

Downpour

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Downpour

by [Muffinworry](#).

Summary

Sometimes Sybil wishes people would surprise her. Sequel to Cloudburst.

Sybil lies very still and resists the urge to check her blinking terminal. Six unread messages and two events tomorrow and –

Red sighs and shifts her weight, and Sybil holds her breath.

Twelve weeks she's known the singer, and in that time, Sybil Reisz's life has changed, subtly and profoundly.

After their shared ride home in the rain, Sybil spends an evening looking up recordings and scraps of video – anything with Red. They're mostly uploaded by friends, a couple of small solos with a choir. One twelve-minute clip of her in a club, improvising something jazzy. The video is shaky, people pass in front of the camera a few times, but Sybil watches it over and over again. She's – well, she's not perfect (not yet), but she's got depth and real power behind her smoky voice, and when she takes the microphone, the audience responds as one.

It seemed like a good investment to get to know her better. Sybil is careful not to come on too strong – she arranges a chance meeting outside Highrise, which turns into a casual offer of lunch. Two days after that, she's perched among empty flatbread boxes on Red's kitchen counter, listening to her chatter about lyrics.

"It's got to be about love, of course," Red calls over her shoulder. She rummages through the fridge and stands back up with two beers. Sybil grins happily and drinks the stuff without even wincing.

"Of course! Give the people what they want!"

"But not perfect, fairytale love." Red sets down her bottle and stares at it for a second. "It's more – seeing somebody new, falling for them, without really knowing who they are, and you don't care, you know what they're doing to you, but you just want to be near them."

"Right." Red's painted fingernails are drumming on the counter, next to Sybil's thigh. Sybil shakes herself mentally, and tries to focus. "Well, that sounds good. Call me when it's ready, I'll make sure you get some time in a really good studio."

Red is breathtaking when she's grateful.

She's pictured it for weeks now – a sold out show, a standing ovation, Red's gasp of happiness as she flings herself into Sybil's arms. In the end, it's almost exactly like that, except it's not Red's big day. It's Sybil's.

The wedding is the highest of high society, and Sybil's been working for a year and a half on it. The past few weeks, she's been too busy even to go out to Red's shows, sending flowers

and regrets. Tonight, all of Cloudbank is celebrating. The wedding reception is in full swing, everything is perfect, and for once, Sybil is smiling and relaxed.

And she walks in.

She's swaying in a long gown that Sybil had helped her choose. She's gotten better at her makeup too; her red lips curve in a slow smile as she steps up to the microphone. She congratulates the couple and starts to sing for their first dance. It's a popular song, not one of her own, but the crowd thrills to it. This is definitely the wedding of the year now.

Afterwards, they clink glasses of champagne and Sybil, her duties officially over for the evening, throws back her head with an exaggerated groan of relief. And then Red – gorgeous, tantalizing, selfish Red – smiles at Sybil and tells her, “You worked hard for this. Congratulations.”

And kisses her.

Sybil shifts over to pull Red closer. Red is still chewing on the end of her pencil.

“Not coming together?”

“It just isn't right. It's too happy.”

“People like happy songs.” Sybil catches an auburn curl, twirls it around her finger.

“People will like what I give them.”

Red's smile is knowing, slightly cruel.

“Yes. Yes, I think they will.”

Backstage is different when it's empty. Before the show, it's a fizzing centre of excitement and panic, bright lights and air kisses and flashbulbs. Waiting for Red's set to finish, in the empty dressing that smells of hairspray, Sybil is less at ease.

She's never liked waiting.

Sybil hugs her arms around herself and looks around with mild interest, examining the snapshots of Red on the wall, picking clothes up here and there.

She can't resist.

She glides over and flicks on the lights that frame Red's mirror.

The eyes are wrong.

Sybil twitches the bright curls into place over her own blonde, tugs them lower over one eye, and stares at herself critically in the dressing room mirror. Wide-set brown eyes blink back at her, and she closes them quickly, before the wrongness of the image sings her imagination. They don't make contacts that shade of blue anyway. What would it be worth, to be *adored* everywhere you went?

She doesn't sing, wouldn't presume, but she hums a little to herself, tries a little pirouette. Over her shoulder, her reflection catches her eye again; the red hair doesn't suit her. She looks deathly; a blood and snow reflection.

Sybil snatches off the wig and flings it angrily onto the heap of discarded props and costumes.

She is useful. She's always known this; it's the foundation of her life. Friendly and a good listener, and enough people have called her beautiful that she has no hesitation about her looks, but it's her usefulness, her perfect organization, that makes her a valuable citizen.

When did she stop being useful?

Sybil curls up around her pillow in a bed that's too big, and remembers.

Five unanswered calls is four too many, so Sybil asks the city to take her to Red's door. She stares unhappily at her reflection in the door's camera, and pats down a stray curl. This interference with her schedule is really taking its toll on her appearance. Her hand hovers over the bell. She takes a deep breath, and presses.

Silence.

Then a small sound of surprise and a giggle, followed by a low, rumbling laugh. Red's voice: *I said put me down.* A patter of footsteps.

The door swings open and Sybil steps back a pace.

Red has a fluffy robe wrapped around her, and a lazy smile. Her bright hair is tangled over one half-lidded eye. She gazes at Sybil with the insolence of a woman who has just been very well loved.

"Sybil! Sorry, did we have plans, or-?"

The famous voice is throaty, hoarse. *If he's damaged her voice*, thinks Sybil, with a ferocity that scares her.

"Oh nothing special," she replies brightly. Forces herself to smile. "I just wanted to check that you're all right." *You aren't, are you? You're not writing, not performing. You're slipping away and leaving me, and you can't do that.*

Red gathers her into a sudden hug. The closeness of her leaves Sybil breathless. "You're a good friend," she says, and just like that, the bubble bursts.

Sybil's terminal chimes softly, and she stares at the name on the screen.

"Sybil? Are you listening to us?"

She puts it down, unanswered, and turns back to the table. Royce clearly wants a cigarette; his long fingers are shredding the corner of his notepad.

"I'm listening. And of course I agree. Talented people, not too high profile. And I think I have a new candidate." She stares at her terminal again as a message pops up.

[I finished it – finally! Want to hear? – R]

"Are you positive?"

"Royce," Sybil forces a laugh. "Trust me. I know people, remember?"

She's backstage again, and again it's too cold and empty. Even for the best-connected woman in Cloudbank, after-hours access to the Empty Set had been hard to pull off. On stage, Red is singing a scale, testing out the legendary acoustics. Red's – friend – is watching from the wings. Sometimes Sybil wishes that people would surprise her.

Red is so very beautiful when she's grateful.

Sybil wavers, bites her lip. Watches her singer.

Her voice warmed up, she starts to sing to the empty concert hall. The most exclusive concert Sybil's ever attended. Only one guest too many.

And then the lyrics hit Sybil like a physical blow, and all of her uncertainty vanishes.

"I won't save you," Red moans on the stage. Sybil feels her heart tighten as she hears the truth sung out in that golden voice.

It's not betrayal, she tells herself. It's solving a problem. It's saving Red from herself. She presses the button to call Grant, never taking her eyes off the stage.

He jumps in front of Red, of course. Sybil doesn't bother to worry about that. It's what she'd do, in his place.

But Red isn't there, glowing and grateful for Sybil to claim. She vanishes, along with something less important.

Grant and Royce and Asher are all shouting about the city and the Process, but their voices are getting fainter. What Sybil hears, above the ringing in her ears, is Red's last song, over

and over. She begins to laugh.

They leave her there, in the Empty Set. Somebody should stay, they say, in case the singer comes back, and they leave her quickly. The stage is slippery with blood – his blood, and so Sybil fetches a towel from the dressing room and spreads it out beside her parasol. The ladylike effect pleases her, and she giggles and sits down daintily. Thinks of a beach that she never got the chance to show Red. Fickle, beautiful Red.

Sybil finds herself humming her song. How generous of Red, how wonderful, to write a song for Sybil. She spreads out her ruffled skirts and closes her eyes to wait.

She'll be back soon.

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