Fallon felt a rough yank at her arm and was wrenched away. Indignant hands pulled her struggling back into the
sunny yard, her eyes stinging, ears ringing, deaf to the two red-faced men berating her.
“…liability,” she finally made out after a minute of muted vitriol.
“I need to talk to him,” she demanded.
“And just who the fuck are you?” the angry man on the left said. “Are you trying to get us shut down? You trying
to get conked by a hunk of rock and put us out of business, you crazy bitch?”
“No! I need to talk to him. To Max Emery.” She rubbed her ears furiously, trying to coax her hearing back.
“Please. I used to live here. He’s my friend. I need to talk to him—”
“Well, you have to wait until he takes a break,” the angry man on the right said. “And he don’t take many breaks.
Go sit in your car and wait ’til the polisher shuts off and stay the fuck away from the site.” He stabbed a sausagy
finger back toward the road.
Fallon narrowed her eyes one last time before stomping to her hatchback. She heard the men exchange a final
nasty name in her honor.
Sitting on her hood, she waited, unsure what percentage of her tears could be blamed on the dust. Minutes
dragged on. She dug her glasses out of her bag and flicked her ruined contacts onto the grass. After an hour she
pulled her phone out. Eight missed calls, all Forrester. She shut herself in the car so she could listen to the three
voicemails he’d left. He clearly knew nothing about this—he was as frantic for an explanation as she was. Just as
she finished the final message, silence. The machines shut off. She practically fell out of the car, sprinting toward
the construction.
One of the chief angry men put a hand up from ten yards away. “You stay back! We’ll send him over.”
Fallon waited some more. She watched the tarp and the scaffolding shake, praying it was Max descending. A
minute later he emerged from behind the partitions, following the men’s gestures and striding toward her. He had a
welding-style mask flipped up on his head, and he yanked off a pair of safety gloves as he walked, tossing them on
the grass.
“Fallon.” He looked perplexed. He looked filthy and sweaty and exhausted. He looked sexy as hell.
“Hello.” She found herself at a sudden loss. “What’s…what’s going on?”
He grinned, so familiar. “Forrester’s statue.”
“I don’t understand. Does he know about this?”
“He knows enough,” Max said, taking her arm and walking them toward the house.
“What does he know?” Fallon stammered.
“He knows I asked to hire a crew. He knows enough so that if he receives a call from a contractor asking how to
bill him for construction costs, he’ll go along. He doesn’t know quite how big that bill will be, though. He knows
even to say, ‘Emery is in charge. He has the details.’ This is what I told him to say. We artists can be so
demanding, you know. Your friend Donald Forrester is impatient and busy and that is very handy for me.” He
grinned. “I’m the foreman, you see.”
“I still don’t really get it.”
Max sat her down on a bench-style tree swing.
“When I called him I said, ‘I have the inspiration for the greatest piece of my life!’ I said, I need more time. I need
you to pay for some machinery costs, and labor, and in a few weeks you will be the patron behind the centerpiece of
my career.”

“Okay…”

“I said, if any contractors call you, you tell them I have the details. You give me free rein and I will make you my
finest masterpiece. I think he thinks this sculpture will be the next David.” Max smirked with satisfaction.

“He doesn’t know you’re dynamiting the hell out of my foster mother’s cliff, does he?”

He shook his head.

“How can he not know?”

“Donald Forrester, he’s rich. He is so rich and so busy, and so uninvested emotionally in his work, one call from a
construction company blends into the next, I think. And I have gotten lucky. Luckier than I even hoped.”

“Well, he knows now,” Fallon said. “I called him. I thought it was him, destroying Gloria’s property. Sorry—not
destroying. But I thought he was. I still don’t get it,” she admitted. “Are you just trying to piss him off?”

“Oh, no no no. That is just a happy byproduct. This is for you.”

“What is?”

He brushed a hand over her hair, licked a thumb and smoothed it over some smudge on her face. “A statue,
behind all that.”

“I saw it. Most of it. Before they dragged me away. Why are you carving a gigantic angel into the cliff? For me?”

“This is your foothold. I did this for you, for attention. We will tear down the scaffolding and everyone will see
the monument. Passing cars, then the press. Do you see?”

“Sort of. A media circus?”

“Well, as close to a circus as we can manage. I’m not as famous as I used to be. So that is where you take over,”
Max said. “You have to use this time to stall. You have to tell people about this woman, your foster mother, and
what she did, and tell the story of why this statue is suddenly here… Or at least tell the local news. You have to fight
and get her home turned into a memorial—a protected place. Perhaps others that she helped will join you. You have
to fight Forrester and get the state or the town to tell him this place cannot be touched.”

“Oh God, Max. That’s insane.”

“Even if they are not swayed by sentimentality, tourism may prove enticement enough.”

“I’m not a lawyer, Max. I’m just some woman. I haven’t lived here in over ten years.”

“I hope that it will be simple, that Forrester will not have the sac to say he is going to tear this place down. He
could claim to be behind this, some play for philanthropic credibility. You and I, we let the press think this too, until
he’s too embarrassed to deny it. But if he doesn’t play along, if he still wants to hurt you, you will fight.”

She chewed her lip. “You actually think that could work?”

Max shrugged. “I’ve fought for this. I did many things I said I wouldn’t. I’m inviting attention and sensationalism
and trouble. I used machinery, and other people’s hands. And I worked from a photograph. Actually, the dynamiting
was fun, I must admit.”

“How did you even know where the house was? Or what she looked like?”

Max smiled. “I’m a very good detective. I can even operate a computer when I have to.”

Fallon’s head swirled with a hundred horrible scenarios. “Forrester could have you arrested. For some kind of
massive destruction-of-property thing.”

“No, I do not think so. The builders he let me hire, they have contracts. He gave me permission to do this, in
documents that he did not read very carefully. I think he has a crush on me,” Max said with an evil grin. “He was
very eager to kiss my ass and sign my forms.”

Fallon fell silent for a minute. “Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

Max slid her glasses off and brushed her gritty face with a handkerchief from his pocket. “You do not have to say
anything.” He replaced her frames. “You save those words for if there is a fight.”

Fallon nodded, so overloaded with information she felt numb.

“Listen, I have very little time to finish this, now. And I am so close. Give me until the end of the day, and I can
do this. But I have to go back to work, before Forrester or some authorities arrive and all of this grinds to a halt.
Your job is to come back tomorrow with the press, whoever you can get. The scaffolding will be gone. By dawn
everyone will see your statue.”

“All right…”

Max stood. “I will answer questions, in my way. I’ll make a press statement and try to back Forrester into a
corner. And I will say that you’re overseeing this memorial. You are in charge of setting it up, in your vision, yes?
The Gloria Engels Memorial Home for Teens or what have you. And we will pray that he lets you, without a fight.
Then I will go, because you know how I feel about fame.”

Fallon shook her head, punch-drunk. “This is all so weird.”
He rubbed both her shoulders, looking pleased. “Yes, I was told I am very weird by someone, once. Now I have to go. I will look for you tomorrow, with cameras. And then we will say goodbye.”

The next twenty hours were a haze. Fallon made dozens of phone calls to television and radio stations and newspapers, just as she suspected Forrester was making calls to lawyers. She hoped even one of the stations would bother to show up, the story sounded so ridiculous.

The following morning at five she arrived back at the Engels house where all was silent and dark. Her headlights revealed the scaffolding to be gone. She climbed out of her car with a flashlight and crunched across the frosty lawn. Nearly all the evidence of the construction had been wiped clean, save a few hunks of granite here and there. She trained the beam on the gigantic stone feet, their eerie relief in the tiny spotlight, up the legs to the robes and bare shoulders. Massive arms, outstretched and echoed by unfurled, feathered wings, a long neck. The head was what she feared most. She held her breath and slid the light up, surprised not to find her own face, her mane of curls.

Instead it was Gloria, her elegant hair cascading, those features Fallon knew so well, minus a couple decades’ wrinkles. The whole figure was framed in an arched alcove. Fallon began to cry, sobs tightening her throat, choking. The jerking flashlight strobed over the image of the woman she’d loved most in the whole world, surreal in scale and context and mere existence.

Headlights panned across the property and Fallon turned. Too small and too early to be a news van. She held the flashlight under her chin so the party would see her.

“Fallon!” It was Forrester.

She blinded him as he made his way across the grass. Donald Forrester, broad and white-haired and deceptively grandfatherly in appearance, accompanied by a tall, thin man in a suit who reeked of litigation.

“Hi, Donald,” Fallon said as they neared. For the first time in the three years she’d known him, he didn’t intimidate her.

“What have you done?” He was angry but also visibly awed, and there was no physical threat behind his rage.

“I didn’t have anything to do with this. It’s Emery. I only found out after I called you.” She swung the light over the statue. “What took you so long?”

“I was in Madrid. What in—”

“The press is coming, in less than an hour…I hope. I called the morning news, every network and paper in the state. I’ve been given a script, as it were,” she said evenly, though inside she was trembling. “In this script you come off as a philanthropist, and the most sensational arts patron in recent history. It’s an amazing bit of PR. It paints you very favorably. I’ll be curious to see if you play along. If you’re interested, leave the talking to me this morning. And if you want to fight this, I’ll see you in court. As usual.”

“You can sue, Donald,” the lawyer said. “Do not say anything to the press. It’s your right. It’s your property. Let me do the talking.”

Forrester was silent for nearly a minute. Eventually he turned to Fallon and asked, “Have you been crying?”

It was then that the first news crew arrived. It was followed shortly by others in the early dawn light, until the front lawn was littered with vans and takeaway coffee cups and boxes of doughnuts. Apparently the local press wasn’t above covering sensationalist publicity stunts. Fallon brushed her hands down her blazer and prepared for her close-up.

Fallon spotted Max when he arrived in a cab around ten o’clock, hours after the story broke. He disembarked with the cold ennui of a rock star arriving at a club opening. He tipped the brim of his tweed fedora to the cameras as he made a beeline for Fallon, toward the small clusterfuck of microphones and reporters gathered around her. She’d underestimated his infamy—clearly the press had taken the time to Google M.L. Emery and decided the arrival of a controversial artist was worth waiting around to document. A couple crews from Manhattan had even turned up.

He slipped in beside her and pulled her smoothly into double cheek kisses before addressing the press. His statement was short, his answers to follow-up questions even shorter. He was gracious in a distinctly rude kind of way, seeming immune to the camera flashes and the endless shouts of the journalists.

“I think the person who deserves the greatest share of the credit for both funding and conceiving this extraordinary project,” he said dryly, “is Donald Forrester. A true patron of the arts and protector of the family if ever there was one. That is the end of my statement.” He smiled and fought his way out from the noise and the crowd. Fallon managed to follow as the crews disbursed. Many moved on to harass Forrester, who stood stiff and silent on the sidelines. Fallon heard his lawyer say, “No comment,” for the thousandth time that morning.

Max distanced himself from the madness, saying, “Go away, please,” to the reporters who tried to wrangle more sound bites from him. Fallon trailed him and eventually they made it to the outskirts of the action.
He turned to her and smiled. “I want to kiss you, but I think we’ve caused enough of a stir already.”

She nodded. They stared back at the crowd, at the gigantic statue, the television cameras panning the scene. Surreal.

“Look at it.” Max pointed to the statue, shaking his head. “This will be my legacy, now. With all due respect to your foster mother, it’s tacky as hell.”

“I think it’s beautiful. Just a bit...you know. Huge, I guess.”

He nodded. “It goes against everything I value, creatively.” He turned to look her in the eyes. “And it’s the greatest thing I think I’ve ever done.”

Fallon pondered it all for a minute...this enormous angel, this outlandish public memorial. So similar and yet so different than that first winged statue of his own mother, the intimate tribute that had changed the trajectory of his life so radically. “This is all very strange and wonderful. And terrifying.”

“Like love,” Max said.

She looked him over, dressed to kill. Dressed to sacrifice his ideals for her. She ran her fingers over the lapels of his smart designer suit jacket, the hood and frayed cuffs of his soccer zip-up showing behind it, sucking all the formality from the outfit. Jeans and dusty black shoes. His bumblebee scarf. So very Max. So very right.

“Are you going back to Nova Scotia now?” The words caught in her throat.

He nodded. “I have to go back to my home. I’m like you,” he added with a weak smile. “I went a long time not belonging anywhere and now I need to stay still for a while. Maybe when you decide what you want and where you belong, I’ll see you again.”

She nodded, unsure of what to say.

He continued, looking shy. “Maybe you will decide you belong in Nova Scotia, someday, with all the water and the quiet. I’m sure someone will pollute or overfish it soon and the strait will need you,” he added mischievously.

“Maybe.”

“And so maybe we will be neighbors. Maybe you will make a home there, too, and invite me to live with you when the sun goes down, away from all my dust and windows. Maybe one day I will finally complete that statue of you... Maybe one day there will be some curly-haired child running around with us on the beach, making us crazy.”

“That sounds…” She trailed off, thinking. “That sounds very normal.”

Max shrugged. “I am willing to be normal, if it will have me. But anyway. I won’t put any pressure on you. I hope I’ll see you again. Maybe soon. But I waited thirty-three years for you the first time. I can wait another thirty-three.”

Fallon nodded, so overcome by gratitude she thought she must be suffocating. Max watched as tearless sobs began to buck her shoulders then he pulled her hard against him, press forgotten.

“You’re strong,” he whispered. “And if you have to fight for this, you will win. You’re a conservationist. You will preserve this woman’s memory. It’s an honor to have helped, in what little way I can.”

“You’ve done so much,” she choked, then gave up trying to speak.

He pulled away. “When you’re done fighting, you come see me. We’ll have a drink and take a walk, and let everyone else struggle in the ways they seem to love so dearly.” He looked down and twisted a thick silver ring off his middle finger. He placed it in Fallon’s palm, folding her fingers over it. “Don’t lose that. It was my father’s wedding band.”

“Max—”

“Hang on to it until we meet again on Cape Breton. I’ll see you soon.” He smiled and walked a few steps toward his cab before Fallon rushed to him, turning him around by the shoulder and catching his mouth with hers, a kiss full of ferocity and gratitude and heartache. And hope. When she pulled away, tears slipped down her face, tasting like the sea.

He smiled again and tipped his hat at her. “See you.”

“I’ll see you soon,” she said, and held the ring so tightly it bit into her skin. She watched Max climb into the cab and drive away. She watched until he was out of sight, and she smiled.

“Very soon.”
Epilogue

Fallon crunched down the gravel drive, travel-weary, dying for a shower but aching for the reunion that awaited her. The studio appeared as the pines thinned. The glint of the late-afternoon sun on the glass coupled with the salt air...so fundamentally Cape Breton. She broke into a jog.

The cat surveyed her lazily through the bay window as she mounted the steps. She touched her fingers to the little brass plaque and pulled the screen door open, its rattle and squeak the sweetest sound she thought she'd ever heard.

“Max?”

She found him slumped comfortably in a chair beside the worktable. By his elbow sat a mug and half-empty French press and a glass ringed with orange juice pulp. His languid smile and heavy lids told her she'd awakened him.

She studied him in the cool light, those seductive eyes and strong arms, tanned skin against the white of his undershirt. Max, elementally.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Don’t get up.”

“Welcome back. T’avons-nous manqué?”

“Of course. Did you guys miss me?” Fallon looked to the mop of curly brown hair tucked under Max’s chin, that fat-cheeked profile, closed eyes, serene face. Such a marvelous little creature. Her father’s dark hair, Fallon’s pale skin. Both of their stubborn dispositions when she was awake.

“Constantment.”

“English for me tonight, please, Max. The flight was bumpy and the drive from Halifax was one huge construction zone. I’m too pooped to translate.” She pulled out a second chair and sat across from him. “Plus you’ve already got a bilingual daughter.” She reached over to brush the child’s hair from her face and ran a finger over that impossibly soft skin. “Dr. Noelle Emery, future Professor of Linguistics. Why not leave your wife to her happy ignorance?”

Max smiled and pressed his lips to the child’s head. When his eyes returned to Fallon’s, it felt like a stiff drink, as always. “How is the Engels Home?”

“Good. The new supervisor’s amazing, and that grant money’s doing wonders. You should see what they’ve done to the basement already. It’s like there’s suddenly a whole new floor to the house. The kids are all obsessed with rec room catalogs. If they don’t get a pool table, there might be a mutiny.”

“And how is old Uncle Donald?”


“And Auntie Rachel?”

She laughed. “She’s as round as she is tall. Looks like Noelle when she’s carrying that beach ball around. And all she wants to eat is enchiladas and Cherry Coke.”

Max grinned.

Fallon studied the scene, this strong man cradling her daughter amid the clutter of his art, such a perfect encapsulation of everything that made her love him.

“What did you two get up to today?” she asked. “I thought I’d find you at home with dinner ready, eagerly awaiting the return of the prodigal mother.”

“Never fear, there’s a casserole made. And we went on the Bird Island tour again.” He ran a palm over his daughter’s back. “She’s on a first-name basis with the boat captain, now. Then we came by to feed Oscar, and she wanted to draw.” Max nodded to the middle of the floor, where the tiny easel he’d built stood beside his own. Fallon saw a cat-shaped blob in the lower left corner of the newsprint sheet—purple, since Noelle thought black was boring. Above were three more blobs Fallon identified as her daughter’s current obsession—puffins.

“Very nice. Has she been good?”

Max nodded. “An angel. Mostly.”

“A demanding one.”

“Like her mama.”

Fallon tugged her elastic out and finger-combed her tangled hair. “Is your commission all done?”

He nodded. “The truck took it away yesterday.”

“You must be relieved.”

He made a grudging face and nodded. “Should keep us in food and utilities for another year and a half. No
Fallon sighed. “I’m not looking forward to work this week... I honestly don’t think we’re going to get that cove protected status.”

“Worry about it on Monday, then.” Max tapped a fingertip softly on his child’s nose until her eyes opened. “C’est l’heure de te lever. Look who’s back.”

Noelle’s sleepy brown eyes swiveled to Fallon. “Hi, Mama. It’s my birthday almost.”

“I know, baby. On Sunday.”

“I’ll be four,” she said with a yawn, then her eyes shut again. “Papa’s making me a chocolate cake.”

Fallon raise an eyebrow at Max. “I’m gone for three days and all she can think about is cake?”

“Wait until she’s awake. You’re all she’s talked about.” He stood with a groan, shifting the girl’s head to his shoulder. “Let’s get home.”

“Here.” Fallon held her arms out and took her daughter, breathing in the sweet, familiar scent of her hair and skin. Max locked the studio and they started up the dirt drive. Fallon held Noelle to her chest with one arm and took Max’s hand with her free one. They stopped at her car and Max grabbed her suitcase from the trunk. He jogged to hold open the door to the cottage they’d had built that first summer after she’d moved to Cape Breton.

Fallon eased Noelle onto the couch and turned to Max, finding a tired but mischievous smirk curling his lips. He set her bag down and pulled her into a tight hug and kissed her forehead. She studied him again as he stepped back. Three gray hairs at his right temple, five on the left, just where they’d been when she’d left. She smoothed her fingers over them.

“Fatherhood is so dignified on you.”

He smiled deeply, lowering his eyes. He grabbed her bag and carried it to the back room. Fallon followed.

“It’s been lonely at night without you,” he said.

“I’ll bet.” She eyed the bed, predictably unmade in her absence.

“July evenings with the windows open and no one to enjoy the breeze with.” He flopped the suitcase onto the mattress and pulled her close. His deep kiss tasted of coffee and that familiar, perfect Max flavor.

He broke away, rubbing his palms over her arms. “Let me put dinner in the oven.”

Fallon watched him prep the meal through the breakfast bar. He poured her a glass of cabernet then leaned against the fridge, arms crossed, expression content.

She took a sip, savoring the wine and the smile aimed in her direction. “What?”

Max came forward and propped his elbows on the tile near hers. He took her lips with his, a long, sweet kiss that hummed with the soft growl in his throat.

“It’s good to have you home.”
About the Author

Before becoming a writer, Meg worked as a record store bitch, a lousy barista, a decent designer, and an over-enthusiastic penguin handler. She loves writing sexy, character-driven stories about strong-willed men and women who keep each other on their toes…and bring one another to their knees.

Meg now writes full-time and lives north of Boston with her extremely good-natured and permissive husband. When she’s not trapped in her own head, she can usually be found in the kitchen, the coffee shop, or jogging around the nearest duck-filled pond.

Meg welcomes reader feedback. E-mail her at meg@megmaguire.com, follow her on Twitter @megguire, or visit her website at www.megmaguire.com.
She wants it. He’s got it…and a whole lot more.

Turn It Up
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The Turner Twins, Book 2

Maxwell Turner considers his stubborn and resourceful attitude a plus. After all, it usually gets him what he wants—except for Natasha Bellingham. The long-time family friend may be ten years older than he, but so what? He’s plenty old enough to know they belong together. Now all he has to do is convince her.

Over the past few years Natasha’s love life has degenerated into a series of bad clichés. Her biological clock is ticking—loudly. As a proven architect with her own house-design company, she’s financially ready for a baby. Who says she needs a permanent man in her life for that? She just needs a “donation”.

When Max discovers Natasha’s future plans include artificial insemination, he’s outraged. She wants to get pregnant? No problem. He’s more than willing to volunteer—no turkey basters involved.

But there’s one non-negotiable clause: He wants forever. And he intends to do everything in his power—fair and unfair—to make it happen.

This title contains one younger man ready, aimed and hell bent on giving one woman everything she wants. Includes interludes against the wall, in a Jacuzzi, on a car hood and even—shockingly enough—on a bed or two. Oh, and about that porch swing? Yup…

Enjoy the following excerpt for Turn It Up:

He stepped closer, not giving her time to continue her protests. Last night he’d shown more control than any man should ever have to. Today his ability to manage the urges driving him grew a little shakier. “My family thinks the world of you and would be thrilled to be involved with your child—again meaning more love and attention. That’s not the biggest reason to marry me, but it’s a bonus.”

“Like a prize in the cereal box?”

Max laughed out loud, the expression on her face driving him crazy. Sarcastic wench. “God, you are so freaking cocky. I love that. And that’s the real reason this makes sense. I would definitely choose to be in a long-term relationship with you.”

She opened her mouth to speak then swung her hands in frustration, pacing away to stand in front of an empty window opening. Fists planted on her hips, she stared out at the backyard.

He waited patiently.

Tasha turned and shook her head. “You can’t know that. You’re too young to—”

“Don’t.” That was the one argument he would not accept. It made his blood boil. He rapidly crossed the room to her side. “Don’t you dare say something trite like ‘You’re too young to know your own mind.’ This is me, not some random person off the street. We’ve spent tons of time together over the years.”

“Not one-on-one, not in a sexual relationship.”

“Because you’ve never let us go there. I’ve been your friend. I’ve helped you move and fixed your car. We’ve played games together and watched bad movies. When I make a decision I stick to it. If I say I want to be involved with you, trust me, I’ve given it a ton of thought. I’ll not only keep my commitment, but be the best damn father possible.”

Her face grew redder as she waved her hands in the air and shouted at him, “You can’t propose to me just because I want to get pregnant.”

It was his turn to stare in disbelief. “This from a woman who plans on making a baby and having to deal with wet diapers and colic and all the rest of it alone for the next twenty years? Don’t talk to me like I’m the only crazy person in the room.”

They locked glares, neither one blinking or willing to back down. The wind picked up and blew in the open window, ruffling her hair around her face and something inside him tightened. Was he in love with her? Hell, yeah. He’d admired her forever, her body and her character, and love seemed to have snuck in as a natural progression, but that’s not what she needed to hear, not yet. She’d spent too long keeping him at arm’s length. He’d have to start somewhere they could agree. Max took a step closer, dropping his gaze to her lips. She licked them nervously, crossing her arms in front.

“What are you doing?” She shuffled backward, coming to a sudden stop against the raw wood of a two-by-six wall stud, flinging her hands out to catch her balance.

“Proving we’ve got a physical attraction between us.” One more pace put him in her personal space, their feet
alternating on the floor, torsos brushing, hips close enough the heat of her body bled against his.

She leaned harder against the wood at her back, her breasts heaving beneath her T-shirt as she tried to widen the space between them, and he refused to give way. “What does that have to do— I mean, I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

Max sank his fingers into her thick mane of dark hair and let his satisfaction escape in a low moan. God, he’d wanted to do that forever, and last night refusing her sexual advances had taken him to the breaking point. He needed this so badly he felt raw inside, aching with need for a taste of her. He tugged until her face tilted toward him, the smooth curve of her cheek shining in the midmorning sunlight. “Just in case you get some screwy idea of accepting only part of my terms. I don’t want you to imagine for even a moment we’re going to use any kind of turkey-baster method to get you pregnant.”

Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth, probably to lambaste him. He took advantage of the opportunity and clamped their mouths together.

Stone cold sober.

Suddenly, that’s what she was—the blood pounding through her carrying more than enough oxygen to reinvigorate her dusty brain cells. He was kissing her. No, that was wrong. A kiss was something your granny gave you, something innocent and calm that made you slightly sleepy. This was a different beast altogether, like a flash fire rolling through and consuming everything in its path, and before she realized what she was doing, Tasha had wholeheartedly joined in.

Maxwell Turner wasn’t only kissing her, he had his body so tight against hers there was no doubt remaining that various parts of his anatomy had increased in girth, and she wasn’t talking about his pecs anymore. His tongue swept into her mouth, the lingering hint of coffee vanishing as her taste buds switched to take him in. Clean, warm, and oh my God, the boy could kiss. Heat flushed from her core outward, her breasts grew hot and heavy, and damn if she remembered why she’d turned him away all these years. Strong fingers curled around her neck as he deepened their contact. She responded, her tongue brushing his, lips and teeth getting into the act. She grabbed his shoulders for support, digging into the firm muscles under her fingertips. He ate greedily at her mouth until her head spun, senses shifting to overload.

He snuck a hand around her torso, fingers spread wide as he slid under her shirt to caress the bare skin of her lower back. Warm palm in full contact with her body, he pulled her even tighter against his groin, and his rigid erection dug into her belly. Her breasts were crushed between them, nipples tight and aching. Max fastened onto her tongue and sucked it into his mouth, a flash of ecstasy shooting through her core and setting her on fire. How long had it been since she’d felt like this from simply kissing? She scraped her fingernails down his back and he dragged his lips from hers, groaning loudly. Air rushed back into her lungs, and she shoved her fingers into his back pockets and yanked him forward. The leg between hers nudged her knees farther apart before sliding closer to connect with her sex.

His assault on her senses continued as he worked his way along her jaw to press kisses and nips to the tender skin below her ear. The need inside escalated to the point she was ready to peel off her clothes and go for it right there. She was empty, and aching. Their combined breathing carried loud on the air, echoing in the hollow spaces of the unfinished room.

Max returned to her lips, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the rocking motion of his hips, and she whimpered. It was too much and not nearly enough. He released his grip on her hair and cupped her ass instead, dragging her up his body until she rode the solid ridge of his erection. Tingling, flashes of heat, pleasure—all of it washed over her in waves and she clutched him tighter. Good Lord, she was going to climax like this, rubbing him like a cat.

He lifted her left leg higher and looped her knee over his elbow, forcing her back hard to the wall. Spread wide open, she was defenseless as he ground against her, the seam line of her jeans making contact with her clit through the thin layer of her thong and she panted hard. So close.
A future with the woman of his dreams is within his grasp...if the past will stay that way.

Long Time Gone
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Konigsburg, Texas, Book 4

Erik Toleffson wasn’t looking to become Chief of Police. He’s got enough trouble trying to rebuild his relationship with his three brothers who, until just recently, ran the other way when he approached. He’s not the bully they grew up with, but bad memories are tough to overcome.

Morgan Barrett is as worn out as a vat full of crushed grape skins. She never planned to run Cedar Creek Winery, but there’s no one else to shoulder the load as her father recovers from an injury. All she needs is a little sleep. Just a five-minute nap in the booth at the Dew Drop Inn—if that guy across the bar would stop staring at her as if putting her head down on the table is a crime.

After Morgan yawns in Erik’s face, there’s nowhere to go but up. With time, though, their relationship warms like a perfectly blended Bordeaux. Until the shady mayor digs into Erik’s past and dredges up information that could drive a permanent wedge between him and his brothers—and sour any chance of a future with Morgan.

Warning: Contains hot sex with mango sherbet, crooked politicians, yuppy bikers, Bored Ducks, and a Maine Coon Cat with attitude.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Long Time Gone:

Technically, he was still on duty, assuming that the call forward worked on his cell, of course. A new way to get around not having enough people for night duty since it was Peavey’s day off. “I just wanted to check on you. To tell you the truth, I didn’t expect you to be awake.”

He’d hoped she would be, though. Bingo.

Morgan walked behind the bar and opened the refrigerator. “Water? Soda? Fruit salad? I’ve got a little of everything.”

“Soda. Thanks.”

He watched her reach into the refrigerator. She had on jeans and a white tank top that showed a lot of her chest and did interesting things to his solar plexus. When she turned to set the can down in front of him, he saw the clear outline of her nipples against the white ribbing.

No bra. His lungs contracted. Down boy!

“Actually, I slept most of the afternoon.” She pushed a hand through her hair, sending short curls tumbling around her ears.

The shadowy disks of her nipples peaked against the thin cotton. He wondered if the feeling in his chest was heart palpitations.

“So now I’m wide awake.” She grinned in his general direction.

He tried to remember what she was talking about. Oh yeah, sleeping.

He pulled up a bar stool on the other side of the counter. Better than standing there with his pulse thundering in his ears. “Nice place. How long has it been open?”

“The winery? Dad started off in a Quonset hut around 1994. He and Ciro finished this building a few years ago.”

She looked up at the vaulted ceiling over her head, smiling. “I’ve always liked it.”

“How long have you lived here?”

Her smile faded slightly. “I moved in after my dad got hurt. Before that I just came down on weekends. But I needed to be on-site so I could help Ciro.”

“Does your mom come down to help you out sometimes?”

Her smile disappeared entirely. “My mom doesn’t like wine.”

“Must have made for interesting dinner conversation.” He picked up his soda.

“Oh, it did that.” Her lips stayed flat. “Like I told you, my folks are separated. Not legally, but practically.”

“Where do they live?”

“Austin. My mom’s there full-time. My dad was there in a rehab facility, getting his leg back in shape. My mom let him move back in when they released him, so maybe some good came out of the whole wretched mess. Maybe they’ll work out their differences. What about your folks?”

Erik frowned, not sure what she was asking. “They’re still in Iowa.”

“Are they thinking of moving down since all of you are here?”

“They threaten to every once in a while. We might be able to lure them down for the winter, but my mom’s not
“Big on heat.”

A moment of silence stretched between them. He tried to think of something to fill it. “Remembered anything else about what happened on the hill?”

She gave him a dry smile. “No. In fact, I’m looking forward to forgetting the whole thing.”

Not as great a smile as before, but he’d take what he could get. He mentally told his nether regions to cool it. “I’ll try to get back up there tomorrow to see if I can find the tracks you talked about.”

“Good idea. At least I’ll know I didn’t imagine them.” She leaned on the counter next to him, letting the scoop neck of her tank slide down a little more. “So what were you doing up on that ridge this afternoon when you so kindly saved my butt?”

Erik gave up trying to calm his unruly body. As long as she was leaning against the counter like that it was a lost cause. “I was looking at the stock tank. Rancher who owns the land had some sick goats. Claimed it was because somebody poisoned his tank. We need to have the water tested.”

Her head snapped up. “Oh shit.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t think the situation was good, but I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“It is if we’re thinking of planting a vineyard there.” Morgan rubbed her hand across her forehead. She looked like her headache was back. “Ciro is going to freak. And I told him I’d pitch the vineyard to Dad.”

“Take it easy. We don’t know what’s wrong up there yet. The water could be bad, but it could just be something that was dumped in the stock tank. Particularly since somebody also pushed you down that hill.”

He put his hand on her shoulder, reassuringly. At least he thought it was reassuring. A moment later, he wasn’t so sure. His hand rested on smooth bare skin, silky and warm. He smelled lavender and rose and hints of wine. And she was watching him with those eyes—rich, dark brown, like chocolate kisses.

All of a sudden, he felt a little dizzy. He leaned forward, almost without thinking. She rose slightly to meet him. Her lips were soft, warm. He inhaled her sigh, tasting wine, then angled his mouth against hers. Her mouth opened beneath his lips, but he wasn’t going to do anything about it. This was just a quick kiss, an intro as it were. Nothing serious yet.

And then it was.

Morgan’s mouth opened wider and his tongue plunged deep, tasting, sensing. Warmth and smooth deep wetness. Without thinking, he raised his hand to her breast and felt the hard pebble of her nipple against his palm. Heat flashed again at his groin.

Somewhere his brain went on red alert. *Danger, danger, Will Robinson.* His body surged right ahead, hardening almost instantly. The warm weight of her breast filled one hand and he rubbed his palm against the other, her faint moan raising prickles on his scalp.

She held her hands at the sides of his chest, then smoothed them around his body, pulling herself tight against him. Erik heard a melodic chirping and wondered if it was him or her.

Until he realized it was his cell phone.

He stepped back, eyes closed, trying to catch his breath. His face was damp with sweat. “Sorry,” he whispered, clicking open the cell with one hand.

A routine traffic call, fender bender on Highway 16. But by then he knew he had to go anyway. He turned back to her, tucking his cell in his pocket, trying not to think about what had just happened.

And what had almost happened.

Her eyes were huge, her mouth a thin line. “I didn’t…” she stuttered, then stopped.

“I’m sorry about the call,” he said quietly. “I’m not sorry about the kiss. Not hardly.”

She still watched him, as if she were trying to make up her mind about something. Then the corners of her mouth edged up, slowly. “Drive carefully.”

“I will.” He smiled back at her, breathing again. “Sleep well.”

“I will.”

Erik headed for his truck, listening to the voice screaming in his head. *What was that? What the hell was that? You’ve got more than enough on your plate, Toleffson. You’ve got two months to prove yourself. Keep your mind on your freakin’ job. You’re supposed to be in control here, remember?*

No question. He was definitely going to concentrate on his job and nothing else. He was going to make this work. Definitely. But the smell of lavender and roses and dry white wine lingered in his head all the way back to town.
The Reluctant Nude

Meg Maguire

Chipping away at her resistance, one touch at a time…

Fallon Frost’s late foster mother had done so much to heal the wounds of her damaged childhood. So when a lecherous developer plans to bulldoze her old home to make room for a strip mall, the practical, ordered life Fallon has built for herself is threatened.

Then he makes a twisted proposal. He’ll leave the land alone if she poses nude for a sculpture that’ll end up in his collection. Seeing no other choice, she heads for Nova Scotia—only to find something totally unexpected. A sexy, hot-blooded, infuriating sculptor.

Guarded, sexually detached Fallon is a challenge Max Emery can’t wait to tackle. Yet with each tap of his chisel, he uncovers a woman who rekindles a dream he thought lost. Home, family…love. And the closer he gets to her core, the harder it becomes to accept that he’s carving her naked body for another man’s eyes.

As progress on the sculpture almost grinds to a halt, their fragile fantasy world collapses under the weight of reality. Threatening Fallon’s one chance to save her foster mother’s land…and any chance she and Max have to find love.
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