

An excerpt from *Unbound*, by Cara McKenna, published by Penguin / Intermix

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The clouds turned thick, the sky dark and the cottage cool. Merry abandoned the rocker to feed the fire.

Against the wall leaned a large upholstered cushion, a cast-off from some long-departed sofa. She set it on the floor a few feet from the stove, and stretched out her legs so the fire would warm her achy toes. She watched the flames through the oven's slats. Their dance hypnotized her, and she jumped when the rear door creaked. A cold breeze came first, followed by Rob, a fresh stack of wood balanced on one arm.

Merry waved. "Hey."

"All right?" He let the kindling tumble into a pile beside the stove and checked its belly. "Are you cold?"

She was now—that voice always made her shiver. *Keep talking. Keep saying stuff in that accent, all deep and dark and hard. Grocery list, blender manual, Wikipedia entry for gingivitis. Anything.*

She flexed her feet in their wool socks. "A little. But mainly it just feels so nice—a fire."

He looked around the kitchen. "Tea?"

"Sure."

Rob disappeared to fill the kettle.

What had he called her, earlier? *Impressive*. And without an ounce of the patronizing sugar she used to taste when a man deigned to compliment her. Like a pat on the head—*Good job, fat girl! Who'd have guessed you had it in you?* But not Rob. He'd meant what he'd said, and it had taken some effort to say.

He returned on the heels of a final chilly gust. With the kettle left to its devices, he paused to watch the fire, arms crossed over his chest. Strong body, with that intriguing, hard-to-read face. His expression had changed. He looked...determined. His unease from their time outside was gone, thank goodness. He was steeled, eyes set. She admired him as a whole, and attraction wound a few more mischievous vines around her heart.

She thought she'd seen a similar glimmer in his eyes when she'd been coiling that old rope. His attention had stayed glued to her hands. She'd taken it for alarm, but now that she thought about it... It was like the way a man's eyes went glassy when they spied a ripe slice of cleavage. Merry smiled to herself, wondering if maybe she'd misdiagnosed the entire moment. How long since he'd been with a woman? The way she'd toyed with that rope might've looked like a strip tease to Rob.

Maybe he wasn't eager to get rid of her, after all.

Maybe he was disturbed by how desperately he wanted to ravage her, conflicted by his lust in light of her vulnerable condition!

*Hey, it's slightly possible.*

He set two mugs on the table behind her, along with the jar of tea. "That'll be awhile. Water's frigid."

"I'm in no rush." The second the words escaped, a pang of misgiving struck, all her hopes for Rob's lascivious intentions gone in an instant. *Should* she be in a rush? For her, this stay had started as a necessity, but now it was creeping toward luxury. She might be well enough to leave the next day, and for all she knew Rob was looking forward to that moment. Perhaps she shouldn't be lounging here, reveling in his fire, grateful for another night in a bed. Not when that bed's rightful occupant would be stuck out here again, crashing on the floor.

"I hope I feel strong enough to head out, tomorrow," she said, angling.

His gaze snapped to hers, unreadable. “If you think you concussed yourself, don’t be reckless.”

Merry’s heart soared. “You’ve been really kind to me.”

He shrugged. “Couldn’t very well tell you to piss off. Not in the state you turned up in.”

“Sit down,” she said.

With a split second’s wary glance, he did.

He sat on the bare floor; unlaced and pulled off his boots. He wrapped his arms around his knees, and the gesture made him seem younger. Younger than the forty she’d guessed him to be, younger than the thirty-six he actually was. His hair was nearly dried, and the glow of the flames burnished his grays blond and softened the lines beside his lips and between his brows. She tried to imagine him as a twentysomething, living in the city. His jeans, now worn, had been nice in their day, stylish and surely expensive, and purchased by a man who knew his own measurements—she could tell from the fit and the quality of the stitching, the weave of the thick denim. The belt that held them up was equally well made. Yes, this man had been young and urbane, once upon a time. The burgeoning beard tried to hide this fact, but she could see it now. She could almost see this fellow in his English pub. Short hair, clean jaw, nursing a drink...and herself in the corner, trying to find the courage to sidle up to him.

Rob swallowed and his nostrils flared, the gestures of a man about to say something profound. But all that came out was, “Did you, um... Did you get much reading done?”

“Yeah. I’m over halfway through *Heart of Darkness*.”

“I haven’t read that since secondary school.”

“What was the last book you read?”

He squinted. “It’s been a few months. *Walden*, I think.”

“How very appropriate.”

Rob smiled. "I'd never heard of it before I found it on some list of classics. But I liked that one. Very much."

*Read it aloud to me. In that accent. In bed.*

He watched the flames, face nearly placid for a change.

She wished he were her lover, so she could reach over and rub his back, feel the muscles there and discover how cold or hot his body ran. She wondered who the last woman had been to touch him in such a familiar, possessive way.

She eyed him. "May I ask you a prying question?"

He smirked, and that tight little lopsided gesture put her nerves on a pleasurable edge.

"You can try," he said.

"Who did you leave behind, when you decided to move up here? Do you still stay in touch with family?"

He shook his head. "I lost my father about a year before I left Leeds, and my mother and I don't speak."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What about friends?"

He pursed his lips, looking grim. "I wasn't the nicest man before I came here."

*You aren't the nicest man now.* Not chummy, anyhow. But there was someone else underneath that protective shell. She'd glimpsed him, again and again. She was impatient, now. She wanted to crowbar him open at the hinges and stare that man dead in the eyes, whoever he was. No matter the heft of his baggage.

"How so?"

The orange stripes of the stove grate danced in his eyes as he chose his words. "I burned a lot of bridges on my way out of England." There was a humbleness in the way he said it, a softening of his stiff tone.

"What do you mean, about not being a nice man?"

“I was a lost, miserable person.”

She wanted to pry further, to ask if he had depression, or had simply been trapped in some life that hadn't suited him, troubled by the disconnect. But that seemed too nosy even for her.

“So there's no one you miss, back in England?” *No woman who broke your heart, sent you running off to live like a refugee?*

He gave it a long moment's consideration, his expression turning sad. “I miss some people, and the way things used to be. Before I made such a royal cock-up of everything. But they'd all turned their backs on me by the time I moved away. And with good reason.”

“People can be pretty forgiving.”

Rob linked his fingers atop his knees, seeming to study his knuckles. “It's too late. Though thank you for your optimism.”

“Did you leave a woman behind?”

“Not before she left me.”

*Aha! The catalyst.* “Can I ask how long you were with her?”

“Not quite five years.”

“And which came first—her leaving, or the royal cock-up?”

He smiled faintly and met her eyes, seeming relieved by her candidness. “The cock-up.”

“And kids?”

“No kids.”

Merry sighed, studying him with open curiosity. “I have to say, this mysterious mess you made of your life has me intrigued.”

His smile fled. “It's nothing thrilling. I just spent a long time going through the motions of living this life I thought would make me happy, but it never did.” His gaze dropped to her mouth or chin and his brow creased. “You know how you see someone around, with a job title you wish you had, a nice salary, nice car? Lovely partner, lovely home?”

She nodded.

He met her eyes once more. “That was me. That was what my life looked like, from the outside. On paper. I worked hard and I got all the things I thought would make me happy, and when the happiness never arrived...”

“You felt empty?”

“I felt...” He trailed off, watching the fire as though deciding whether or not to continue down this path.

Merry let the silence reign, rewarded when he finally spoke.

“I felt broken. I had everything I thought a person needed to feel satisfied or fulfilled or secure or whatever, but I didn’t feel any of those things. I felt... Well, yes. I felt empty. Like some part was missing, some mechanism that converts success into contentment.”

“And how do you feel out here?” Merry asked, hoping to steer him into more cheerful territory.

“Here I feel...”

*Safe? she guessed. Calm? In perfect step with nature and the meaning of life?*

“I feel very little,” he concluded.

She frowned, and Rob turned in time to see it. He smiled, sheepish or guilty.

“It feels nice,” he assured her.

“Does it?”

“You know how when you’re worried about everything you have to get done, it’s like your thoughts are these great loud lists, running through your head?”

She nodded, thinking of all those numbers waiting for her back home.

“Here, when I’m alone, there’s nothing in there. Just silence, and a sense of what my next task is, based on the simplest human needs. It’s very peaceful. Very Zen.”

“But it must be lonely.”

“It can be. It *should* be, I suppose. Except my last few years in the city... There was nothing joyous left in any of my relationships. Only stress and resentment. To be honest, I mostly feel relieved to have left everyone behind. Callous as that likely sounds.”

She shrugged. *Callous* wasn't the word. *Sad*, perhaps.

“I miss all kinds of people,” she said, “just being away for three weeks.”

Rob frowned. “I don't want to make you think...” He blinked at the fingers linked atop his knees. “I'm not relieved because I think the people in my life were nothing but bastards. It's just that in the end, all I seemed to do was disappoint everyone. If I'm relieved, it's because I know that out here, I can't do any more damage, or hurt anyone who cares about me.”

“Hurt them how?” she asked, more curious than fearful. Nothing about Rob got her serial-killer alarm wailing, but she did want to understand.

“Not physically,” he said. “Like I said, I was a miserable asshole. I hated myself, and I think I drove people away, annoyed that they even cared.”

“Were you depressed, do you think?”

He nodded. “I'm sure I was.”

*Ding ding ding.*

“That's hard.” Merry felt that way, from time to time. She knew she couldn't have overindulged herself to 240-plus pounds if she weren't seeking to quiet something—sadness or anxiety, some cold, echoing depth she hadn't known how to muffle except with food. And more recently, with the all-consuming project of losing the weight. The hole was still there, demanding satiation. And she still didn't know how to fill it, not permanently.

Maybe she'd hoped this trip might give her a clue, but part of her also suspected everyone had that well. It came standard, same as lungs, heart, skin. It drove some people to great ambition and success, and others to despair. Fill it with food or work or shopping or babies or sex or video games or God—whatever made you feel full for a time.

It sounded as though Rob's well might simply be deeper than most. So deep he wound up exiling himself to escape its echoes.

"I think you're a nice man," she told him, apropos of nothing.

His brows knitted. "Do you?"

"You've been very nice to me. And knowing what I do now, about how little you like people, I think you're all the nicer, being this courteous."

The kettle began its low, preliminary moan, and Rob looked grateful for the task. As he stood stirring the teaspoon in a mug at the table he said, "I couldn't very well ignore you. I'm an asshole, not a monster."

"I don't think you're either. Maybe I might have, if I'd met this alleged former you, back in your old life. But I think you're perfectly nice. Just a bit...bristly."

He seemed to blush at that, though it was hard to tell by the jittery glow of the fire. Still, he held her gaze for a long breath, a willing connection she doubted he'd have offered the day before. He turned away, thumping the spent leaves into the plastic tub and adding fresh ones. Stooping, he handed Merry the steaming mug.

"Thanks."

After getting his own cup started, Rob joined her again, sitting a bit closer, though still with a couple feet separating their hips. He set his mug between his ankles, stirring slowly. His expression was calm, perhaps melancholy.

Merry's heart felt full and swollen, none of this man's confessions having done a thing to lessen her attraction. If anything, Rob's discomfort over his alleged failings was strangely endearing. If he was indeed an asshole, he wasn't oblivious or self-righteous about that fact. Some dark magnetism hid behind those stony eyes, a force that made Merry yearn to move closer, to get invited deep inside his private thoughts.

To invite him deep inside her in return, in far baser ways.

“Do you miss...you know.” She trailed off, wussing out.

“Miss what?”

“Women, I guess? Romance? Or...” *Sex.* She couldn’t quite bring herself to drop that boulder between them. “Just that kind of contact. That connection.”

“I don’t know.” He studied his mug.

“Don’t you?”

“I hadn’t thought much about it. Like I said, my brain’s sort of a blank, out here.”

*Have you thought about sex, in two years?* Surely a man would be going crazy from the deprivation by now. Or perhaps sex was complicated for Rob, tied up in whatever shame he seemed to feel in regard to that final relationship.

Then Merry thought about bad things, about Rob in his lonely little cottage, in that bed where she’d slept and woken. Just Rob, alone, with only his hand for comfort. Who did he think of? Was there any slim chance he might think of *her* in those moments, after she was gone? Or had Rob shed his lust right alongside the trappings of a normal life?

Merry sipped her tea, heat slipping inside to warm her belly. She imagined a far less appropriate sensation, of the heat of a man’s body as it claimed hers.

“I sort of wrote off romance, too,” she told him.

“Oh?”

“I got dumped earlier this year. Well, I wasn’t quite dumped, since we weren’t a couple or anything.”

“That’s a shame.”

She shrugged. “He was kind of a jerk, and I always knew it, in the back of my mind. He never introduced me to his friends or asked to meet mine. Just called me up when...you know. And it was so pathetic that I was okay with it, for so long. Except, well... The sex was really great.” *There, good. Introduce sex without overtly demanding to know Rob’s feelings about it.*

*Smooth.* In truth the sex hadn't been all that amazing, but Jason had been out-of-her-league hot, so she'd rounded it up. "But then I started going through these positive changes, and I thought, maybe he'll want to get serious, now that I'm getting my shit together. Then out of the blue— nothing but crickets."

"I'm sorry."

"I feel like an idiot, looking back. Like, why did I ever waste my time with some guy who thought I was good enough to hook up with, but not good enough to meet his friends? Then the second I start having any kind of boundaries or self-esteem, he cuts me off? Doesn't even have the balls to come out and say we're over?" She shook her head.

"He sounds like a coward."

"I probably sound like a moron."

Rob's smile was skittish, telling her he wasn't used to these sorts of conversations. "We've all done stupid things for sex," he offered.

*Even you? Tell me. Tell me everything.* "I guess. But I always kinda figured you were supposed to be over that, by your thirties."

"Nah. Plenty of people make asses of themselves over sex well into middle-age. And beyond. Just look at every politician, ever."

She took a deep breath and finally found the balls to ask, "Do you miss it? Sex?"

His eyes widened, meeting hers, fleeing, meeting them again, escaping to stare at the thumbs tracing the lip of his mug. "I suppose. The way I miss a hot bath or ice cream. As a luxury, perhaps."

She shot him a sad smile. "That's all?" Maybe he was just downplaying it, so she wouldn't feel threatened, trapped here with him.

"It's not as though I came out here expecting to keep it in my life," he said. "I lost it in the trade. And willingly, yeah."

“Wow.” She studied him for a long time, well after his gaze had returned to the fire.

“That’s very sad.”

“I’m sure it is. I do my best not to think too much about it all.” He looked to his mug or the floor and laughed softly. The sound made Merry’s neck flush. “You’re very nosy, you know.”

“I know. It’s just that you’re probably the most interesting person I’ve ever met. Plus you can’t kick me out, so I may as well interrogate you for as long as I’ve got you captive.”

Something shifted in his expression, a hint of alarm passing over his features.

“Just kidding,” she added quickly.

“It’s fine. Pry all you want, just don’t expect to get too far. I came here so I could forget all the things that drove me out of my old life. I’m not eager to rehash them now.”

“Sorry. I’ll drop it.”

“Though it’s sort of nice to be asked,” he added, catching her gaze.

“Yeah?”

“Sure.” His brow furrowed, chin dipping. “I can’t remember the last time anyone seemed eager to know me.”

A pang of heartache passed through her, chased by something softer. Affection, perhaps. Longing. “Maybe because you never answer when they knock.”

He looked up again, his smile humble.

*Kiss me*, she wanted to say. Was this how men felt, she wondered, constantly angling for a sexual segue and struggling to manifest one? Rob wasn’t taking any of her bait. If she was going to get anywhere, she’d have to be blunt.

“May I hold your hand?”

He blinked at her, a hundred perfectly valid questions tensing his face, starting with *Why?* But when he spoke, all that came out was, “Okay.”

He unlinked his fingers and offered his hand. Merry took it in her own, on the edge of the cushion. She let her body's awareness swim in the warm, strong weight of him, the softness of his palm, the roughness of his knuckles, the heat where his fingertips had touched his mug.

They watched the flames behind the grate and she gave his hand a faint squeeze. When she felt him squeeze in return, the sensation lit a fire in her toes that crackled through her legs and belly, spreading a fever all the way to her cheeks and ears.

"This is nice," she told the flames.

"It is."

"No one's held my hand in ages." Not even her erstwhile fuck buddy. Probably no one since her dad, standing beside her as they watched her mom's ashes dissolving into the Pacific tide. Yet this contact felt nothing like consolation.

"They ought to," Rob mumbled. "It's so soft."

Merry had lost much of her old softness in the past year, though not in her hands, not in her heart, not her mouth or her sex. She rubbed Rob's knuckles with her thumb, noting how the space between their palms had grown damp. Like chemistry, the way their two bodies could come together in even this most negligible way and alter that tiny climate.

*Soft*, she thought. Like Rob's bed and sheets. As his spent body might feel against hers, after she reminded him of certain luxuries he'd sacrificed in exchange for solitude.

She turned to him, freeing her fingers, edging them along his wrist. Struck still as a statue, he let her roam up his arm and discover the lean muscle there. He watched the caress, lips parting. Merry took a deep breath, tugged gently. He edged closer.

She'd seen confusion on that face, alarm, disbelief. But this was new—a more hesitant breed of uncertainty, like he'd never been invited to kiss a woman before. His eyes darted between hers, lips pursing and relaxing, but drawing no closer. Maybe he was trying to be a

gentleman, not registering which of them was attempting to seduce the other. His eyes shut, and he swallowed. His hands were on his shin, clutching it like a roller coaster's safety bar.

Merry touched his neck, then his jaw with its overgrown stubble. She wanted to trace every feature—those dark brows, strong nose, the faint lines around his eyes. His mouth, so sensual at rest, but tensed now, a tight, hard line. He was handsome when he smiled, sexy when he scowled; beguiling when he hesitated this way, unreadable and fascinating.

Those lips parted, and his deep voice was as soft as she'd ever heard it.

"You smell nice," he murmured. "Like the tropics."

"Thanks. It's gardenia and jasmine and—" *Quit babbling.* "Anyway. I felt silly even bothering to pack it. But now I'm glad I did."

His eyes opened, playing a game of tag with hers, meeting and dodging, meeting again. His lips pursed and parted half a dozen times.

"I want to, if you do," she whispered.

His lids lowered, hiding all but a sliver of steely blue, and he turned, bent knee resting atop her thigh. The fingers that touched her jaw were warm and coarse, but his lips felt smooth when they met hers. This contact, hot and sweet as a gulp of tea, and her body dissolved like sugar.

The kiss lasted only a second before Rob pulled back, studying her face.

"Has it been a long time?" she whispered.

His gaze captured hers, pinning it in place. "It's been a very long time."