

Coming Up Roses Excerpt

I wanted to kiss Tess Monroe.

I'd wanted to kiss her the second she walked into the shop a couple days ago, wearing overalls and a Cure T-shirt. I'd wanted to kiss her as I watched her scrub the wall with her little face wrinkled up in concentration. I'd wanted to kiss her when she fell off the ladder and into my arms. And all day today while we painted the shop, I only thought about one thing.

I wanted to kiss her. And I was accustomed to getting what I wanted.

"Did you hear me?" Kash asked impatiently.

"Hmm?"

He rolled his eyes, his long body stretched out on the bottom bunk in our old room. "Man, what's with you?"

"I've been scrubbing and painting the shop for two days. I'm tired."

"Right," he said, "and the redhead in the overall shorts has nothing to do with it."

I leaned back in the wooden desk chair I'd taken up residence in, the hinge squeaking. "As if Tess Monroe would willingly give me the time of day."

He shrugged. "Seems to me like she's given you the time every hour, on the hour, for two days. What's with her? She was different today."

It was true. This morning, she'd walked into the shop, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to work with a smile on her face. She'd only insulted me seven times, and one of those was a backhanded compliment. My stats were down: the day before, it'd been twenty-three insults and a jab with a broom handle that I couldn't be sure was accidental.

Not that I was counting.

"I dunno what's gotten into her, but I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth. I'm just taking the boon and moving on."

"Man, she looked so cute with that bandana in her hair and paint on her nose. And her ass in those overalls..." He whistled up at my old bunk.

I fought the urge to chuck my Batman paperweight at him.

"So are you going after her or what?" Kash asked, smirking.

"I just got her to quit treating me like a dog. Pretty sure anything more is off the table."

"Maybe I'll go after her then. Think I've got a shot?"

I snorted to cover my immediate fury at the thought. "She's a girl with standards, Kash. If I don't have a shot, you've got none in hell."

"Maybe she just needs somebody older. More mature."

"We were born in the same year, asshole."

"I'm just saying. Maybe she's looking for stability. Everybody knows you're about as stable as uranium."

“And you’re running your mouth like you want a foot in Uranus.”

Kash laughed. “I’d love to see you try.”

I eyed him. “You don’t actually like her, do you?”

“Nah,” he said, smiling. “I just want you to admit you do.”

A sigh of concession blew out of me, the pause filled with my thoughts. “We almost kissed yesterday,” I admitted.

Kash sat up so fast, he thunked his head on the bottom bunk. “Goddammit—” He rubbed at his forehead “—Warn a guy before you go saying things like, *I almost kissed Tess.*”

I laughed openly at his misfortune, hoping it left a mark. “She fell off a ladder in storage, and I caught her. Topless.”

His eyes bulged, hand still pressed to his forehead. “Tess was topless in storage?”

“No, I was.”

He rolled his eyes, chucking a pillow at me. I caught it midair and chucked it right back at him.

“I’m surprised she didn’t deck you,” he said, fluffing the pillow before leaning back again.

“Me too, if I’m being honest. She hates me. Hated me. Maybe still hates me a little.”

“What’d you do to her?” he asked. At this point, the question was rhetorical—neither of us knew, no matter how many times we’d asked.

“Who knows? But I think the last couple of days have helped my case. All I had to do was show up and not fuck up.”

“Don’t worry. There’s still time,” he reassured me.

“Trust me, I’m aware. I’ve been working on the installation for her in the back, and I’m both convinced I’m going to disappoint her and that I’ll knock her socks off.”

“Or her bra. Think you can knock that off?”

“If she were anybody else, I’d guarantee it. But Tess?” I made a resigned noise.⁷⁷

He watched me for a second in that way he had about him, the quiet assessment that ran under his outward charm. It was a mask— that much I knew for a fact—armor to protect his soft spots. Everyone thought he was nothing but a girl-crazy flirt, just like me. But that was just how we liked it. Let them think we were empty.

There was comfort in being underestimated. We were constantly set to impress everyone.