



*He wants her to find
Happiness, but she might
be settling for the next
best thing.*



J. H. WOLF

ANY *Just*
CAUSE

ANY JUST CAUSE

BY

J. H. WOLF

www.johennywolf.org

Copyright © 2015 Jo Henny Wolf

First published July 24, 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this book, either text or image may be used for any purpose. Therefore, reproduction, modification, storage in a retrieval system or retransmission, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise, for reasons other than personal use, is strictly prohibited without prior written permission.

CONTENT

1	5
2	8
3	15
4	23
5	31
6	34

He should have said no. It's not that difficult to say no, two letters, a single syllable, and he says it often enough. *No, you're not getting a reprieve. No, I'm not interested in a deal. No, I don't want to be your best man.* That's what he should have said.

What he said, though, wasn't that. *Yes, of course I'll be best man.*

Idiot.

Rourke Monroe is hauled out of his sulking when Adam clinks a glass against his and claps him hard between the shoulder blades. He only just manages not to spill his drink.

"One more week as a free man. One more week, Rourke." He downs his drink in one single gulp.

Rourke frowns into his own amber-colored drink and wonders if Adam is planning on giving himself liquid courage, and holding it up till the wedding day. "You're making a mistake," he says. Not for the first time.

"Bah." Adam rolls his eyes and gestures for a refill. It's his third, while Rourke still holds on to his first and wishes to be as far away from his friend and this wedding as possible. Siberia sounds like a wonderful place to be at this time of the year, and maybe he should look for a flight and disappear for a year or two, or ten, depending on how long it takes him to come to terms with this union.

"You could try to be a good friend and best man for once and be happy for me. You don't have to like my wife, but it would be really nice if you'd manage to behave until this wedding is over." For the first time, there's something like impatience in Adam's voice, and he scowls. His forehead doesn't lend itself easily to creases that stem from ire rather than sarcasm, and it's a sign of how strung out that particular thread of their discussion already is that he now loses his good humor.

"I just don't get why you have to marry her." Rourke can't let it go, and he gulps down his drink, hoping the sting of it keeps him from saying more.

"It's the next logical step. I have the money, the house, now it's time for the wife and the kids."

"You could get yourself a trophy wife with a better rack."

"Eve isn't a trophy wife. Now shut up or you'll be best man with a black eye."

Rourke doesn't say another word, even though there's so much he'd like to say, so much pushing up inside his throat and tasting bitter on his tongue. How did he end up as Adam's best man in the first place, for one, when it's never been a secret that he disapproves of this marriage? Or, to start questioning his taste to begin with, how did he end up being friends with the plastic surgeon who first broke his nose in an accident and then nearly cut it off when he tried to fix it? He isn't that desperate for friends, he tells himself, and if he ruins this, he can live a solitary life without anyone to talk to just as easily, and without worrying that his crooked nose might offend anyone.

"Alright. I won't say another word," he promises, knowing it's a lie. But Adam will probably have forgotten about it before the night is over.

By the time he delivers him at his doorstep, Adam is well and truly drunk, and Rourke gets a scathing look from the bride to be as she places the arm of her fiancé around her shoulder to help him inside. She's so small that she can hardly keep him upright, and Adam hunches over her like a walking corpse, no longer in control of his limbs. She would fit perfectly against Rourke's body, but he doesn't allow himself to dwell on that thought, instead wondering if that one drink he had maybe was too much after all.

"Place him in the shower and rinse him in cold water, and he should be fine," he says, thinking that the shock of ice cold water is exactly what Adam deserves. Maybe it will bring him to his senses.

"He thinks your rack's unsatis... fucktory..." Adam slurs, and Eve gives them a look that could have saved Pompeii by freezing Mount Vesuvius.

"I said you could do better," he states, even though it won't make it any better.

"You're wrong." That's all she says, voice cold and hard, and Rourke knows she's right.

"Exactly what I said, honey bunny. You're fucktastic!"

Rourke is almost glad he isn't at the receiving end of her look this time.

Adam snores and sounds like he's cutting down an ancient oak tree by the time Eve is finished with her evening routine of applying fifteen different lotions meant to make her look like the most beautiful and happy bride in the world. She would need magic to achieve that.

She has to shove his leg from her side of the bed, and he grunts in his sleep. It's only natural for a bachelor to get drunk before the wedding, so she shouldn't be as irritated as she is. It's only a week that's left of his freedom, as he calls it, another word Eve has added to her list of offensive terms. Of course he doesn't know she has such a list. And she knows better than to share it, for her list holds words that are not offensive by meaning as much as by intonation. *You* will be happy as a wife, for a woman it's *not the same* as for a man... *You* won't lose anything, you'll only gain *security* and *comfort*. And *happiness*.

Only that her definition of happiness differs from everyone else's definition. She loves Adam, but when they're married, she has to sit him down and have a serious talk about respect.

Monroe isn't helping. She shies away from calling Adam's best man Rourke (another word to add to her list, for different reasons). He's not *her* friend, so calling him by his given name is inappropriate. Daring and too intimate. And what a mouthful that name is. It sounds like the croak of a crow, as unpleasant as the man himself.

"He's my friend, and he's just worried for my happiness," Adam says whenever Eve dares to feel offended by his friend. And there's that word again, *happiness*, with a different connotation this time. For Adam, happiness is about him. For her, happiness is about everybody else.

She tries to fold herself into the small space Adam leaves unoccupied in their bed, and waits for sleep to come and take her away for a spell. But his snores gnaw away at her, until she wants to scream, and so she gets up again and moves to the couch downstairs. Without her blanket, because that is stuck under Adam's leg. It could be just as well stuck under the fallen trunk of a tree, equally impossible to move for Eve.

The sounds downstairs are unfamiliar, but at least they're quieter. Sleep is still hard to come by. Eve tells herself all the positive reasons why she's excited, tells herself that it's the joy and happiness that have her stomach fluttering and her skin cold. She will be happy. Her father will be happy, Adam will be happy, and she will be happy, because they are happy. Only Monroe will be unhappy, but maybe that will make her happy, too.

Daddy will stop worrying, and start concentrating on his own life. And Eve will be content. Why should she have said no when Adam proposed, when everything was going so perfectly? They've been together forever, and not once did they fight. Maybe they would have, if Eve would give in to that mad urge to say no, once in a while, but harmony is so much more important than Eve getting her way. And her dreams are silly, anyway. She knows that. She wouldn't make it on her own. So, marrying means security, and it means she'll have the time and the luxury of a comfortable life to pursue her dreams. She has to be grateful for that.

She will put on a smile in the morning, and no one will ever notice that it's only a mask.

The time left till the wedding races by, and Eve slips more and more into panic mode, while her father hardly ever loses the broad smile on his face.

Adam and Eve have the organizing neatly split between the two of them and their respective best man and maid of honor, so neatly that Adam even calculated the time the tasks on their checklist were likely to consume and assigned each of them the same amount of hours. Eve and Heidi, the maid of honor, spend days with addressing invitations, and in the weeks they spend on testing bakeries and their cakes, Eve gains at least 3 pounds. She wouldn't have noticed, but Adam's eyes are sharp, and he adores her; he wants her to fit into her wedding dress.

"Pfff, as long as your dress fits, he can suck it," Heidi says, while Eve gets tucked and pinned into said dress and tries desperately not to breathe. She fails, and when she gasps and sucks in air, the seamstress clicks her tongue and pricks her left boob. She doesn't have much in the boob-department, but even that little has to be molded and taped into the dress. Heidi tilts her head and watches the process with a heavy-lidded

smile. Eve can't decide if it's sadism or envy glowing in that smirk, but her friend doesn't have much reason for the latter, so it's probably the first.

"He has no problem with my looks, Heidi. He's just worried and wants me to feel comfortable with myself."

"You really should write books, sweetie. You have a talent for stories."

The seamstress takes the last needle from between her lips and drives it home somewhere between Eve's fourth and fifth rib. "Have you already settled on a corset?" she asks.

Eve can't help it, she blushes, because a corset, as beautiful as it is (and as helpful in keeping everything in place), is also a very sensuous thing. Adam is going to see her in it, and she always feels a little dirty when he makes her wear lingerie for his pleasure. The dress is for the bride, but the undergarments are for the groom, and Eve knows her duty. Still, her chosen corset is rather plain, made of smooth satin without frippery. All it has to do is keep her inside the dress. She nods, sucking her stomach in once more.

"You look beautiful," Heidi says, and Eve almost believes it. Her reflection in the floor-length mirror looks a bit like a pre-raphaelite Ophelia, a body in the water, pale apart from the red blotches on her throat and face. Heidi's attention is already somewhere else again. She flips through Eve's planner and curls her lips. "We're choosing the band this weekend."

Eve sighs. Another date to get through. She's glad that Heidi will be there and she doesn't have to sit through an evening with Monroe and Adam alone.

She's even more relieved when Heidi brings a bottle of champagne to the date. Adam has set up his laptop with the projector and a screen (because he likes going big, which is more important than having a crisp image or a clear sound), and they flock on the couch to watch the recordings of wedding bands and compare impressions. Only Monroe sits by himself in a chair. Eve sits as far away from him as possible, with Heidi between her and Adam, and while Heidi and Adam cheer and joke and Monroe sneers and tears bands apart, Eve quietly sips her champagne and wishes she wouldn't have to listen to his raspy voice. The tone of it settles in the pit of

her stomach where it pulses like a flame. Or maybe it's the champagne licking her insides, nipping at her core and slithering through her veins.

Monroe doesn't hide his grudge over being there. "I don't have to like the band," he says.

Eve empties her glass of champagne in one go. If you would believe him, he doesn't have to like anything.

"You don't have to like me either, yet you inexplicably do, so do me a favor and play nice now," Adam says, and even though Eve doesn't look at Monroe, she can hear the look on his face in the sound of his voice. Lips pinched, eyebrows raised, forehead creased.

"What makes you think I like you?"

"The fact that you're constantly trying to keep me from making a mistake."

It isn't necessary to open that same old vein again, and Eve doesn't need a reminder that Adam's best man is so opposed to this wedding that he hardly manages to look at her, the bone of contention. It's Heidi who saves her from saying anything.

"Boys, stop squabbling and listen to these guys. I really like them." She points at the screen, and there's the look of a hungry wolf in her eyes as she fixes her gaze on the singer.

"They're nice, yeah," Adam agrees.

Eve doesn't particularly like this band, but Adam seems intrigued. Just like Heidi. She seems short of licking the screen.

"I don't know. I don't pay a band so you can shag the lead singer."

Heidi sighs and leans back, and Eve thinks that it's maybe an accident that her eyes meet Adam's over her friend's chest. She attempts a smile, but it falters.

"Technically, I'm paying for the band. But yeah, I think we can find a better one."

When he leans back, Eve catches a look from Monroe, who watched their exchange far too interested. Of course, every sign of disagreement is only fuel to his

argument, so she swallows the inarticulate rebellion sitting inside her chest. Technically, Adam agreed with her, but Eve can't shake the feeling that it's not for her sake that he rejects this particular band.

"I'll fetch some more champagne," she murmurs, and she stares at the floor and fights the nausea when she rushes from the room. She needs a moment alone to compose herself, but as she bends over the sink in the kitchen and counts deep breaths, someone else enters behind her.

"You need to learn to stand up for yourself."

Eve clenches her hands around the edge of the sink and takes another deep breath before she turns around. Monroe stands in the door and watches her with a frown that makes her feel even smaller.

"And who are you to determine what I need to learn or to do? Are you such an expert on relationships that you know exactly that this one is doomed?"

Monroe takes a step into the room, and Eve leans back, even though there's still a whole room between them.

"I didn't say anything of the sort. But tell me, is Adam paying this whole wedding alone?"

"No. Of course not. All my savings go into this wedding, too." She feels stupid for even engaging in this talk. It's all his voice, she's sure, so soft, like a velvety blanket wrapping her up.

"Ah. That's what I thought. Then why do you let him act like a prick and disregard your share in all this? Do you really want to start this marriage on such an imbalance?"

Eve bites her lip. He doesn't say anything she hasn't told herself a hundred times and more, but coming from him, it appears even more blatant and wrong. Adam takes such care that every bill is split exactly by half, that all tasks are divided equally, and yet he pretends to pay and do the lion's share of it all. And Eve keeps quiet to secure the harmony.

"He just likes to feel generous and needed," she says, but it sounds weak and pitiful. She wishes for Monroe to leave her alone, but that's probably too much to wish for.

"And do you like to feel small and dependent?"

Something flares up inside her, and Eve recognizes it as rage. She can't contain it any longer, it's like a wave that grabs her and throws her forward. "And what do you care? You're like a broken record, all you say is that this wedding is a mistake. It's time you realize that you can't save your friend. He doesn't want to be saved. So instead, you try to make me doubt it, you try to chase me away. Well, I got news for you: It's not working."

She's crossed the distance between them, and she ends up poking his chest, emphasizing every word. He's stunned by it, she can see it in his blown pupils and his flared nostrils, and in the way he licks his lips and swallows heavily. So stunned that he doesn't even answer her allegation and just stares at her. Eve stands taller, and the heat cursing through her seems to vaporize around her. For the first time this evening, she breathes freely, taking in so much oxygen with each breath that the fire inside her flares up even higher. She can hear the shuddering breath he takes over her own panting, and she feels his heart beat hard against her fingertips, like a drum before battle.

"Hey, Eve, where's that champagne you promised?"

Eve flinches, almost leaps away from Monroe when Heidi comes into the kitchen. It's like a switch is flipped and the tension is washed out of her. She has no recollection of the champagne Heidi's asking for, and as she stares blankly at her friend, Heidi looks from Eve to Monroe with her eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Am I missing something here?"

"Not at all. I was just hoping for something stronger than champagne," Monroe says, with that crook of disdain at the corner of his mouth that always speaks of his suffering when he has to be around Eve.

"I can offer a baseball bat," Eve growls, and she almost misses the flash of amusement fluttering across his face when she turns away. It's a true grin, however short, and Eve's stomach contracts with a soundless giggle of her own.

"Scotch will do," he says, and his voice rumbles and leaves gooseflesh at the nape of her neck.

"Well, when the two of you decide to join us again, I think we found a band that you'll love, sweetie." Heidi spots the champagne on the kitchen isle and makes off with it, and Eve follows her without another look at Monroe.

Rourke's ready to admit that he screwed up this one. The tux in his hand is not the conservatively black one he thought he ordered, but a baby blue one, with adventurous pink piping along the seams. He wonders how that happened. How could a simple order get messed up so thoroughly?

He zips the clothing bag closed and takes a look at his watch. If he drives back to town quickly, he can return the tux - because certainly, there's been a simple mix-up - and be back before the last rehearsal. But he has to cross the entrance hall of the mansion Adam rented for the Wedding weekend, and of course he has to run into the bride there.

She's pale, and fussing over an arrangement of flowers that clash unpleasantly with her blue dress and her green eyes, and she's looking more like someone waiting in a hospital for bad news than like someone excited for their wedding. He wants to pass by her, without a word, as long as she hasn't seen him (or the tux he's trying to hide by carrying the clothing bag tossed over his shoulder like a body he needs to disappear), but something - maybe the sound of his shoes on the tiled floor or the rustle of the plastic bag - makes her look up, and their eyes meet over the hideous bouquet.

"Orange is a peculiar choice for the flower arrangements," he says, just to say something, but it's exactly the wrong thing. Her eyes start gleaming, and he measures the distance from where he's standing to the door, eager to escape before the floodgates open.

"It's not what I've chosen," she states, flatly. It's the tonelessness of her voice that betrays how much effort it costs her to appear calm.

"So who made that terrible decision?"

"There's been a mistake."

"Oh my. It's almost as if the universe conspires to tell you that this wedding is a mistake." It's out before he can stop himself, before he remembers that he doesn't want her to know about the tuxedo mix-up.

She narrows her eyes, blinks, and he's sure she's forcing back tears. He wishes he had just kept walking.

"There's a reefer full of orange flower arrangements and no time to rectify that. It would be really nice if you wouldn't use this catastrophe to tear me down some more just because you hate me and hate that Adam is going to marry me." Red spots bloom on her cheeks and her chest, and she's pointing the bouquet at him like a gun, aimed to kill. He takes a step back to give her room.

He wants to say "I don't hate you", but she's so tense and brittle that he fears any word might break her. And it doesn't really make a difference, does it? So he shrugs, and starts for the door. It's then, when he turns his back to her, that she spots the tux in its clear plastic bag. She gasps, and Monroe's face curls up in itself over his own stupidity.

"What is that?" she asks, voice rising in panic.

"It's the tux for the singer, I suppose." The lie goes smoothly over his lips as he turns back, but it's obvious she doesn't believe him.

"And why do you have it?"

"That's an excellent question, dear. I suppose there's been a mix-up..."

She pales, and for a moment he thinks she's going to faint. He lets go of the clothing bag so he can grasp her arm and keep her from crumpling to the floor. Her naked arm is clammy beneath his touch, fragile in his grip, and his palm prickles and stings as if he grabbed the loose end of an electric wire.

She looks at his hand like it's something slimy and repulsive, and yanks her arm away. If only he had kept walking.

"Do you want to ruin my wedding so badly?" she rasps, her voice sounding like a pebble being rubbed against a cheese grater. Utterly defeated.

"Don't be ridiculous. Everything will be fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to drive to town and get the right tux before the rehearsal." He does his best not to look at her when he bends down to pick up the blue tux again. She simply watches him,

and her look alone kindles the shame inside him. His cheeks burn with the intensity of it.

When he's finally behind the wheel of his car, blue tux stuffed safely into the back, he needs a moment to compose himself. He lets his hands hover above the wheel without touching it, for he still feels the touch of her skin beneath his, like a tingle seeping from his palm into his bones, and he forces himself not to make a fist in an useless attempt to prolong the feeling.

He makes it back just in time for the rehearsal at the small chapel in the woods behind the mansion. The woods are an oddly appropriate place to get married to a pixie human, especially this time of the year, when the green is still fresh and the plum trees blossom, and Rourke tries not to think too hard about how he would like a wedding to Eve Carter to be.

The sky is heavy with clouds and it's darker than it should be when he enters the chapel, but not as dark as the look of the bride-to-be when she sees him.

"Finally. We said seven, not half past!"

Adam reaches out and pats her arm, but it does little to dispel her fury. She yanks her arm away. Rourke's stomach contracts, and bile rises in his throat.

"So eager," he says, but he swallows the rest, and it weighs him down like lead.

"It's just the rehearsal, honey bunny." Adam is amazingly oblivious to his bride's distress, and Rourke wishes he could just grab his friend and shake him. Instead, he positions himself behind the groom and watches in silence while the minister talks the pair through the ceremony. Heidi stands at Eve's side, cheeks flushed and tears already in her eyes. Rourke does his best not to look at Eve, and he's so far away in his thoughts that he misses the moment when he's supposed to give Adam the ring.

The ring that is sitting on the night stand in his room up in the mansion.

Four pair of eyes are focused on him, and the silence grows deafening when he springs into motion and pats his pockets in the - fruitless - search for the ring that isn't there. At last, he fumbles his own, heavy ring from his finger - the ring that belonged to his grandfather and was given to him by his mother - and gives it to Adam, and his cheeks burn like black slate in the sun. He mumbles an apology, but Eve's hand is shaking when Adam slides the ring over her finger, and she's white as chalk.

She breaks after the minister tells them "Now you kiss" and Adam presses a kiss to her colorless lips.

"Please tell me that this wasn't some bad joke and you actually have the ring." She's rounded Adam and plants herself in front of Rourke, and even in the soft light from a single lamp, he can see a vein throb at her throat. Her eyes gleam brightly, and her voice is brittle.

"Of course I have it. There's no need to worry..."

"Isn't there? From the first moment on, you tried to sabotage this wedding!" She takes another step towards him, and Adam fidgets at her side.

"Eve..."

She ignores Adam. "Are you going to speak up tomorrow and protest against this union?"

Rourke takes a step back. "Of course not, no. And I did nothing to sabotage your wedding!"

"No? What about the tux? What about the flowers, was that your doing, too?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I had nothing to do with the flowers, and the tux was an accident."

"Eve, come on, I told you he's just worried. Calm down." Adam reaches for her arm, but she flinches away. She's breathing hard, and Rourke wishes he knew what to say. He doubts that anything would make it better, though. Still, he has to try, so he reaches for her, a weak attempt to show his remorse by offering a comforting touch. She slaps his hand away and steps back, almost stumbles.

"I need some fresh air," she says. "I can't breathe."

They all watch her as she storms off. Rourke knows that it's all his fault, that his ring on her finger was too much, but Adam doesn't understand a thing.

"Man, I have no idea what's wrong with her, I'm sorry."

Rourke just shakes his head. "I'm going to go after her and apologize. And maybe get back my ring."

"Yeah, you really screwed up." It's the first thing Heidi says, and she puts a hand on Adam's arm and holds him back when he moves to go with Rourke.

The stars and the moon are still veiled, and Rourke hopes the weather is going to clear up by tomorrow. As much as he detests this wedding, he wants Eve to have exactly the day she hopes for. It occurs to him that he should hope for Adam to have a day like he wishes for, since Adam is where his loyalty should lie, but his mood gets as dark as the sky when he pictures Adam sliding a ring on Eve's finger and peeling her out of her wedding dress.

Eve follows the path leading into the woods ahead of him, and he just sees her pale form getting swallowed by the darkness as she disappears between the trees. He follows her slowly, feeling blind between the shadows of the trees. His eyes need some time to get used to the night, and Eve is quickly out of reach. He hopes that she keeps following the path (and that the path doesn't lead to some grisly ravine) so he'll catch up eventually. But it feels like forever until he catches a glimpse of her in the distance. The wind picks up, and when he calls her name, the sound gets carried from his lips and scattered between the trees, never reaching her. It's only when she pauses, hesitating on a crossing of paths, that he gets closer and she finally hears his calls.

"Eve! Wait, please."

She does, but when he comes closer, he sees that her face is flushed and her cheeks are stained with tears.

"What?" she snaps, and Rourke halts a few steps away from her.

"I want to apologize. I didn't want to create additional stress..."

"But you did." She turns, and Rourke takes a quick step closer to keep her from leaving.

"Also... you still have my ring..." He's ashamed for this weak and ugly attempt at holding her back, and he knows how he must sound.

She presses her lips together and pulls the ring from her finger. It hits him hard to the chest when she throws it, so hard it's going to leave a bruise, and Rourke is too shocked to catch it when it bounces off his chest and falls to the ground.

"There's your ring. Anything else?"

"There's no need to be so resentful," he says. It's less that he thinks she doesn't have a reason - because she does - and more because his ribs crack a little each time she shows her distaste for him. He hasn't hardened himself enough to it yet, and a small part of him hopes for something different.

"So it's okay for you to behave like a grumpy five year old whenever you have to do something for me, but it's not okay for me to be pissed about it?"

"I'm not behaving like a five year old..."

She cuts him off. "You're right. Even a five year old is behaving more mature than you do!"

He wants to protest, but his words are drowned out by earsplitting thunder. Eve flinches and nearly knocks him off his feet when she hops closer.

"Fuck." Somehow she worms her way into his arms and presses to his chest, and her heart beats as fast and hard as the pitter patter of raindrops that start to hit the leaves above, and the ground - and them.

"Are you alright?" he asks, but he can't bring himself to let go of her. She's too warm and fits too perfectly into his embrace.

"Just a tiny bit scared of thunder storms."

He has to strain his ears to hear her whispered response.

"Well, I'd invite you to my cabin, which is probably closer than the mansion, but you have to crawl through the dirt for me first and find that ring." He sounds presumptuous, and he knows it, but he also knows that he will never get his ring back if they leave without it, and it means too much to him to just let it go.

Eve finally leaves his arms and drops to her knees, digging through the leaf-covered ground. Nothing like bad weather to motivate her, apparently. Rourke doesn't join her, too caught up in the sight of her, bare knees and hands covered in mud and loose strands of hair plastered to her face by the rain that grows heavier by the minute, a grey form in the dark. He feels like the big, bad wolf watching Little Red Riding Hood, ready to devour her.

"Are you not going to help me?" she asks, sinking back to her heels, and Rourke is grateful for the dark, gracefully covering up the things the sight of her on her knees does to him.

"No."

"You vile ba..."

"Careful, dear. I could decide not to share my cabin with you after all. Also, I twisted my ankle following you, and getting down into the dirt would take me more time than it'll take you to find the ring *you* lost."

His words - his lie, really, for his ankle is fine - are followed by another thunder, and Eve gives up protesting and searches the ground with her hands. Finally, she yells "Hah!" and springs to her feet, holding his ring like a dirt-covered trophy. He wants to kiss her in her glorious triumph, but of course he does nothing of the sort.

"Thank you. Now, let's hurry, before we drown in this rain." He takes the ring and clasps her arm to lead the way, and she doesn't even protest. In the dark, the mud on her skin makes it look as if she's caked with blood, but as they hurry along the path, the rain intensifies and turns the dark stains into smears before it washes them off.

It takes them maybe ten minutes to reach his cabin, but they're thoroughly drenched by then, and Eve's dress clings to her like a second skin. She's waiting close to his side while he unlocks the door, and her closeness makes his hand tremble even more than the iciness of the rain. It comes almost as a surprise when the door opens

and they stumble out of the brawl of the downpour into the muffled silence of the cabin.

Eve shivers and hugs herself while she waits for Monroe to turn on the light. It's just as much to warm herself as it is to hide her hard nipples beneath her dress. It's so wet it's dripping water into a puddle at her feet and so sheer she could just as well be naked. Monroe is wet as well, but he's wearing more layers and doesn't look half as bad as she does, if you ignore his hair that is plastered to his skull, giving him the look of an otter, wet pelt and huge chocolate drops for eyes. Eve cringes at her own cheesiness.

"There's some wood but it won't last for long," Monroe says as the light flickers to life, and Eve closes her eyes and fights the shudder crawling up her spine.

"Last for what?" she asks.

"A fire. We need to warm you up, or you'll be dying of a cold tomorrow."

"Of course, we wouldn't want that." She murmurs it more to herself than to him, but he crooks his lips into a thin smile. Eve averts her eyes when he sheds his blazer, too aware of the way his shirt clings to him. She feels dirty, and the last layers of mud itch on her skin.

"I think I have some towels or blankets in the bathroom. Maybe you want to search for them while I light that fire?"

"Yes." Eve is glad to get out of his proximity, and she uses the task as an excuse to look around. The cabin is small, but comfortable. She finds towels in the small bathroom, and she uses the privacy to wash hands and legs. Then she returns, one towel wrapped around her shoulders and one extra for Monroe. He's still occupied with starting the fire, and Eve watches him in silence.

Finally, flames lick at the logs in the fireplace, and he looks up and frowns.

"You're still wearing that soaked rag," he says, and his words at least get her blood boiling, if nothing else.

"It's a dress, not a rag. And yes, of course. I'm not stripping naked with you here to watch me!"

"Well, you should. I'm not going to stay cold and wet just to spare your sensibilities." He straightens, and Eve is torn between stomping her foot, screaming in frustration, and watching speechless as he starts loosening the knot of his tie and unbuttoning his shirt.

"Monroe..."

"I think you can call me Rourke. The circumstances are rather intimate."

She wants to say something, anything, but her throat is clogged and she swallows heavily, pulling the towel tighter around herself. He pauses when he reaches the last button above his belt, and crinkles his forehead.

"Please take off that dress. You're dripping onto the floor."

"I'm not that wet!" Eve protests, and only then realizes that they're not referring to the same kind of wetness. A choked sound escapes her, and she stares into the fire, thinking up names to call him. None of them is Rourke.

She flinches when he steps to her side after a while and takes the spare towel from her hand, and she does her best not to look at him. But somehow she steals a glimpse after all when he rubs his hair and a few drops of water hit her. He's still wearing boxer shorts, and she tells herself that she should be glad. He must have noticed her peek, for he chuckles softly. It's proof for how closely he has to be watching her, and that part of his display of skin is provocation.

"Do you have to come so close?" she asks, when another spray of water hits her, and he grins.

"I'm almost naked and it's nice and comfy at the fire, so..."

Eve takes a swift step aside, but shivers instantly. Monroe shakes his head.

"You rather die than take off that dress, huh?"

"Maybe you could make up your mind if you rather see me miss my wedding or not. Your consideration of my well being is slightly confusing."

"Oh please. Of course I rather want to see you well and dry. Now, come and let me help you."

Eve is shocked when he clasps her arm and pulls her in front of the fire, and she chokes on a squeak when he slides a warm hand along the nape of her neck to lift up her hair and wrap it into his own towel. She's shaking in earnest now, but very little of it has to do with the cold.

"There," he says, rubbing her hair, and her scalp, and deep inside her belly, something brims and tugs and melts down into her thighs and knees. She has to lick her lips that are too dry, and she has to swallow, but nothing helps to lessen the tightness inside her.

"Why are you so nice all of a sudden?" she whispers, and Monroe's hands come to a rest on her shoulders, warm and heavy and almost imperceptibly pulling her closer. Maybe he doesn't even notice it himself.

"Isn't it obvious? I want to get you naked."

Maybe it's said in jest, but his voice cracks, and Eve shakes him off and glares at him.

"Not the right time for a joke?"

"You're not funny."

"Granted. I admit that I am a little... out of my depth here. When I went after you, I didn't expect to find myself trapped with you in my cabin. Not to mention soaking wet." He rakes through his wet hair, and it sticks out like spikes. Eve's fingers itch to comb it out with her fingers and give him back some of his dignity. Instead, she claws at her towel and pulls it tighter.

Monroe tilts his head. "Coffee? I'm sure I have some left somewhere in that kitchen..." He steps around her and heads for the kitchenette. And while his back is turned to her, it seems safe to look at him and follow the trickle of water that's running down from his hair, following the curve of his spine and disappearing beneath the waistband of his boxers. She shouldn't feel like she does, so eager to lick

that trickle of water up, from the dimple just above his boxers up to his neck, so eager to plant a bite there, like a lion bites his mate when he mounts her.

Monroe finds a tin and opens it, smelling its contents. He grimaces, and offers it to her. Eve hasn't even noticed that she's wandered after him, like a moth drawn to a flame, so that she only needs to bend a little forward now to dip her nose into the tin and inhale. The coffee smells old and unpleasant, but Eve doesn't even care. She's transfixed by another droplet of water that slowly makes its way down from his collarbone across his chest. He's more muscled than Adam is, if leaner, and she thinks vaguely that she shouldn't find him sexy. She'll marry Adam tomorrow, and she tells herself that she likes Adam's softness, and that a stomach as flat and hard as Monroe's is uncomfortable to rest on. And yet...

"So, tell me the truth," she says, remembering her question from earlier, while Monroe fills a kettle with water. He closes the lid and takes great care when he places it on the gas range, and even greater care when he lights the flame, and Eve can't avoid the impression that he's stalling. At last, he runs out of things to do, and all that's left is waiting for the kettle to whistle.

"I get that today was stressful, and tomorrow will be so even more, so I just don't want to add to that. You're going to marry Adam, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Why are you so convinced that this wedding is a mistake?" She shudders. Her dress still clings wet and uncomfortable to her skin, and her arms look like plucked chicken. Monroe stalls again, this time by extending his arms and herding her back to the fireplace without touching her. Eve doesn't resist, even though she hates to be patronized like this.

"May I?" Monroe asks, gesturing to her arms, and when she nods, he starts rubbing her. He's not really gentle, but his firm touch at least warms her a bit - though, the heat could also stem from the close proximity of his naked chest. He's so close that she can see the dark stubble covering his throat and jaw, and her attempt to tear her eyes away and look somewhere else lead only to her gaze being drawn to the hollow between his collar bones and the tiny droplet of water resting there. She sways forward, and it's just then that the kettle whistles and Monroe steps back again. He still hasn't answered her.

Eve sets up a pair of chairs close to the fire while Monroe brews coffee, and for a moment, she wonders how long she would have to stand *in* the fire until she'd feel warm and dry again. A tiny spark would be enough to set her insides on fire, so crackling with heat are they. But her outside is clammy and cold, and the contrast traps her in a feverish state.

Monroe comes back and puts a camping mug with coffee into her hand.

"Drink it while it's hot, then the taste isn't as bad," he says, and he sits down and stretches out his legs towards the fire. Eve notices that he's still wearing his socks, held up by sock suspenders.

She's always associated sock garters with old men, but on him, they look incredibly sexy, and she quickly hides her face behind the mug and takes a gulp of bitter coffee that burns its way down her throat. For a moment she's unable to breathe, and she has to bend forward to cope with the pain of piping hot coffee scalding her throat from within.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she gasps, and Monroe leans over and rubs her back between her shoulder blades.

"Good Lord, I didn't mean you should gulp it down all at once! I trusted you had more brains than a chicken!"

"Ugh, you are so charming!" Eve fights the tears biting behind her eyelids. This day couldn't get any worse, and it isn't even over yet. She still needs to get back to the mansion, and dry and roll up her hair for the next day. But first, it needs to stop raining.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I really am." Monroe still rubs her back, but it doesn't make anything better. Why does it have to be him, of all people, with whom she gets trapped in a cabin in the woods? Isn't that how the average horror movie usually starts? She considers getting up and leaving, rain be damned. She is already wet, after all. And he's so very determined to evade her questions. He shed his clothes, but not his walls.

Eve's determined to tear those walls down. She's not sure why it's so important to know what his problem is, but maybe it's just easier to concentrate on him than on

her own anxiety, flaring up now, in the night before the wedding. She's shedding walls like he's shedding clothes. She knows he's right, knows that it's a mistake she's making, knows that comfort and contentment will never be enough to make her happy. But there's no reason not to do it either. She can find happiness in herself. And she loves Adam, in a way.

"No, you're not sorry. You can't help it. You glow with amusement, because everything that's gone wrong today pleases you so immensely! You want this wedding to fail, because you think I'm not good enough for your precious friend!" She straightens and stares him down, and he takes his hand away. He doesn't repeat how sorry he is.

"That's rubbish. This has absolutely *nothing* to do with you!"

"No? Then tell me, why is it a mistake?" Her voice rises in volume, she can't help it. His does, too.

"You and Adam just don't make a good match. You're going to make each other unhappy..."

"And who are you to know so well what will make us unhappy? Who asked you?"

"No one. But even a blind man can see that Adam isn't what you need."

Eve allows the incredulous laugh to escape her, but her chest is still too tight. "And what kind of man do I need, if you are such an expert, Mr. Monroe?"

"I told you, it's Rourke!"

"Yes, but I choose not to call you with your given name, because I don't want to. Now, I'm waiting."

"It's just a very basic thing. Everyone needs someone in their life who respects them for who they are, and not for what they represent. I can guarantee you, if you ask Adam what he loves about you, he's going to answer with some superficial cliché."

"So you try to ruin my future because you think Adam doesn't *love* me the right way? Are you serious?" Eve doesn't hold out any longer on her chair. She hops to her feet and plants herself between Monroe and the fire, and for the first time since the

rain started, she doesn't feel cold in the slightest. No, she's as hot as a volcano.
Furious.

He stares up at her like she's an apparition, and it takes her a moment to realize that she dropped her towel and stands there in nothing but a sheer, wet dress that reveals even the last curve and crevice to his gaze. It only fuels her rage.

"You deserve better," he rasps, straightening and leaning forward. The air between them drains of oxygen and crackles with electricity.

"And of course you know exactly what I deserve. You're a dick, Mr. Monroe. You don't know the least thing about me!"

He gets to his feet and scowls at her. "I know that you're passionate about stories. You live and breathe them, and words are what the blood in your veins is made of. You try to make everyone happy, even if it means that it'll cost you your own happiness. You're so fucking intent on sacrificing yourself that you construe every critique on that plan into a personal offense, just so you can suffer some more for it!"

"That is not true."

"No? Then why go through with this wedding to a man you don't love?"

"I love him! He's sweet and nice and he wants me!"

"Those are poor requirements for the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. I can tell you at least one other person who wants you, too, *you*, not the pretty little breeding mare Adam sees in you!"

"Oh yeah? Who might that be? You?" Eve's voice is biting with sarcasm, but her insides drop like a brick when Monroe clenches his jaws and lifts his chin. *Oh no.*

"And what if?" He says it like a challenge, but there's a breathlessness in his words that pulls the floor out from under her.

"Are you telling me that all this time, you've been mean to me *because you're in love with me?*"

"If you put it like that, it sounds rather childish..."

"Because it is! I can't believe this..." Eve stumbles back and sinks down on her chair.

Monroe has the decency to be silent. At least for a little while. "I never wanted you to know," he says then, and Eve buries her face in her hands and groans.

"Because that would have been the decent thing to do. That, and, like, *being* decent. Not... not this. Not treating me like an ass because I am marrying your friend and you happen to like me!"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry."

Eve can't believe it. *Now* he won't stop apologizing? Now, after telling her the reason for his incredibly childish behavior? She wants to punch him, hard, but she suspects that that will make her only temporarily feel better. She can't spend another minute in the same room with him, not while she's so mad at him, for making her feel terrible for so long, for not telling her sooner, for being such a... dick. She gets up, despite her wobbly knees, and grabs his blazer. He just watches her as she slips into it, his face like a question mark without a sentence when she turns away.

"I'm going. I have a wedding to get to," she says, and heads for the door.

"And the rain?"

"I'm already wet. What else can the rain do to me?"

Nothing, she thinks, as she bangs the door behind her. Fuck the rain, and fuck Rourke Monroe.

Rourke considers following her out into the night for a moment, before he remembers that he's pretty much naked. And at what point has that looked like a good idea? Of course she flees him. It's the only reasonable thing to do, when a naked madman confesses his love, after tormenting you for months and never missing an opportunity to point out the inanity of your life planning. But he worries for her, worries that she'll miss a step in the darkness and the rain and falls, hurts herself. That would be his fault, too. So he opens the door that she so violently shut and calls after her, but the rain just washes his voice away. Eve's already gone.

He slips back into his clothes, as damp and clammy as they are, and sets out into the night. He reaches the mansion without finding Eve, drenched to his skin and freezing for the second time in one night. He leaves a trail of mud in the kitchen when he enters the house through the back, but there's a second trail and a pair of muddy shoes besides the door into the hall that tell him that Eve reached the house before him and there's no need to worry. So he climbs upstairs with heavy feet and takes a hot shower, but even the scalding water can't take the sadness from him. Tomorrow, he's supposed to be at Adam's side when Eve walks up the aisle, and that is at least awkward, if not completely embarrassing.

And, if he's completely honest, he's tormented her enough. Does he really want to ruin this wedding for her so badly that he'll make her walk down the aisle a walk towards him and all the toxicity he represents? Showing her that she's never going to get rid of him, because he's Adam's friend, and to Adam, friendship means more than Eve ever will?

No, he admits to himself. No, he doesn't want to be at Adam's side and watch Eve walk down the aisle, but it has just as much to do with how much he wants to spare himself as it has with his need to spare her. Watching her walking to the altar, smiling at Adam, saying *yes, I do* - he can't go through that and pretend to be happy for his friend. In the end, he's just a pathetic, wretched egocentric, and witnessing that would be more misery than he's willing to endure.

So, when he's finally dry again, he takes the jewelry box with the rings from his nightstand and goes in search of Adam. It's past midnight, and by all accounts, Adam

should be in bed, but Rourke takes a chance and searches his friend at the bar in the ballroom first. Even someone as cold blooded as Adam is bound to experience some nerves before marrying a woman like Eve. Rourke knows he wouldn't sleep for a second if he were the groom. A woman like Eve needs to be cherished and protected, so delicate is she, but she also needs a sound resistance for her spine of steel.

Rourke would be terrified to fail her.

He finds Adam with a tumbler of whiskey in the lounge. His face lights up when he sees Rourke, and he grins. He has no idea.

"And? Got to grovel at her feet and do your apologies?"

For a moment, Rourke has no idea what Adam's talking about. Then he remembers the chapel, and the rehearsal gone sour because of his lapse with the rings. "I don't think I am forgiven," he says then, sinking down on the couch besides his friend.

"Too bad. But no one holds a grudge like a woman does, right?"

Rourke wonders if Adam is going to live his life with Eve under the assumption of stereotypes and pretension, without ever making an effort to look behind the surface. The notion churns in his stomach, and his attempted smile turns into a grimace. "Listen," he starts, intent to get it over with and be gone. "I know that this is probably a huge inconvenience for you, but I don't think I should be your best man tomorrow."

Adam's smile slips and he straightens. "Are you insane? You're going to bail on me?"

"Well... yes."

"Why?"

It's a fair question, but Rourke can't answer it truthfully. Not completely, at least. "Look, Eve and I don't get along, and it would ruin this day for her if she had to look at me all the time..."

"And? She's a big girl, she'll get over it."

"Eventually. But maybe I don't want to be the reason your wedding is not as good as it could be. I'll leave that to you."

"Are you telling me you're copping out *now*, the night before the wedding, because she *might* hate you? You're a coward, Rourke."

The accusation stings, mostly because it's not wrong. He can't look at Adam any longer, so he directs his eyes at the floor. "Look..." But he trails off, lost for what to say.

"Shouldn't I be the one with cold feet? Suck it up, man. She'll get over it. In a few years, we'll laugh about it!"

Rourke knows with absolute clarity that he'll never laugh about this. He also knows that it's time to man up. He pulls the box with the rings from his pocket and drops it in front of Adam on the small table. "I'm sorry, Adam. But I'm going to go home now, and I won't be there tomorrow. And maybe, in a few years' time, we'll laugh about *that*."

Adam closes a fist around the small box and glares at him. In this case, not hurting Eve means hurting Adam, and there's no winner in a situation like that. Certainly not Rourke. Still, when he drives back into town through the rain, he feels free and as if a large weight was taken off his chest.

Somewhere between the darkest hour of the night and the first light, it finally stopped raining, and the morning glitters in the jewels of water that bespeckle grass and trees and moss. A fairytale morning for a fairytale wedding, Eve thinks, while Heidi laces her into her corset. It's the corset that gives her the breathlessness that is appropriate for a bride on the morning of her wedding.

"Sweetie, what happened to your hair? It will be impossible to curl that..."

Eve sighs. It's not only her hair that suffered the night before. On her way back to the mansion through rain and darkness, she slipped twice, scraping her knees and the heels of her hands. She can hardly touch anything, and she spent an hour in the shower, sobbing helplessly while she picked dirt from her bloodied knees. Heidi didn't say a thing when she saw Eve's raw knees, but when she turns away from the window now to observe the catastrophe that is her hair, Heidi wraps one of her long arms around her shoulder and squeezes.

"Hey, you don't look like a happy bride. Tell me what's up, so I can help you."

Eve doesn't know how to put it. Something broke between Monroe's cabin and the mansion, and she's no longer able to pretend everything is fine. She tries it, though, and puts all that's left of her strength into a smile. "I guess I'm just nervous. Name someone who's not wondering if they're making a mistake..."

"Adam," Heidi says, promptly, and it sounds almost bitter. She takes a deep breath and smiles, and Eve can't help but think that it costs Heidi just as much effort as it cost her. "Don't let Monroe get into your head, sweetie. He's bitter and can't stand anyone being happy in a six-mile radius of him. And you are happy with Adam, aren't you?"

Eve nods, but what does happiness even mean? She can't tell anymore, after last night. Does she really expect too little?

She's silent while Heidi helps her into her wedding dress, taking care that every curve, however little, finds its right place. And still, when she looks into the mirror

when she's finally dressed, it looks all wrong. Heidi notices the panic that slowly rises inside Eve.

"Don't worry! Once the hair is done, you'll look perfect..."

"Yes, of course," Eve murmurs, but she can hardly hold still while Heidi styles her hair in a simple up-do, braiding pearls and flowers into it. Heidi is almost done when there's a knock at the door. Eve claws at her chair to get the trembling under control that's started in her hands.

"It's your dad," Heidi says after opening the door, and somehow that crushes the flicker of hope that flared up at the sound of the knock. Just her dad.

Joe enters with tears in his eyes and a wobbly smile, and Eve wonders if he even sees her, so blinded is he by happiness - already, when they haven't even started with the wedding yet.

"I'm so proud of you, darling. So proud." He pats her cheek and Eve has no idea where to look, because everything about her father is so open and vulnerable and pitiful. Eve hates to see him like that. It means she has to be the strong one again, like always, the one that takes care that everyone else is happy.

"Thank you, Dad," she says, and allows him to place a wet kiss on her cheek.

"Your mother would be so happy if she saw you today!" His voice trembles, and he uses the heel of his hand to wipe his red eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"She always wanted to see you happy. You were the most important thing in the world for her."

It's then, while her father talks about her mother and pets her cheek with hands wet from tears, that Eve can no longer lie to herself. She is not happy, and she never will be if she keeps up appearances and forgets herself to ensure everyone else's happiness. Suddenly she gets why it made Monroe so miserable to see her go through with this wedding; it's not because of him, not because it would mean he would lose her for himself. It's the same misery she constantly feels gnawing at her: the sadness one feels

over giving up hopes and dreams and settling for the next best thing. Only that he saw what she was denying: she had given up the pursuit of her own happiness.

"I have to talk to Adam," Eve says. She hikes up the endless layers of tulle of her dress and starts for the door, with bare feet, while her father and Heidi stare at her as if she's suddenly lost her mind. In truth, she's never been clearer.

"Sweetie, he can't see you yet!" Heidi tries to hold her back, but Eve shakes her head and laughs. She sounds hysterical, and she probably is.

"The wedding is off," she says, before she slips out of the room and runs down the hallway to Adam's room.

She storms in without knocking, finding Adam fighting with his tie. He's alone, and she's glad she doesn't have to deliver her speech in front of a rejoicing Monroe.

"Baby, I'm not allowed to see you yet!" he chokes, but his eyes stray down her front and inevitably lose a bit of their shine when he comes to the same conclusion as always - no matter how she pushes and packs, the boob department will always be underwhelming, even in a wedding dress where they fall nearly out. Adam offered her a boob job once. Now she's glad she declined.

"I'm not going to marry you." She can't help it, she sounds relieved. And happy.

Adam stops fumbling with his tie and stares at her as if she just stormed in and stabbed him. "Et Tu Brute?"

"What?"

"First Rourke tells me he doesn't want to be best man anymore, now you storm in, telling me you don't want to marry me anymore... What the hell is wrong with you all?"

Eve takes a step into the room and bites her lip. Of course it's naive to think Adam would be as relieved over calling off the wedding as she is. "Monroe left?" she asks, and her heart thumps hard inside the cage of her ribs.

"Last night. Would you please explain to me what this nonsense means? Of course we're going to marry. You're just having a panic attack."

Eve shakes her head, and she's sorry for Adam, who sinks down on the edge of his bed and looks like a lost puppy. "No, Adam. It's not a panic attack. It means that I'm not going to marry you. I don't want to spend the rest of my life unhappy just so that you and Dad and everyone else can be happy. Eventually, I'd hate you, and you would hate me because nothing you do would ever be enough."

He pulls the tie from his neck and tosses it onto the bed. "But you're still going to pay your share of the expenses," he says.

Eve almost laughs. "Yes. Of course I will pay my share, Adam." She's so glad that it's over that not even this upsets her. She turns, anxious to leave before something happens and she caves in after all and takes it all back. When she reaches the door, though, she hesitates. "I'm going to move out. I'm sorry, Adam."

"Yeah. Me too."

Eve hurries back to her room. Now that she's made up her mind, nothing can stop her anymore. She's on a rush, and there's a score she has to settle.

In her room, Heidi and her father still stand there like frozen in place, her father's mouth even hanging open like minutes before when she left.

"Eve, what is going on?" Heidi asks. Her father finally remembers to close his mouth.

"There's not gonna be a wedding. We... I broke up with Adam." Even though she feels that it's not her fault alone, she can't help but take the blame all on her own.

"But you love him!" her father says, and he sounds as if his world just turned upside down and shattered into tiny pieces. More heartbroken even than Adam.

"I do, in a way. Adam is a good guy... But I love myself, too, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life with a guy who keeps me to feel grand and generous while at the same time making sure he doesn't pay a single cent more than I do... I don't want to marry him just so I'm well provided for. That's not enough." She grabs her car keys and Monroe's blazer that hangs over the back of a chair, and as she does, something falls to the floor with a clink. It's his ring, encrusted with dirt, landing at her feet, and Eve picks it up and clenches her hand around it. Now that she's finally taken her life

into her own hands and decided for herself, she's spurred by adrenaline, wild like a thunderstorm, and she needs to give him a piece of her mind, too. He's made her miserable for long enough, and Eve can't let that stand any longer.

She ignores Heidi and her father and anyone else when she storms down the stairs and out into the world that's still wet like a newborn after the rain. It's an awkward drive into town in her tiny car, barefoot and with countless layers of tulle billowing like clouds of cotton candy around her, and Eve recites, no, screams over the clatter of the engine all the things she wants to throw at Monroe's head, so that she doesn't forget a single one, and she's still charged like a storm when she reaches his blue Victorian house and drives her car onto the lawn in front of it.

Still, when she storms up the porch, she hesitates before she knocks, biting her lip and clenching her hand so hard around his ring that it hurts. All the rage and all the words she practiced are blown away, and she wonders what she even wants here. It's not as if she wants to fall into his arms. He told her he wants her, maybe he even loves her, but that doesn't mean she reciprocates these feelings. She's still pissed over the audacity, the *nerve* to unburden it all on her the night before her wedding. That thought gives her back some of her bearing, and she knocks against his door, so hard that the fancy glass panes of it rattle in their frame.

She bounces on her toes while she waits, holding on to her rage with all her might. Yet, when the door finally opens, and she faces Monroe, she's speechless for a moment. He looks at her, topmost buttons of his shirt unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, and although she saw him almost naked only the night before, he looks far more vulnerable and open now, when he looks at her as if she's the Queen knocking at his front door and asking if she might use his bathroom.

"Eve," he says. He sounds as surprised as he looks. And maybe he also sounds the tiniest bit hopeful. But he furrows his brows and schools his features into an expression that lets Eve doubt that turning up on his doorstep is a good idea. "Don't you have a wedding to attend?"

And just like that, she's on the defensive. "The wedding is off."

"And you decided that when? At the altar?" His eyes trail down her front, taking in her wedding gown and her bare feet before he returns his gaze to her face, slowly lifting his brows. It's an insult, but it blows her rage back up to full size.

"Are you actually reprehending me for calling off a wedding that *you* disapproved of from the very first moment?"

"I hope you didn't call it off because of me."

Eve wants to stomp her foot, but instead, she straightens, and lifts her chin. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Then why are you here?"

"To bring you back your blazer. And your ring." She pushes his belongings against his chest, a jerky movement so forceful that he lets out a low 'oomph' and grasps her hand as if to steady himself. And somehow, when his palm covers her hand and his thumb presses against her palm, breathing becomes hard and the world swerves. Their eyes lock, and even though Eve wants to let go of his things - blazer and ring held up purely by the pressure of her hand against him - she's unable to do so. Just like your muscles refuse to obey you in the moment before the world goes black on a very hot day, when your circulation collapses and you pass out, and something wells up inside you like a whale breaking the surface of the sea, a wave of hot blood gurgling up and bubbling inside you. Maybe it's some kind of magnetism when he pulls her inside, with her hand pressed to his chest, and turns her like in a dance - or maybe she's the one leading their pas de deux, she has no idea - until she crashes with her back against the banister of the stairs. It knocks the breath out of her with a gasp.

"Why are you here?" he growls, and Eve wonders the same thing.

"To tell you..."

"What?"

"To tell you that you're not the reason why I'm not marrying. You're not the reason I called this wedding off. You're nothing but a sad, lonely coward who waited until the very last minute to tell me about his feelings, when you thought there was no longer any way out of it for me, when telling me was no longer an act of honesty, but

raw beastliness to ruin my wedding. If you really loved me, you wouldn't have told me, but wanted me to be happy!" She's breathing heavily, and her heart races. Under her fingertips, she feels his heart race in a rhythm just as fast and hard.

"What can I say, I'm not a nice man." He bares his teeth. Eve wants to bite his lip bloody.

He lets go of her hand. The blazer flutters to the floor between them. Nothing is holding her in place any longer, and yet, when Eve curls her fingers around the ring and the open edge of his shirt, it's not to push him away. It's not to pull him closer either.

"You really aren't. You're a beast. You were nothing but mean in all that time I was going to marry Adam. You made me feel terrible. Sometimes I went to bed feeling bruised and beaten because of your cruel words. 'You can do better, Adam. Find someone with a better rack, Adam. You're making a mistake, Adam.' Do you know what you did to me?"

"I am sorry..."

"Do you think that's enough?"

"No. But what else can I do?"

She doesn't know what she wants him to do, and in her lack of words, she just stares at him. He's not even really looking at her. His gaze goes somehow through her, as if he pretends to look at her but really doesn't. That's when she realizes that he doesn't have an idea how to handle this situation either. Rourke Monroe, the man who always has a plan, is helpless like a turtle on its back. When she doesn't answer, he narrows his eyes and finally focuses on her. The raw intensity of it squeezes her heart like a fist.

"Do you want a coffee? Tea?" he asks, and Eve feels it in the tension of his body under her touch that he wants to step back.

"No."

He licks his lip, and something inside her clenches and melts. "Do you want to go?"

"No."

It's only when she shakes her head and declines that he lifts his hand, slowly, and reaches for her face. His palm is dry and hot when he cups her cheek, his fingertips prickle and tickle when he follows the line of her jaw, slipping them under her chin to tilt her face up with hardly a touch.

"Why are you here?" he whispers, and he leans closer, searches her eyes. Eve swallows.

"I wasn't going to come here... but you owe me something." She tells herself that she came to settle a score. That he tormented her for so long, chipped away at her, until nothing was left - that she came here to yell at him and tell him off for it. But her mind is empty and all her thoughts flee her and leave her with light-headed giddiness. This is what she wanted to feel and what she always missed with Adam - the complete absence of rationality, being just in the moment, being seen and wanted so much that she feels it prickle inside and out, on her skin, her lips, her breasts, her ribs... So maybe, if she allows him this kiss that he so clearly longs for, she'll feel... whole? She leans into his touch, leans closer for the fraction of an inch -

He steps back.

"You should go. You're clearly upset, and stressed. We can talk about my faults and wrongdoings when you feel better... You're not even out of your wedding dress yet!" He points to the door, but he doesn't even wait for her to leave before turning and walking out of the hallway.

Eve stomps her foot. "That's because you haven't helped me out of it yet," she mutters under her breath, before pulling up her skirts and following him into the dining room area.

"I'm not upset," she states. "In fact, I've never been clearer."

He's been the one telling her to stand up for herself, and that's what she finally does, even though it feels as if she has to chase him around the table when she follows him. Finally he stops and turns to face her, and Eve collides with a chair when she has to stop so abruptly. He frowns when she hisses in pain.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"I -nothing! I just..." Eve has no idea. Her scraped knees pulse, and she pulls up the tulle of her dress, afraid she might bleed again and stain the dress. Though, it's not as if she could return it anyways. But maybe she could sell it. Unless she manages to give it the look of having been worn by a murder victim, of course. Her scrapes haven't started bleeding again, despite stinging with pain.

"What happened there?" Before Eve can let go of her dress again, Monroe squats down before her, holding on to the table, and examines her knees. It's like an electrical shock when he clasps her leg just below her knee. Her insides contract with the pulsing heat radiating from where he touches her. She needs to hold on to something, but that means letting go of the dress and that means ending the touch. So instead she holds up her dress and presses her thighs together in hopes of holding all that's melting inside her exactly where it belongs.

"I fell last night," she whispers, and pants when he paints a circle to the back of her knee with his thumb. He looks up, and the hunger in his eyes only adds to the liquid heat inside her.

"Sit down. We need to take care of that..."

He lets go of her, pulls himself up again, and Eve sways in the sudden emptiness the loss of contact creates. When he wants to retreat once more, she grabs his arm. His naked arm, below the sleeves he's rolled up. It's another shock to her system.

"There's no need... I cleaned it already..." She's so shamefully hoarse. Her throat's so tight she can hardly speak, and her lips are dry despite the saliva flooding her mouth. She hardly breathes when she meets his eyes, unafraid. No longer shy of demanding what she wants. She pulls him closer. Leans back against the table. Wets her lips and allows her gaze to be drawn to his lips.

It's with a groan deep in his throat that he breaks, reaches for her face. Slips a hand to the back of her skull to draw her close, pull her against him, and finally, finally catches her lips with his own. It's a messy, hungry, wet kiss. She's sure he wanted to claim her lips gently, tenderly, but she meets him in such haste and eagerness that their teeth clash and their noses bump. He wants to draw back immediately, but Eve bites his lip and keeps him locked in place.

No kiss with Adam has ever been this messy, and yet, no kiss has ever made her this weak and breathless before. She wraps her arms around his neck to cling to him, to hold herself upright, and she rakes through his hair and shivers with its softness. It's only when she starts getting dizzy that she lets go of his lips and allows him to draw back. He's panting as much as she is.

"Eve..." He says her name like a question, like something stunning and wondrous, like she's a miracle to behold. It fills her with something too big to name. His wordless question demands an answer, one that Eve doesn't want to put into words yet. She doesn't know what this is, and she doesn't want to think about where it's going. So, instead of saying words too little and insufficient for what she feels, she turns her face into his touch, into the hand that cradles her cheek, and presses a kiss to his wrist. And, without breaking eye contact, she turns a tiny bit more, brushing wet lips across his skin, and bites into the fleshy heel of his hand. It's a gentle, playful bite, but it's also a statement. Mine.

His eyes flutter shut, and he throws his head back. Groans. Eve licks over the mark her teeth left. Feels his other hand curl at the back of her head, digging into her hair, and pulling her head back to expose her throat. She shivers when he bends over her and plants open-mouthed kisses on her jaw, down her throat, sucking on her skin as if he's planning to devour her whole. His fingertips follow the path his mouth took, brushing down her neck, following the line of her shoulder and across her chest, until he's met with the edge of her dress. Eve arches her back, hungry for him to cup her flesh, her breast, through the layers of her dress and the corset underneath, but he trails down her front before he sneaks his arm around her waist, evading her silent pleas while his mouth never leaves the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. It makes her gasp, moan, and his grip around her tightens and pulls her closer, crushing her against his chest.

"Rourke," she gurgles, and he pulls away, locks eyes with her, breathing heavily. Maybe he interpreted his name as a sign to stop, as protest, when it's anything but. She grabs his shirt and pulls him closer again. "Don't stop."

"Say it again. My name, say it again..." There's need in his request, hunger, something Eve recognizes because it's brimming in her veins as well.

"Rourke. Kiss me again..."

He does, kissing her like he wants to drink the breath from her lips, like he wants to gobble her up, like he's starved and she's his salvation. She has to grab the table behind her to keep her knees from buckling. Rourke moves with her, never allowing an inch of space between them, and somehow, Eve finds herself lifted onto the table, and Rourke pushing between her legs. Eve doesn't mind the clumsiness or haste of it. Only the sound of ripping seams distracts her, and cools her ardor. She leans back to break the kiss.

"Careful with the dress!"

Rourke grasps layers of tulle and bunches them up around her hips. There's something wild in his face. Something feral. "If you minded the dress, you would have taken it off before coming here. You can't expect me to be careful to a dress you wanted to wear while wedding another man..." He gathers more tulle, and Eve has to push it down so she still sees him. "But you're right," he says, fisting her skirts. "There's too much off it. Let's get you out of it."

Before Eve can protest (or decide if protesting is what she wants to do), he pulls her from the table once more and turns her around. He's fighting with the buttons in the back of her dress, and even mutters a curse. But now and then he presses a kiss to the nape of her neck. Each kiss draws a response inside her, a clenching of muscles, a flutter beneath her diaphragm, a sting between her ribs. When the dress falls away, it takes the last veil of hesitance with it. Rourke turns her around again, and she faces him with unguarded vulnerability, open and bare to her bones. He's biting his lip as he reaches for the edge of her corset, between her breasts, and hooks a finger into it. Eve inhales deeply. Rourke pulls downward as she does so, and her breath lifts her breasts from their prison. Her nipples peak over the edge of the corset, almost obscene, if her breasts weren't so small. She can no longer look at him, doesn't want to see the disappointment that's bound to follow. Her face burns with the blush blooming on her cheekbones.

She's forced to meet his eyes when he places his knuckles beneath her chin and tilts her face up. "You take my breath away, Eve," he whispers.

She believes him. It's not said to reassure her for his own, selfish reasons, nor said to persuade her. He means it, and warmth blossoms in her chest, wells up and fills her. She allows him to help her step out of her dress pooling on the floor, and she

holds his hand and follows him when he leads her out of the room, up the stairs, into a bedroom. She has only eyes for him, not for his beautiful home.

He pauses just inside the door of his bedroom. "You deserve a bed," he murmurs, and a faint blush rises into his cheeks.

"I'm not tired." She hopes to sound casual and funny, and she succeeds, for he answers her with a dirty grin.

"The bed's not for sleeping, darling. The bed's for ravishing and for worship. I plan on leaving not a single inch of you unkissed."

The husky tone of his voice makes her shiver, and she quickly steps to the bed and flops down. Somehow, the strength has left her legs. Rourke follows her, and kneels down at her feet, clasping her knees. He never takes his eyes off her when he pulls her closer to the edge of his bed, nor when he pulls her knees apart in a way that takes her breath away with the possessiveness of it. He demands her to be open for him, and she is. She meets his gaze unblinking as she unhooks the busk of her corset and lets the last layer shielding her from his eyes fall away.

He leans forward and kisses her throat. Kisses her collar bones and the hollow between them, kisses his way down between her breasts. Eve arches into his kisses, rakes through his hair and gasps as he strokes up the insides of her thighs. He stops just short of her core, where she's aching, and circles her hips, caresses her stomach, her waist, brushes up to encompass her ribcage with his large hands. Every touch is reverent, pervaded with veneration. There's something incredibly erotic in being held that way, with his shirt brushing against her skin with every caress, and his lips soft and hot on her as he makes good on his promise to kiss every inch of her. Eve sinks down onto the mattress, sighs and gasps as he licks and bites and kisses her stomach, circling her navel before he makes his way further down, between her open legs. He kisses and licks her above her panties, and Eve gasps with the wave of heat that washes over her. But when he hooks his fingers into the waistband of her knickers, she pulls his hair to move his face away.

"Please, Rourke... you're still dressed!" It seems such a silly thing to say, not really a protest, but a hint of discomfort nonetheless. She's open and vulnerable for him, but she's more and more aware that he is not. And wasn't the point of taking

responsibility for herself that she no longer wants to be passive? She wants to decide, to grab life by its hair and pull it close, like she pulls him close now, up from his knees and onto the bed beside her. She struggles to her knees and pulls at his clothes, not daring to rip his shirt open, but adamant in that she wants him naked. It's her turn to take, and his turn to open himself up for her.

It seems to take him hardly any time at all to get rid of his clothes. When he's left in only his boxers, he wants to pull her beneath his body again, but Eve resists. Pushes against his chest until he falls back and looks up at her like a dog looks at bones on your plate. He wants her, there's no denying it. His boxers hide nothing, and Eve takes her time to look at him, to trail the length of his hard cock through the fabric. He bucks his hips and once more reaches for her.

"Eve..."

Eve plants her palms on his chest and leans over him, searching his eyes. She feels his heart beat against her hands, and she wishes she could reach into his chest, pluck his layers away like the soft flesh of plums or nectarines, to reach the hard pit inside and lay it open, to find the truth at his core. She wants to grow inside him, be intertwined in a connection she's missed for so long. She longs to feel whole.

She needs to get closer.

"Do you have condoms?"

He blushes and opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. It's endearing, and seeing his boyish insecurity now makes her forgive some of his previous insults. "I do," he admits, after clearing his throat. Eve is tempted to ask why he has them, but she supposes it will lead to more time being wasted before she gets to consume him and the feeling she seeks. She can ask later.

Leaning back, she allows him to reach for his nightstand, and he produces a cardboard box with condoms out of the drawer. He holds it in his hand like he doesn't know what to do with it. Maybe it's because she took over the initiative and he's no longer setting the pace. Eve has no time for his sensibilities.

"Get naked," she says. It's odd to watch him stripping down to his bare skin, odd to see him so real, made of flesh and blood and hair, not armored in silk and

cashmere. His cock is as ugly as any cock, or as pretty, Eve has never been able to decide her feelings about this particular detail of male anatomy. Though, now that she reaches for him and lets her fingertips glide from the slightly slick tip down to the base, following the thick vein pulsing under his skin, her mouth waters, and she longs to feel him inside herself. She touches his balls, and the dark skin puckers. Rourke gives off a strangled groan.

"Gods, Eve..."

She bites her lip, intrigued that he's already so close from so little. Having such power over him is a heady feeling, like a rush, and it tempts her to glory in it. She closes her hand around his prick, gently, for she doesn't know yet how he likes to be touched, but even that little is too much for him. Rourke tenses, fists the sheets beside him, fights it, but he's powerless to stop it. With a broken sob, he comes, and his seed shoots in hot spurts onto his stomach.

He lies still, pressing his eyes shut in a grimace of shame and agony. Eve is short of breath, torn between unknown, primal triumph and bitter disappointment. As thrilling as her taste of power was, it's bound to be the end of her adventure.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

Eve swallows the standard answer, the one she always gives, the one so ingrained that she can already taste it on the tip of her tongue. *It's ok. Not a problem. Can happen to anyone.* Instead, she spits out what brims inside her chest, the ugly truth. That, too, is part of taking life in her own hands. "You're not finished yet. You owe me."

She clammers up at his side. Understanding dawns in his eyes when she shoves her panties down and off her legs and lifts her knee, and he reaches for her, guides her to kneel above his head. And he eats into her cunt like she's the last supper, honey and milk and ambrosia, like he wants to drown in her and get drunk on her taste. His fingers dig deep into her thighs as his grip tightens. Eve doesn't want to sit too heavily on his face, wants to keep her weight off him, but she's helpless against the pleasure ripping through her, rolling up her spine and coiling her insides into a hot, tight knot. His tongue finds a perfect spot, one that makes her cry out and buck her hips, and he licks it again and again, merciless, until she shatters. Throwing her head back, she screams out her orgasm.

It's almost too much to fall to his side, panting and thoroughly spent, so thoroughly that she's silent for a long while. Rourke turns his face and looks at her like he's not quite sure he's allowed to look at her at all. And when he extends his hand, he doesn't bridge the distance completely, and instead places it palm-up close to her. Hopeful, maybe, but not demanding. When Eve covers his hand with hers, lacing fingers, a smile blossoms on his face, so soft and tender that her heart flutters in her chest like a wren.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

Eve knows that they will need to determine what this is. She knows that they have conflicts to resolve, feelings to untangle, and agree on how to go on. But right now, right here, she has only one answer. Pulling his hand closer, she places a tender kiss on his knuckles. And with a smile, she says "Happy."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Henny Wolf lives with her husband and two daughters in the idyllic Rhine Valley in one of the warmest places of Germany. She spent her childhood roaming the woods of the Black Forest, steeped deeply in myth and folklore and ingrained superstition, where her love for fairytales was nurtured and cemented.

She holds a B.A. in German Language and Literature as well as Scandinavian Language and Literature. Tracing intertextual influences is like a treasure hunt and a fascinating puzzle to her, but it's not as fulfilling as writing her own stories, accompanying her heroines and heroes through adventures full of magic, love and melancholy, and lots of steamy sex.

Visit her at johennywolf.org to learn more about her and the projects she's working on, and subscribe to her mailing list to be the first to get notified about new releases and special offers.