

# Max

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2018**

When Audra parks the car at her house and we get out, I am singularly focused. I am a wolf. I am vile. Wicked. My baser prayer has been activated. All I want is for Audra to yield to me. I heard her say words about how the house had been designed and built and tweaked by her grandfather over the years as we drove up the long, snaking driveway and pulled up in front of the garage, but I couldn't stay with it. All I can think about is Audra and her genius works, which I know are locked away somewhere here. The paintings that show me the inside of her brain, her heart, her soul. The spark inside of these works that show a piece of the brilliance I had at her age. I am ravenous for it. I am ravenous for her. Her art, her body—they have grown knotted into one concept within me. One demand: show me.

She leads me up onto the porch, each of us carrying a bag or two. I want to press myself against her as she unlocks the door, so tight, there

is no daylight between us. I want to kiss the backs of her ears and the back of her neck. But I don't. I control myself. She points out something about the door knocker—a dove, gleaming and brassy—and then finally the door swings in, and her home is open to me. We enter the foyer; the delicate scent of lavender and fresh linen comes to me. Maybe rosemary, too. I look to Audra. I am mad with expectation. I want us to drop our bags to the floor as if pulled from us by magnets. I want us to disappear into a bedroom together, finally, mercifully—but she doesn't immediately turn to face me. Instead she heads directly into a large kitchen and sets her purse and her mail on the marble countertop. She looks at me and smiles, but it's an innocent one. She is calm, collected, under complete control. Infuriating.

“Welcome to my home, Max.” She gestures hospitably. “I'm super glad you were able to come for a visit.” She heads toward the large, stainless-steel fridge. “Do you want some water?” She opens one of the fridge doors and looks over her shoulder at me. I stay standing dumbly in the foyer, door open behind me, luggage still in my hand. I look around the nice entryway like it will provide some sort of answer. I need to get my bearings. I'm in a new world. Her world. She grabs two bottles out of the fridge when I don't answer, sets one on the counter and brings one to me. “Let me help you with your bag.” She comes toward me and takes the small suitcase from my hand. She hands me the water.

“Thanks.” The ordinariness. The lack of charge or passion or blatant desire. I look at her and want to grab her by the arms, shake her, scream that I know exactly why I'm here, exactly what she wants; that I am more than happy to give it to her. But I manage to stay my hand. Again. Maybe she feels shy. Maybe she's feeling nervous, now that we're so totally alone together. Way out here in her home. No watchers, no boundaries.

"I'll show you to your room. You can rest or wash up or just take a few minutes to settle in if you'd like. Take as much time as you need." A spark of hope. A room. Which will undoubtedly have a bed. She hauls my bag through the foyer and up the wide staircase, so I close the front door behind us and follow her. I take in the expansive hallways and meticulously clean, comfortable rooms we walk by. This is a nice house. A big house.

My room is a large guest suite on the second floor, handsome in shades of light blue and rich brown. Pristine picture windows look out across an expansive, green field swelling with wavelike hills and dales, crisscrossed with low, stone walls. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves packed with volumes line one wall.

"So, there are various towels and basic toiletries in the bathroom." She moves to the darkened doorway and flips on the light. "Extra stuff in the closet in there." She then moves out of the bathroom and toward a door on the other side of the bedroom, opens it up. "You can hang your clothes in here if you'd like, plenty of room. And there's the dresser of course."

"This is great, Audra—thank you," I tell her, piqued by the niceness of everything. I look at her as she gazes out across the beautiful field to the tree line a quarter mile or so away. The trunks of a few of those trees are banded in a couple bright streaks of yellow, maybe some sort of ribbon or tape, tails fluttering in the breeze.

"I have so many things to show you, Max," she says as she approaches me, a twinkle in her eye. "I have such plans for us." The ember of wickedness always just under my surface glows redder, hotter.

"You're in charge, boss." I stroke my thumb gently across her cheek, and I see she is mildly surprised but not displeased with the gesture.

“Had a little something there. Eyelash or something.” We both know it’s a lie.

“Should have let me make a wish,” she says, the two of us standing painfully close.

“What would you have wished for?” I ask, voice gentle. The gap-toothed smile returns to her face.

“Oh, Max,” she sighs. “You know I can’t say that out loud.” She squeezes my forearm as she walks past me toward the door. “Then it might not come true.” Her hand lingers on the doorframe. “Let me know if you need anything, I’ll be downstairs putting together a little nosh. I’m starving. You must be, too.”

“Ravenous,” I say; we look into each other. We are in the borderlands now, the dangerous place where we know no one is looking. I watch her swallow, a glint of something darker, unreadable in her eye.

I watch her go.

I run a hand down my face and take a big, silent breath.

A bracing shower would do me good.

In the first few minutes, I deal in cold water, trying to banish my hardness, trying to slow down to the simmering pace at which Audra apparently wants to move. After a while, I turn the hot water up, feeling regulated. Feeling vaguely cleansed. I turn it up so it’s almost unbearably hot. But my solitude in the shower, the quiet patter of the water falling to the tile, the heat conjures Audra back into my mind.

I was on the admissions committee when she applied to the program more than two years ago, and her application had struck all of us; her written materials and portfolio had been instantaneously arresting. We’ve accepted our fair share students from the University of Maine’s flagship campus in Orono over the years, in addition to places like

Bowdoin College, the University of Southern Maine, and Colby College. But the letters of recommendation in Audra's packet had been particularly interesting, prophetic. Each of her professors and advisors had praised Audra's work with awe, insisting we'd be mad not to take her based on her portfolio alone (about which they were correct; her pieces had been incredible—tear-your-hair-out incredible) but said they'd found her a challenge to interact with as a person. It was a consistent thread. She had never availed herself of most of the department's resources. She returned to her house on some rural lake often and never really described what—or perhaps more importantly, who—kept drawing her back. She would pause her studies for entire semesters and then return as if nothing had happened. She was quiet, they said. Completely present for classes, instruction, mentorship when it came to her work, but an absolutely closed book when it came to the rest of her life.

Some artists, especially those with real raw talent, have their quirks. We on the admissions committee knew this. Hell, I'm one of them. I've been called brilliant, eccentric, gifted, a divine vessel in the various write-ups and introductions and articles and talks that have been created for me, about me, with me. But I have my quirks. We assumed Audra was one of those types, too. She seemed born from the froth of the ocean or from Zeus's own head, a goddess, a revelation. We admitted her, and she has been a feather in our collective cap ever since.

She didn't appear much at all during her first semester. I began noticing her at parties and soirees in the spring of her first year. She was a mirage: you would see her, but it was hard to get close. She'd disappear. I would feel her eyes on me during these shindigs. And she would continue to look, even after our gazes met. She was not cowed. Her confidence and her silence reminded me of myself when I was younger. She seemed

to show up to these events primarily to drink deeply of the unfolding scene and its improbable people and its hyperbolic talk and then retreat to her own inner world, as if the whole thing was an exercise in reconnaissance. But she never approached me, and I never really approached her, though I wanted to. On the few occasions that I tried to get near this gorgeous, mysterious woman, she'd vanished again. I knew I would get my chance soon enough, so I just bided my time. Fate and bureaucracy would funnel her to me.

Every studio painting student must take my Theory of Form class in the fall of their second year, and that's when I finally met her. She did not disappoint. She was laser focused and passionate when it came to discussing the work, the theory, the techniques we worked on in class. She engaged with the other students. She engaged with me. But she never brought anything biographical, as so many of the other students naturally did. Audra would smile and laugh and empathize with everyone as they exposed themselves, but she never would. She showed only what she wanted to show. When pressed by other students, or by me, she would say some sneaky, jokey thing. She would deflect, and people would move on; her mysteriousness became her hallmark, until no one much tried to crack her anymore. She is a mirror, reflecting back only yourself. It began to drive me nuts. I wanted to know more about her. I *needed* to know. Her mind. Her body. Talent like that—secrecy like that—comes from somewhere.

In the evenings, after my heady seminars, the students and I, including Audra, would often go out to a bar near campus, and I would be the charming, witty life of the party. Most of them listened hungrily to every word I said or over-laughed at every lightly amusing anecdote I told, but Audra was a tougher crowd, giving me almost nothing. As the night

wore on, students would fall off, some grudgingly so, until it was just she and I. She would say little but give off the vibe that she was thinking, *Well, the party seems to be over, doesn't it? Maybe I ought to be going.* I would draw her out then, not wanting to lose her. I would ask her to stay until I finished my drink. This is when she would finally, truly talk.

This happened on numerous occasions, the little game we would play. Soon, we started making plans, just the two of us. I would take her to interesting, hole-in-the-wall bars in Chinatown or Dorchester, or extravagant artist's parties on the Cape or in Cambridge, or to underground art showings in New York, even, sometimes on a weekend. I would tease her that the standard artist/lover differential always involved a couple of decades, that some things are just written in the stars. She would laugh with me, but that was all. Even on these field trips, even on occasions when there would be overnights, she would never spend them with me. She found some way to beg off, to crash with a friend or get a hotel or something. I would be sure right until the moment she abandoned me that *this* was the time. This was the moment. But I was always wrong.

It all teetered on the edge of something intimate, special, but never got there. And I can see that this was purposeful. That she is the conductor of her own silent score, the beats and movements of which I am unable to hear. I have simply been led. Conducted. Curated. It's a novel position to be in, one I recognize only from the other side. And so I've decided to let it happen. An experiment, an indulgence of sorts. To follow. To wait. And here I wait still. Naked, in her remote home, two hundred and fifty miles from anyone I know.

I step out of the shower to the entire bathroom shimmering with steam. I turn on the fan and grab a big, fluffy towel from under a large double vanity. This is quite a nice bathroom. Large. Finely appointed.

Nothing about it is woodsy or rustic. There are a few small, black-and-white landscape photographs on one of the walls, framed professionally with title cards. *Birch Trees in Spring*, then *Scavenger Hunt*, then finally *Boat in the Rough*. I look back at the second photograph, *Scavenger Hunt* by Rowan Augustus McCue. The backs of a woman in baggy overalls and a man in a T-shirt, short jean shorts, and sandals stand close together next to a campfire, heads lowered over something as if reading. Some distant bell sounds unmistakably within me, a muffled death knell trapped in the soft marrow of my bones.

I turn away.

I look out the windows that frame the soaker tub. The view is breathtaking. Pure.

I can see the driveway, part of the garage, and a large hill that slopes up toward a stand of apple trees. One of the trees toward the center of the orchard is strung up with countless flowing ribbons in a shocking yellow. I look toward the tree line and see those others with the same ribbon tied around them. I squint, trying to divine the exact shade. It's a desperate color, attention seeking. A color of warning; or a color of triumph. *Goldenrod*. I feel myself frowning. It's like some sort of pagan maypole, that tree. The wind tears and lulls the ribbons about. There's the taste of something sour in my mouth.

I wrap the towel around my waist as I open the door and enter the bedroom, which is also impressive. There's a king-size, four-poster bed. Large, cherrywood furniture, all with classic lines. There's a wall of built-in bookshelves filled with hundreds of volumes—novels, biographies, poetry collections, art books. I notice a book on the right side of the wall, at about eye level, with which I am intimately familiar. It was published ten years ago by a colleague at Brown. I'd written the introduction.



*Edward Hopper: Thoughts and Essays*, by Joan Mary Jenkins. It's a little hard to find these days. Where had my sweet Audra gotten it? And when? I take it from the shelf and flip through the first twenty or so pages. It looks like it's been read, or at least my introduction has. I place it back on the shelf, feeling a boyish sense of pride.

I turn to the bedside table. On it I find one purple, lupine stem in a tall, thin glass of water, a tidy little envelope, and the brand-new pocket knife I just bought at the trading post. The array pleases me. There's something artful to it all. My overnight bag is on the floor nearby. I walk over to the table, just barely able to hear Audra's movements down in the kitchen. The outside of the envelope reads *Max*. I sit down on the edge of the bed, wearing only the towel, the remaining droplets of water growing cold on my skin. I slit the envelope open with my knife to find an artisanal greeting card inside, made from good, thick, textured paper.

*I'm so glad you're here.*

The message on the front of the card is in a pretty, scripted type. A single red rose blossom is on the lower left corner. It's like a blot of paint or blood. I open it up. In Audra's own hand:

*You're always saying you want to find me, Max. Get to me. Now you have. Thank you for coming to my home, to where my truest self resides. Thank you for finding me. It feels like I found you, too. Against all odds. -A*

*I swallow. Thank you for finding me. It is something I say to her often. I know you, Audie, I'm with you, Audie, but I don't think I've found you yet. I don't think you've quite let me. I haven't made it all the way in there, but I will.*

So she's ready to let me find her. Finally.

Excitement ignites like wildfire inside my body.

Audra, the closed fist, ready to open up. It's wild how unlike my

most recent ex she is. Misha was willing to be undone and remade from the very start. Unsteady. Easily shaken. It's like she craved it, what I got from her, what I did to her. Misha with her silken, blond hair and light-gray eyes, her whole self a spectrum of airiness and pliability. I opened her right up like a glistening wound. I saw her deep reds and pinks and blacks over the years. Years of toil. I think of my languid, tonal *Builder* portraits—which are of Misha, ultimately, an architect—and feel an almost erotic shiver. I, the consummate synesthete, see them all, these women, these muses, in pure color—sunbursts, fireworks.

I think of grabbing Misha—cornflower, navy, steel, powder-blue Misha—by her smooth, flaxen locks, pulling her toward me like a shaking sheep.

Francesca—spunky little *Chess*—was a student I had a few years ago. Fire engine, chili, ruby red. Stubborn and needful, overflowing with body, Rubenesque, unquenchable. Looking for a father. Finding me. I think of sinking my fingers into her deep-brown curls and squeezing like a bear trap.

My muses. Misha and Francesca and many more besides. Their pain, their love, their trust has been everything, has given me everything in my life.

But Audra is more like me than she is like them. Audra is not a passive resource. Not something to simply be broken down and drawn from. She's an active engine of genesis. A maker. Like me. Audra is rich plum, eggplant, mauve, always—indicative of passion but two ticks off-center. My job with Audra is not to dismember her and put her back together again. It's not to break and then remake as I have with so many others—lovers and students alike. It's to show her how to climb up here with me. To find her own Mishas and Chesses. To take from these

DARK THINGS I ADORE

sources what was never really *theirs* but was actually always rightfully *hers*—and make it something worth looking at. Something greater than themselves. Something that can live on forever.

A rising tide raises all ships. As Audra rises, so will I.