

I'm squeezing more paint onto my palette when the three sharp raps cut through the silence of my cabin. The sudden sound startles me out of my creative stupor. I flinch and look toward the door, losing hold of the tube of paint in the process. It collides with the floor with an audible slap, spraying the wood with droplets of deep red.

"Coming!" I bark, letting all my frustration bleed into my voice, because goddammit, I moved here to get away from random interruptions like this.

Anger roars through me, my breath stilted and chest heaving as I stalk toward the door, but just before I grab the handle, I see a post-it note stuck to the frame. "Gallery pick-up," it reads, in my chicken-scratch handwriting.

That's when I remember an email from the gallery owner reminding me that her assistant is coming today to pick up a few of my pieces for an upcoming show.

Which means that if I open the door looking like a seething grizzly, that assistant is going to run screaming in the opposite direction.

It takes three deep breaths before the frustration ebbs enough for me to paste on what I'm hoping is a friendly smile and yank open the door.

But on my doorstep is no mere gallery assistant. She's a fucking goddess.

It's her curves that hit me first. Round cheeks, luscious breasts, an ass that begs to be cupped and squeezed. She's a Rubenesque painting in the flesh.

I clock every perfect inch of her form. I'm rock hard by the time my eyes finally sweep up to her face, but when I meet her eyes, I nearly break my zipper. Because in those ocean blue irises, I see lust, desire, need. The same driving forces ridding my mind of rhyme or reason and filling it instead with sin-soaked fantasy. She feels them, too. Instant lust.

It's as she takes her turn to once-over me that I remember that I'm shirtless, clad only in a pair of loose ripped jeans, covered in paint and charcoal, that sit just above my cock.

I'm expecting a reaction of fear—intimidation, even—as she takes me in. I'm at least a head and a half taller than her 5'5 frame, and I must look like a hairy hermit with my unkempt beard and bun. But what I get instead is the sight of her tongue peeking out of her lips, which are curved in a wicked smile.

I'm momentarily distracted by a flash of silver behind her. A compact car sits at the edge of my property. Hers, most likely. My mind slowly returns to the land of the living, not the lustful, and I remember that she drove three hours to get here. I offer her a cup of something hot and a chance to sit before I hand over the paintings.

She accepts with an enthusiastic nod. "I could definitely use a cup of tea. English breakfast, if you have it. And milk and honey?"

“Make yourself comfortable on the couch and I’ll bring it over,” I say over my shoulder as I walk toward the kitchen.

By the time the tea has brewed, Kara has covered herself with a blanket and is curled into the arm of my couch. Her blonde hair looks like spun gold in the afternoon light slanting through the windows.

When I hand her the mug, her fingers overlap with mine. The touch is seconds-long, but when I sit down, I can still feel the heat of skin on mine, seared into my flesh like a burn.

“You’re a hard man to get to, you know that?” Kara says as she lifts the mug to her lips. I watch them wrap around the rim and wish it wasn’t the mug they were enveloping, but my cock. Her pretty little mouth would hardly fit around my shaft, but god would I love to see it full of my length.

“That’s purposeful. I have everything I need here. I grow most of my own food, use wood to heat the place, solar panels for electricity. It suits me.”

“I like getting out in nature, but I could never live off the grid like this. I can’t imagine living without a bodega on the corner and easy access to pizza.”

“And the gallery? There aren’t too many of those out here,” I say, spreading my legs and leaning into the cushions.

“Exactly. It means I get to meet artists like you,” she says, gently nudging me with her foot.

“How long have you worked there?”

“Five years. I’m hoping I’ll be promoted to Marketing Director soon, and then I keep moving up the ladder until I have enough experience to open my own gallery.”

“You’ll do it,” I say, squeezing her foot. She stretches out her other leg and tucks it under my thigh.

“How do you know?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I can tell. Your ambition. Your love of art. It’s obvious,” I say with a shrug.

“It’s a life-long love. Started the first time I went to the National Gallery for a field trip. I can’t draw or paint, but—”

“You don’t need skill to love art. You need passion.”

“Exactly. You get it,” she says, shifting so her calves brush the tops of my thighs.

Our tea gets cold as we talk, the minutes turning into hours. Kara tells me about the kind of gallery she’d like to run, the artists she dreams of representing. We discuss our mutual

hatred for pointillism, the European galleries we'd love to visit. With every new detail, I become more certain of one thing: this woman isn't just someone I want in my bed. I want her as my wife.

Kissing her feels like a foregone conclusion, fated, but even as our bodies gradually merge on the couch, her feet in my lap, my hands on her legs, I wonder: Are we too different, our lifestyles too opposite? She's a city gallery assistant in her twenties; I'm a reclusive painter in my 40's. Would a relationship even work?

But I'll never know if I don't try.

"Something on your mind?" Kara asks, taking my chin between her thumb and pointer finger.

"Yeah, there is," I rasp, grabbing her hips to lift her onto my lap. She bites her lip as I slip my fingers through her hair to cradle her head.

When I bring her lips to mine, doubts and worries fall away. All I know is the satin of her lips, the slide of her tongue, the certainty that's she's it. She's the one.