



Willow
AND

WATERLILIES

THE GENTLEMAN'S STORY

TAYLOR K SCOTT

Willows and Waterlilies
The Gentleman's Story



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Warning: The following work of fiction describes content of a sexual nature.

Musical Influences

No Air – Jordin Sparks

Kissing You – Des'ree

Iris – Goo Goo Dolls

Say Something – A Great Big World and Christina Aguilera

I Wanna Dance With Somebody – Marian Hill

Numb – Linkin Park

Dangerous Woman – Ariana Grande

Breathin – Ariana Grande

Stronger – Sugababes

I Fell in Love with the Devil – Avril Lavigne (The Devil-
Book 3)

Into Your Arms – Witt Lowry

Apologize – Timbaland (feat. One Republic)

Here With Me - Dido

Keeping Your Head Up - Birdy

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DEDICATION

To my fellow cygnet inkers, a special group of authors, readers and reviewers, set up by the amazing TL Swan, whose books got me hooked on this wonderful journey.



Author's Note

This series contains scenes that may be hard to read and may trigger some people. Ellie's story talks about being cheated on in her past relationships. In doing so, she has developed trust issues. Her story also contains scenes of a sexual nature.

Prologue

Ellie

I used to believe in love at first sight, or at least, I had wanted to. Alas, believing in such a notion got my fingers burned, and my heart a little chipped from having one too many of my crushes take a stab at it. One of which was my last boyfriend, Blake, who broke up with me out of the blue, just last year. I spent a good few weeks trying to work out what it was that I had done to have turned his 'I love you' into 'I just want to be friends'. It was incredibly humiliating to learn that he had said these same words to not only me but to two others on the side. He wasn't the first and he most likely won't be the last. Having said that, I did come to a decision after many nights of lone crying, to not fall for men like Blake. He was ridiculously attractive, privileged, and always made me feel like I was lucky to have him. Instead, I would go for the safe guy, the homey sort who didn't exactly rock your world, but who worshipped the ground you walked on.

And so, it came to be that I met this very sort of man at one of my cousin's charity events, loitering around on the peripheries of all the action, looking thoroughly uncomfortable. It was not love at first sight, it was barely lust at first sight, however, it was safety at first sight. Here was a Labrador of a man who would be loyal, comforting, and always pleased to see me. Jonathan works in finance; his job entails long hours which means our two-month relationship has felt more like one month. He is forever making up for the fact with fancy dinners, expensive gifts, and compliments that seem to fall so easily from his lips. I'm sure love will come, but for now, I can at least sleep easy in the fact that he is mine. Only mine.

Chapter 1

Ellie

“Good morning, thank you for calling Cygnature Blooms, where bigger is always better. You’re speaking to Tee, please may I have your location?”

“Yes, good morning, I’m in Los Angeles.”

“Please hold and I’ll transfer you to our LA branch.”

The coffee shop is quiet, gearing up for the morning rush, but still fairly empty. Only a few of us crazies get up this early to avoid the fight for caffeine that will take place in approximately forty-five minutes. It took me a while to work out this window of opportunity; when I could queue for my wake-up drink without being hemmed in like an ewe in a pen. However, after my first week of working for my cousin, getting shoved about between suits and their already bad BO, I decided I’d have to get up even earlier if I was to avoid having to repeat this rather unpleasant experience every Monday to Friday.

Waking at the butt-crack of dawn does have its perks, for this is how I came to meet some of the most interesting people I’ve ever come across. For example, there’s Joan, the fashionista CEO who is in her seventies and still dating multiple men. Finley, the barista who is working his way through med school and enjoys discussing the more gruesome side of his career choice. Carl, the homeless guy who comes in for a free drink every morning like clockwork, and who was once a great porn star, or so he says. Then, there’s Mr Earl Grey, who, if it weren’t for the fact that I was already seeing someone, I might well take the extra time to make myself more presentable for work. The man makes most of the

customers swoon, as well as breathe in extra deeply to get a whiff of his manly cologne. His manners are impeccable, though if you were lucky enough to date him, you'd most likely want him to break some of those manners, if you catch my drift.

“Morning,” he says after finishing his phone call to the florist, complete with a breathtaking smile that forces me to remember I'm already seeing someone. “That's a new color on you, is it not?”

“Oh,” I laugh nervously while we wait in line, studying the shade of blue that has been weaved into my shirt, “I suppose so.”

“It suits you; it brings out your eyes,” he comments with a charming smirk still resting upon his lips for a long time after. Lips that could no doubt bring a woman to her knees if he so chose to.

“Thanks,” I reply rather dumbly. “Early meeting this morning?”

“No, just want to get a head start, like yourself,” he says as we all step forward like sheep, “and to catch you here, as always.”

“You are far too charming,” I giggle, “Mr Earl Grey.”

“You still won't let me tell you my real name, even after...what is it now? A month we've been running into one another,” he says, looking genuinely surprised over how long we've been engaged in this daily routine.

“I think it makes it all the more interesting,” I tell him, knowing that exchanging names will lead to exchanging numbers, and exchanging numbers will lead to temptation. Jonathan is safe, whereas this man is much too beautiful and charming to be anywhere near loyal to just one woman. I suspect he has a cliché little black book of numbers he refers to on a nightly basis. No, anonymity is for the best.

“So, I shall forever be Mr Earl Grey, and you shall forever be...” he trails off, deliberately piquing my interest over whatever nickname he might have for me.

“Be...?”

“I think I shall keep that information to myself,” he says smugly before turning to face the barista. “A large earl grey, please.”

“Tease!” I huff with a long, theatrical sigh. “Don’t laugh, but I tried earl grey the other day, purely because you always order it; I was intrigued.”

“And?” he says as he hands over the money for his drink, which includes a healthy tip.

“Your taste buds must be dead is all I’m going to say,” I admit, causing him to tip his head back and laugh out loud. *God, he’s beautiful!*

“I’m going to make you a promise,” he begins rather cryptically, waiting for me while I give my own order, “the day I find out your name, is the day I will ask you out for dinner.”

“You know I’m seeing someone,” I smile at him cheekily, “and I do not cheat.”

“Neither do I,” he says with a wink, “and because I respect you for that, I will stop asking for your name until I know you are free for that dinner.”

“Hmmm, ok,” I reply, walking toward the door with him. “But, if I go to dinner with you, I get to hear what your nickname is for me.”

“Agreed,” he says with a nod of his head. “Until then, have a good day.”

“The way you talk, Mr Earl Grey,” I giggle, “you have to admit, I chose the perfect nickname for you.”

“Wait till you hear yours,” he says, then walks away before I can answer him in any sort of way.

Jonathan, I am with Jonathan. Safe, safe Jonathan.



Elijah

Lenora Woods was a creature of habit. She pretended to enjoy the simple things in life; she put on a façade of a ditzy female who was only ever fit for getting married, having babies, and being completely predictable in everything she

did. She had always relied on her husband, Harrison Woods, to make the important decisions in life, and to be the main earner and provider for the family. One could hardly blame her for this was how she was raised to be. However, Lenora was a liar, an impersonator, and a damn fine actress. The woman was far from stupid; she was an intelligent person who, if she put her mind to it, could shock you with the most interesting of facts and trains of thought. Had she the confidence, she could argue you under the table until you were nothing more than a quivering wreck, wondering how the hell this woman who wore the perpetual smile of a teddy bear, fashioned cardigan sets that lacked any sense of style, and who normally chose to remain silent, had come to bring you down with a mere few words of her hidden intellect. To many, she was non-descript; to me, she was my mother, the most wonderful one in the world. I've always had the greatest respect for her, even if no one else took much note of her. This included my late father, who had been endearing in his own way, but by no means as fascinating as Lenora Woods.

This is why every Valentine's Day, without fail, I come to the only florist I ever use and buy her a bouquet of white roses and agapanthus. Simple, yet elegant; understated, yet irresistible to the eye; modern, yet classic. My father, when he was still alive, used to buy her pink carnations, always pink carnations, from the very day he had decided Lenora Woods was the girl who he was going to one day, marry. The man had been infatuated with her, for she was a stunning woman who had garnered many a man's attention. Pink carnations had been his mother's favorite, and being a simple fellow, he decided this must be the preferred choice of his would-be wife. Lenora never told him she preferred roses, nor did she argue when he came out with the most ridiculous of ideas, nor when he came home with lipstick on his collar. She would merely roll her eyes over how cliché her situation had become. Even on the day of his funeral, when a long-standing mistress of his turned up to pay her condolences to my mother, she never openly acknowledged his infidelity. The pain was there, in her eyes at least, but she remained composed until the very last

cucumber sandwich had been consumed. It was only when she retired to bed that she let the tears escape. It is a shame the man forgot how much he had once loved her.

“Morning, Mr Woods,” Carol, the friendly florist smiles at me; the fact that she knows my name is part of the reason I always use this florist. “Roses with the agapanthus?”

“Need you ask?” I tease as I lean over the counter with my trademark smirk. She rolls her eyes just as my mother would, laughing over my need to flirt with any female I happen to cross paths with. It is harmless and costs nothing to make a woman feel good about herself.

“Anything else for you today? Perhaps something for somebody who isn’t your mother?” she asks with hope in her voice. Carol has been trying to couple me off with someone since I turned twenty-five, six years ago. “I’m beginning to think I should offer myself as a possibility. It would be a hardship, but for a young, successful, and extremely handsome man like you, I’d put myself through it.”

“Now, come on, Carol, you’re making me blush,” I smile, complete with dimples. At least they’re covered by enough stubble to pretend I don’t look like a little boy every time I offer a grin. “Besides, I think you would be too much for me to handle, if you know what I mean.”

“Tsk, more like the other way round, you wicked boy!” she laughs as she wanders out back to gather my order.

While she is making the order for all I know, for she’s taking that long, I begin to meander about the place, taking in the different scents and shades of reds and pinks in the Valentine’s Day display. I wonder if I should buy a bouquet for my long-suffering PA, but then think better of it in case she

gets the wrong idea. However, another voice from behind the desk picks up the phone to take an order and I find myself eavesdropping for no other reason than there isn't anything else to stimulate me.

“So, you would like two bouquets of two dozen roses,” she repeats with an air of disapproval in her voice. I smile to myself, knowing that this can only mean Mr Romance obviously has a couple of partners on the go. “One for your ‘Darling Wife’ and another for ‘Miss Ellie Russo’. Do you want me to add your name?” A pause ensues and I find myself eagerly awaiting the name of the cad who is tacky enough to order his wife and his mistress’ Valentine’s gift from the same florist, at the exact same time. “Right, Jonathon Beck.”

The name has me wandering over to where she is still holding the phone to her ear. She notices me, seemingly recognizes my face from previous trips, and offers a smile in greeting. She then points to the phone and shakes her head while mouthing the word ‘asshole’. I can’t help but smile, being that I am in complete agreement with her.

“Can I take the addresses?” she asks at the same time as she grabs the pen stuck behind her ear and positions it in a perfect tripod grip to begin scribbling. She doesn’t seem perturbed by my watching as she writes down the two addresses, one of them being an office building not too far from here. Carol comes out with my usual order while the girl, her name being something along the lines of Gabby, takes the adulterer’s credit card details.

“Stunning, as always, thank you,” I beam at Carol as she takes my card.

“It was him again!” Gabby calls over to Carol as soon as she hangs up.

“You know him?” I ask with a curious raise of my brow.

“Oh, yeah, he’s been buying his new squeeze flowers for about three months now. Sometimes he gets his poor wife flowers too, but more often than not, it’s all for the girlfriend. I make him repeat all the details every time because I know how uncomfortable it makes him,” she says with a devious grin.

“What a creep!” Carole declares as she hands my card back.

“Three months, ay?” I ask as I shake my head with a whistle. “Must be very cunning to have kept it from the wife for so long.”

“Sly as a snake,” Gabby agrees with a shiver, “and I bet he looks like the back end of a bus. Bet the girlfriend is nothing more than a gold digger because one thing’s for sure, he must have plenty of dough, the amount he spends in here.”

“You put the extra twenty-five percent on?” Carol checks at the same time as she gives me a cheeky wink.

“Of course,” Gabby confirms as she begins gathering what she needs to make the new order.

“Carol,” I ask in a leading way, “you know how much of a valued customer I am?”

“Yes,” she replies with suspicion in her voice.

“And I bring joy to your life at least once a month?”

“What do you want, Elijah?” she asks, getting to the blunt point with her arms crossed and a smile on her face.

“How would you like to let me do you a favor and deliver the girlfriend’s flowers?” I ask politely.

“For what reason?”

“A public service, if you will,” I reply with a shrug. “I just want to see if this girl is aware of the fact that she’s seeing a married man.”

“I dunno, this guy is helping me to pay for my holiday to the Bahamas at the end of the year,” she says. “Besides, I’m sure that would be an infraction of her personal information; his too.”

“True,” I concede, “but how about I promise to use this florist for every wedding, Christening, apology, funeral, whatever.”

“How are you ever going to have most of those things when the only person you buy for is your mother?” she scoffs.

“Yes, but once I start marrying, I figure I’ll probably be on a roll. I think I’ll have at least four or five weddings. I’m extremely annoying to live with, ask my sister.”

“And the right to privacy?” she counters.

“I can be discrete,” I promise, seeing the crack in her resolve to remain professional.

“Hmmm...”

“Go on, Carol, the bastard deserves it,” Gabby pipes in from the side while still making up the order of roses.

“Yes, come on, Carol,” I tease, making her laugh over my schoolboy cheekiness.

“Oh, you wicked boy!” she relents. “But I will hold you to all those promises. I mean it,” she says, pointing her finger at me as a mother would.

“I swear, every single wedding,” I declare with my hand over my chest.

Today is shaping up to be more interesting than I thought it would be.

Chapter 2

Ellie

“You’re pacing!” Nate, my older cousin, chuckles at me while resting easily inside of my desk chair. His confidence knows no bounds, much like his older brother and my boss, Cameron. Nate has only recently agreed to lift a finger and work for his wealth instead of accepting handouts to feed his party-boy lifestyle. To see him in a suit still looks a little out of place.

“I know,” I gasp in a panicked voice, “I’m pathetic, aren’t I?”

“Ahhh, Ellie,” he chuckles wickedly “I’ve never believed anything otherwise when it comes to you and men.”

I merely flip him the bird, for sadly, I am a little much when a man is on the scene. I can’t help it. My parents found love from an early age and frequently subjected me to their PDA. Not to mention the saucy bastard standing before me has never been short of a woman or three. In fact, everyone in the family seems either happily in love or lust. All but his older sister, Helena. Truth be told, I don’t know Helena all that well; she was pregnant, then married before we’d had a chance to bond. According to Nate, she was a reclusive squat before that.

As I begin to tear myself to pieces over the fact that I appear to be unlovable, my desk phone springs to life, prompting me to enter into a state of near insanity.

“Shit! My phone is ringing!” I gasp at Nate, pointing at it as though the fact that it’s carrying out its main purpose in

life is the most shocking thing in the world.

“You know they’re designed to do that, Ellie,” Nate laughs at me, still with his hands resting at the back of his head. “**You** are then supposed to pick it up.”

“What if it’s him?” I flap, demonstrating my pitifulness in all its humiliating glory.

“Then you say, ‘*Hello, I’m a crazy nut job; run for the hills before it’s too late!*’” the asshole teases, all the while watching Lucinda, the office party girl, walk past with her skirt hitched up to her butt.

“I’m telling Cameron you’ve been bunking off for the past hour,” I threaten at the same time as I pick up the phone with a trembling hand.

“Do it,” he huffs as he finally gets to his feet, taking a leisurely stretch for good measure. “I’ve still got dirt on him from childhood.”

“H-Hi?” I stutter.

“Sounding professional there, Ellie,” he whispers as he leans in to eavesdrop without shame. “Nothing says confidence like a shaky ‘*h-hello*’” he mocks me in a theatrically girly voice. I try to push him away, but the guy is almost twice the size of my miniature frame. The damn men in our family always grow tall and broad, whereas the ladies have to work extra hard to stay trim and are usually shopping in the petite section.

“Hi, Ellie,” Helena says meekly from the reception desk, “someone is here to see you; he has flowers. Shall I show him up?”

“No, no, I’ll come down,” I tell her with a strange mixture of fear, relief, and excitement in my voice. Jonathan and I haven’t seen one another in over two weeks, and tonight is the night I ask him where this might all be heading. I had thought he would have made his intentions known by now, but after not seeing him for this long, I’m now afraid of where that conversation might go. I’ve already fallen for his charm or at least the idea of a relationship that won’t end with me ingesting a bucket of ice cream for one. He smothers me with fancy gifts, but that doesn’t mean a lot if you have the means to do so, does it? Is he really going out of his way for a girl he likes, or am I easily pleased? I need him to break the curse, the one that always has me finding out I was never a man’s one and only.

“Ok, I’ll ask him to wait,” she says softly, devoid of emotion. You wouldn’t believe we were related, but then, the same could be said of anyone who isn’t her only daughter. Jess is the only person she shows any real human affection for.

“Thanks, Hels,” I reply and hang up. I then turn to see Nate smiling smugly, looking like he’s about to do something totally embarrassing.

“I’m coming!” He confirms my fears with his hands firmly inside his pockets.

“No way!” I snap as I grab my key card and attempt to fix my wayward hair. “Get back to work; you know, the reason you’re here.”

“In the absence of a big brother, I need to check this dude out. You have epically poor taste in men, and he already sounds shifty.”

The asshole begins falling into step alongside me and in such a way, I know arguing will be futile.

“I hate you,” I mutter once we’re inside the elevator, “and so does your PA.”

“The feeling is mutual,” he grumbles. “Damn Cameron for stealing my old one. Jack knew how to be efficient and interesting.”

“I still find it laughable that you’ve been matched with the one woman who you haven’t wanted to bed,” I tease, “Cameron must have done that on purpose.”

“I’d rather sleep with a cactus than Beatrice Summers,” he sneers, “the woman bores me to tears. She’s one of those irritating people everyone loves but you have absolutely no idea as to why.”

“Bea *is* loveable,” I declare, “you? Not so much.”

As the doors ping open, reminding me of the impending vomit-inducing meeting with a guy I know I should be feeling comfortable with by now, it strikes me that I don’t hate the fact that Nate is coming to assess him. I no longer trust my gut instincts; they’ve got me burned one too many times. Nate, however, is a guy who reads people extremely well. Poor Bea Summers excluded. She should be thankful though; the guy is a slut. Should he decide he wants a woman, she is virtually powerless to stop it from happening.

Unfortunately, I tend to be attracted to the same (unrelated) type of man.

As I walk into the grand, white reception area to 'Medina Technologies', Cameron Carter's baby, I notice Helena pointing toward the back of a guy who does not look anything like the man who I've been dating for the past three months. Neither does he look like he works for a florist or a delivery company. His Tom Ford suit and expensively groomed appearance say he's more of a top-end lawyer, or perhaps a business mogul, than someone who works with his hands.

"Wow, even I can feel myself blushing," Nate mutters against my ear, "he's nearly as attractive as me...nearly."

"Modest, much?!" I hiss. "That isn't him."

As I stare at the man with a furrowed brow and a decent amount of lust, he finally turns around and looks at me. For a moment, we study one another in disbelief, as if trying to make sure we are who we think we are. He then turns back to face Helena and gestures to me with a questioning expression. Helena quickly nods her head before returning to work. She's always wanted to remain hidden, so the fact she's in reception is a little sad. It was Cameron's olive branch after a decade-long falling out over her ex-husband. It was either here or up on the top floor in Bea's position. Nate tells me he isn't ready to be that close to her yet.

"Er...hi," the man who I see nearly every day, yet don't know his real name, says with a sheepish smile. He's still holding onto a large bunch of expensive red roses; the same sort that Jonathan usually gets from some uptown florist.

“Mr Earl Grey?” I question him while offering my hand and a thoroughly confused expression. He takes my hand as though he wasn’t expecting it. I had to give him something for his presence is a little disarming.

“These are for you,” he says as he shoves the bouquet out in front of him. When I accept the flowers, he begins twiddling his ear. I know we flirt with one another, but I always thought it was innocent. I never, for one minute, thought he’d go this far; he knows I’m with somebody else.

“Hey, I think I know you,” Nate says from beside me, reminding me that he’s there, for the situation had made me completely forget. “Woods, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he smiles with what looks like relief, “one of the partners at Falmer, Woods and Bradford; we sometimes work with Lucius Hastings. I believe he occasionally deals with you. We take on a lot of criminal law cases whereas his firm specializes in corporate law.”

“Ah, yes, the delights of Lucius Hastings,” Nate smiles as though he knows him well. I, on the other hand, have only heard rumors about what an asshole he is. As I look over the stranger’s shoulder, I notice Helena looking straight at us with a deathly pale complexion. However, she soon sees me looking and immediately returns her eyes to the screen in front of her.

“Yes, he is...*interesting* to work with,” Mr Earle Grey laughs awkwardly as he rubs the stubble of his jaw with his knuckles.

“Delicately put,” Nate adds.

“And the flowers?” I interrupt their coded conversation to try and find out why the hell he has gone against my wishes and come to deliver a ridiculously expensive bunch of flowers. I thought he understood how much I despise cheaters of any kind.

“Ah, yes, apologies,” he says with a cough to clear his throat. “These are from Jonathan; I believe you’ve been seeing him for a while now.”

“A few months, yes,” I reply, still with suspicion in my voice. “And you are, what? Living out your dream of delivering flowers in between court sessions?”

“Ellie!” Nate snaps, causing me to look ashamedly to the floor because that did come out kind of rude. But this is weird, right?

“No, it’s ok,” he laughs awkwardly again, so we turn to face him for a much-needed explanation. “Look, this might sound strange, but I happened to be in the florist when the order was called in. I convinced Carol, the owner, to let me deliver them to you.”

“Why?” I ask with accusation, not least of all because a sinking feeling has just occurred in my stomach.

“Did you know?” he asks with a now serious, almost pissed-off expression.

“Know what?” I counter with my hands placed on my hips, ready to go to war if I have to. In the peripheries of my vision, I notice Nate close his eyes and shake his head; this isn’t good, is it?

“That your boyfriend has a wife?”

“Ah, shit!” Nate mutters to himself, all comedy dropped. He was also there after Blake had dumped me because one woman wasn’t enough for him.

“I take it from the look on your face, you didn’t,” Mr Earle Grey says, helping me out by not making me verbally answer him. “Then, I’m truly sorry to be the bearer of such bad news.”

“Excuse me,” I just about manage to mumble as I shove the tainted flowers on top of the reception desk and begin marching toward the elevator. There’s a bathroom on my floor just begging for me to go and break down inside of it. I’m not risking an early showing of my crumbling in front of this suave man who is now eyeing me with severe pity.

“Ellie!” Nate shouts but I’m already pressing the button to get the hell out of here.



Elijah

Well, that went as well as could be expected. Knowing she was in the dark has me feeling sorry for her, and perhaps a complete ass for doing this in front of an audience. Said audience is still eyeing me with suspicion. I have a feeling

he's waiting for some sort of explanation as to why I would do such a thing.

"Do you know each other?" he asks, pointing his finger between me and the now departed elevator.

"Not by name," I reply, "but we often see each other at the coffee shop before work...in passing. I knew she was seeing someone, but I didn't for one minute believe this would be the same girl."

"Yeah, that still feels a little weird to me," he says with accusation in his voice, "just playing the good Samaritan?"

"My apologies, I felt like I had to help," I try to explain, "my father had many girlfriends before he died and it all but destroyed my mother."

"Oh, I see," Nate says as he nods sadly, "I'm sorry."

"Listen, I feel awful," I admit, "I hope I don't sound too forward, but could you pass my card onto Ellie? Perhaps I could take her for a drink to make up for it."

"I like your style," Nate says as he glances at my card, "but she might be feeling a little...*vulnerable* right now? She is my cousin after all."

"No, of course, I sincerely meant as a friend. She's under no obligation to call me, but perhaps I can reassure her that this is for the best, given what marrying a cheater did to my mother. Ellie is always lovely in the mornings, and she shouldn't take it personally."

“Yeah, try telling her that,” Nate scoffs, “she seems to attract assholes like this Jonathan. However, seeing as you know each other, I’ll pass on your card; give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Thank you, and please pass on my apologies to Ellie,” I tell him while we shake hands.

“Yeah, but if this goes anywhere and you hurt her too,” he says with a charming, albeit threatening smile, “not only will I kick your ass, I’ll make sure Lucius Hastings knows about it too. He’s family, of sorts.”

“Duly noted,” I reply.

As I finally begin walking back out into the warm sunshine, I take out my phone to call my sister. We call one another on most days, even if it’s just to exchange a few words. We’re a little chalk and cheese; she fell into my mother’s role, whereas I always knew I wanted to be a career man who would live and breathe his work.

“Brother,” she answers with a perky voice.

“Kelly,” I reply with my usual casual tone, “you sound cheerful.”

“I just got a huge bunch of roses from my gorgeous hubby,” she trills, and I feel my heart sink inside my chest.

“Yeah, about that, Kelly,” I begin, “where is Jonathan now?”

“He’s at work, why?”

“Sit down, Kelly, I’ve got some bad news.”

Chapter 3

Ellie

You know things are bad when your usually teasing cousin is being careful to be extra nice to you. I must look truly pathetic. Edith, the office mother, keeps coming by with cups of tea and packets of cookies that I don't even bother to second-guess before eating. What care do I have for calories when it seems every player in the State is out to get me? Callie, my roommate, has been sending me countless messages, which means Nate's already informed her of my humiliating heartbreak. I can't blame him, she's his best friend too. In fact, she was before I'd even met her. In any case, I don't want to talk about it yet; it's just too depressing to voice any of it out loud.

Just before I resign myself to turning off my laptop and slumping home to a night of chocolate, wine, and perhaps a large tub of full-fat ice cream, I'm graced with the presence of the big boss man, aka, my cousin, Cameron.

"Well, word of your sad sap of a cousin must have spread if you've come down to see me," I sigh, to which he smiles with his perfect teeth. "Oh, God, don't come down here looking like a major clothing brand model, it only makes me feel worse!" I grumble while taking a large bite of a cookie I don't even want. I wouldn't be surprised if I have chocolate chips caught between my teeth.

"Ellie, stop being ridiculous and come here," he laughs before wrapping his arms around my shoulders. Cameron is the classic big brother type, the knight in shining white armor, and an altogether good guy. His little brother, Nate, is the court jester.

“Thanks,” I say half-heartedly, “even if this does feel like Deja-vu.”

“Men are pigs!” I hear Nate calling over to us as he steps out of the elevator.

“They are indeed,” I mutter to Cam, and he gifts me with a wink, knowing full well that Nate is by no means innocent to playing the field or breaking a few hundred hearts.

“You want us to go and kick his ass?” Nate asks as he gifts me with a kiss on my cheek.

“Yes, but don’t,” I reply when I finally haul my butt out of my chair, shutting everything down as I do so. “I take it you both have plans this evening?”

“Several,” Nate replies with a smug smirk.

“Inappropriate, little brother,” Cam snaps.

“Ellie knows I’m just kidding,” he says with a slap to his chest, “and both my plans are well aware of what this is. I don’t lead women on.”

“Bea,” Cam says to someone who appears to be hovering behind Nate’s broad frame, “are you ok?”

She shuffles forward, trying to remain as huddled up as possible. It’s not surprising the way Nate looks at her. The bastard even sighs when she walks up to him. He’s my cousin and I love him like a brother, but he sure is an asshole to that poor girl.

“I was just about to leave but someone stopped me at the door,” she says, ignoring her boss’ scathing expression, even though it’s not hard for her to miss. “Elijah Woods would like to talk to you, Ellie. I told him you might have left; I can always say I couldn’t find you if you would prefer?”

“Thank you, Miss Summers, you can go now,” Nate dismisses her like the Lord of the Manor. Cam and I both sit there looking utterly affronted on her behalf.

“Y-yes, of course,” she murmurs before turning to leave.

“Thank you, Beatrice, that was really kind and fast thinking of you,” Cam calls out, “you really are an excellent PA. I appreciate all your hard work.”

The two brothers glare at each other with the threat of an argument to come. Before that war of words can ensue, I grab my stuff and link my arm through Bea’s and begin marching us toward the elevator.

“Thank you, Mr Carter,” she gasps as I pull us across the room at a fast rate of knots, knowing how heated their arguments can get. Usually, he’d be telling her to call him Cam, but he’s too caught up in staring down his brother.

“Best we get out of here, Bea,” I whisper to her, “the Carter brothers battling for supremacy isn’t fun to be around.”

“I didn’t mean to...”

“And you didn’t, that was all Nate,” I cut in as the doors close on the two brothers. “Course, now I have to go and face this Elijah dude. What the hell does he want?”

“Who is he?” she asks with curiosity, dropping her usual nervous disposition.

“Long story,” I reply, “I’ll tell you when we go for drinks next week.”

“We’re going out for drinks?” she asks with surprise in her voice.

“Of course, we are,” I tell her with a smile, “I think you could do with a friend in this place. I’ll teach you how to stand up to my idiot cousin too.”

The door opens with a ping, and I suddenly remember that I’m about to face the man who ruined my otherwise perfect Valentine’s Day.

“I’d like that,” she says as we step outside and make eye contact with the insanely well-dressed man who is waiting just outside the entrance to the building. “Do you want me to hang around, or leave, or...”

“It’s ok,” I tell her with a firm nod, “you go, I’ll be ok... I hope.”

“See you tomorrow,” she says and gives me a smile before walking away and leaving me to face Mr Earle Grey alone.

Elijah

Christ, this is a ludicrous idea. This girl is going to think I'm a stalker; a crazy nut job who likes to prey on vulnerable young women. I don't even know why I'm putting myself through this after the reaction I got from Kelly. She out and out accused me of lying, of interfering with her marriage because I've always hated her cheating asshole of a husband. I should leave her to it, let her sleep in her bed made up of lies and deceit. However, I then spoke to my mother, the woman who I respect and love more than anyone else in the world. You could call me a mama's boy and I'd be nothing but proud of the fact. The downside is, she only has to give me a sigh to get me to do whatever she wants.

"Elijah, darling," she had said sadly, "she might be acting foolishly, but she is still your little sister and my baby. I don't want her to end up like me, searching for lipstick stains and sniffing at his shirts for the smell of perfume that isn't yours. Cheap, sickly-sweet scents that tell you he's gone after someone who is the complete opposite of who you are."

"Mom, what can I do if she won't listen to me?" I had pleaded with her.

"Make her!" she had said with a hint of exasperation. "Elijah, you have made yourself into the successful businessman and lawyer that you are today. I'm sure you'll be able to come up with something to make her see sense."

So, here I am, chasing after the one person who can validate my accusation because I couldn't think of anything else. Having said that, I must admit, the notion of seeing the poor girl who I had inadvertently crushed today, was strangely appealing. Beyond the fact that I have found her ridiculously attractive since the first day I saw her in my regular coffee

shop, her reaction to finding out someone had played her for a fool, proves she is a woman who still believes in monogamy and self-respect. She is someone who is worth giving your all to, someone you can trust because she demands just as much from you.

The door finally opens to reveal a tired-looking version of her. She cried today, I can tell. It has me feeling guilty for coming back to make it all the harder for her. I offer her an awkward smile and a scratch of my neck, just to prove how smooth and debonair I am. Meanwhile, she clutches hold of her laptop bag with both hands and begins walking up to me with a sheepish smile of her own. Her cheeks are beautifully flushed, and her hair is bouncing around in a simple ponytail.

“Evening,” I begin, momentarily forgetting what I was going to say.

“Hi,” she says as she comes to a stop just a few feet away from me. “Do you have some more uplifting messages for me?”

“Thankfully, no,” I laugh nervously, “no new messages today.”

“I’m sorry,” she says with a wince, “I’m just cranky because, well, you know.”

“Which you have every right to be,” I reassure her. “I came here to offer to take you out for a drink, to make up for ruining your day. Besides, I promised you I would if I ever found out your real name...Ellie.”

“True, but I dunno,” she replies, looking genuinely conflicted over the idea, “isn’t that kind of weird?”

“Not for me, but I totally understand if it is for you,” I tell her. “If it makes you feel any better, it can just be a drink with no strings attached. Just two newly single people seeking solace in a glass of wine and the company of someone who is also suffering from being alone on yet another Valentine’s Day.”

“Oh?” she says, now looking curious. “And who broke your handsome heart?”

And now, it’s my turn to blush; is she flirting with me?

“Not broke, exactly, just cracked a little,” I lie. “Besides, it was years ago, the wound is not as fresh as yours.”

“Still wounded, though,” she says, “it sucks, doesn’t it?” I nod my head and we remain in silence for a little while, as if taking the time to contemplate our dire situations. “Fuck it, let’s do this!”

“Excellent!” I beam at her just as her cousin and another version of him walk out through revolving doors. They eye me with curiosity, so I offer my hand for them to shake, while we exchange names. The one from before explains how I know Lucius Hastings, and we pretty much have the same limited conversation as before.

I already know who Cameron Carter is, for not many people in this town don’t know who he is. The small-town boy with a talent for computers, and who invested his grandmother’s inheritance to help build his own company, is a story well known in my line of business. I’ve never met him before, though I’ve heard good things, but never seen him in the flesh. There’s definitely a family resemblance between the

three, especially now he and Ellie are having a conversation through eye contact alone. He's asking her if she needs him to intervene. She's shaking her head and telling him to keep out of it. He's not convinced.

"Is everything ok?" I venture before he suffers from a bout of cramp between his eyebrows.

"Yes! Yes it is," Ellie answers with determination. "Shall we go?"

"Wait a minute," Cameron says, now stepping in closer. "I'm sure you're an upstanding guy and all that, but considering what happened today, I hope you don't mind me asking what your intentions are?"

"Oh, my God!" Ellie gasps, slapping her hand against his chest with a blush creeping all over her face. I can't help staring at her glowing cheeks, there's something hypnotic about them. "I'm sorry, Elijah, but Cam suffers from a knight-in-shining-armor complex."

I notice his brother nodding along in agreement with her while the man himself tuts and rolls his eyes. The three of them together make me feel a little sad over the fact my own sister won't believe me about her cheating bastard of a husband.

"Not at all," I reply with my token lawyer smile of reassurance. "I mean Ellie no harm and this is simply a drink. I have no other expectations beyond that."

"There, you see?" she says, turning toward her cousin who still looks less than convinced. His brother seems to be suitably mollified, and Ellie appears to be more than happy to

come with me. Guilt begins to eat away at me, and I know I need to get this done and over with before it fully consumes me.

“What if Ellie agrees to message you in say, one hour?” I offer, to which he frowns at her again, as though checking one more time to see if she’s sure about me.

“I am a grown woman, Cameron!” she huffs at his furrowed brow. “But I will text you in one hour, on the dot, if it makes you feel better.”

“Ellie, you have the worst taste in men,” he says before turning back to face me, “no offense.”

“None taken,” I reply with my hands held up in front of me.

“I know, but this is just a drink,” she says before grabbing my hand and pulling me in the opposite direction. “Besides, you know who this guy works with. I’m sure Lucius Hastings wouldn’t be working with any unscrupulous characters.”

“Of course, he would,” he calls out after us. “He’s the biggest one!”

“Yeah, yeah, call you in an hour.”

“Half eight, Ellie,” he shouts as we get further away, “one hour!”

“Bye, boss.”



Ellie

Bar 21, 30 minutes later

As I sit here talking away to Elijah, a man I never thought I'd see beyond the coffee shop, it feels a little odd. The place is full of couples eating romantic meals for two while we are sitting at the bar with bottles of beer and bowls of peanuts. Still, I can't fault the company. Elijah is not only easy on the eye, but he's charming, polite, and doesn't let us fall into uncomfortable silences. He smells like something inexplicably masculine and intoxicating. In fact, I could fall into bed with just his smell.

"You know, I'm glad," he says out of the blue.

"Ok?" I giggle with the expectation for more. He simply holds my gaze for a moment or two with a perfect smile on his handsome face. "You're going to have to elaborate."

"I'm glad you're not in love with the prick who was using you to cheat on his wife," he explains as he turns to order another drink, thus breaking his hypnotic eye contact. I instantly drop my smile, the mention of Jonathan making me feel embarrassed for having fallen for yet another cheater.

“How do you know I’m not?” I quickly ask while I fumble about with the hem of my shirt. He reaches for my right hand and holds it gently between his manicured fingers for a few moments. It stills me but also has me feeling vulnerable.

“If you were truly in love, you would be more upset,” he says as though he knows through personal experience, “you wouldn’t be able to smile. Fake smile maybe, but not a real smile that shows you’re having a good time.”

“I could take offense to that,” I grin, “but I won’t because you’re right. I don’t love Jonathan.”

“How *do* you feel about him?”

“I’m angry with him, of course, I am,” I tell him truthfully, “but I guess I’m angrier over the fact he humiliated me, used me, and made me believe I was worth more to him than I was. Gave me false hope, I guess.”

“No one can make you feel worthless unless you let them,” he says like a perfect self-help book. He can’t help but smile when he sees me rolling my eyes over such a cliché, throw-away statement. “Apologies, what I mean is, you are worth so much more than a cheating mouse of a man. Don’t let him diminish who you are.”

“Hmmm, are you talking from experience?” I ask as the alcohol hits me with false bravery.

“Perhaps,” he murmurs with a sad smile. “Truth be told, I haven’t dated properly since I left college. Like you, I was deceived in a horrible way.”

“I’m sorry,” I offer him while wincing, “looks like you *did* feel something stronger than lukewarm feelings for whoever it was.”

“Yes,” he simply replies with an embarrassed laugh. “I know how bad it feels to be let down by someone who you thought cared about you. And on Valentine’s Day of all days? It’s why I had to come and tell you this morning, it’s why I asked you out tonight, but it’s not why I would like to see you again.”

“Oh?” I tease with a raise of my brow and a silly grin on my face. “So why *do* you want to see me again?”

“Because I like you, have done since the first day I met you in the coffee shop,” he says with a straight face. “And now I know you don’t agree with cheating.”

“No, I do not!” I declare before clinking my glass against his. “So, where would we go on our next...outing?”

“Well,” he begins with a theatrical wave of his hand, earning him a giggle, “how about afternoon tea in London? Or paella on a Spanish beach? Or dinner in Paris?”

“See, now, you’re just showing off,” I tut, offering a small smile for his charm.

“Not to the cousin of Cameron Carter, surely?” he asks me with a genuine furrow of his brow. At first, I offer him nothing but a smile with my teeth, twirling my wineglass around on the table below. “Self-made millionaire at just

twenty-five; the man's a genius, and very generous from what I hear."

"And a country boy at heart," I tell him with a happy sigh. "He wants the loving wife and beautiful children, just like his own parents had."

"Is that what you would like one day?"

I pause before answering, thinking about how to put into words the reply to that question. However, in the end, I decide not to. Men always react strangely when a woman admits to wanting those things, as though we should have given them a false answer to spare them the terror of a female wanting to give in to their natural urges. So, instead, I decide to go down a different path.

"When Cameron bought me my first car, for my eighteenth birthday, I was overjoyed, so excited," I tell him as I smile over the memory of it. "What eighteen-year-old wouldn't be thrilled to have a brand new convertible?"

"Wow, lucky girl," he grins, "though I sense a 'but' coming up."

"I don't know, it just didn't feel right. People began to learn about my cousin's wealth from school and assumed I would be privy to it. I already had some girls asking me for an introduction to Cam and Nate, and this only made it worse. After a while, I could no longer distinguish between those who were genuine and those who thought I was a stepping stone to my cousin. After that, I asked him not to treat me any differently from how he had before."

"And?"

“And he agreed straight away,” I reply with a shrug, “seemed to respect me for it. I did get a pretty decent job at his company, but I like to think I earned that job.”

“I’m sure you did,” he says, placing his hand over mine just as the check arrives. “This is on me,” he says before I can even reach for it.

“You don’t have to; the whole cheating husband thing is nothing to do with you, Elijah Woods,” I tell him truthfully and with a crimson hue of embarrassment on my cheeks.

“No girl should have to find out they’re dating a cheater and then have to pay for their drinks on Valentine’s Day. Besides, I’ve had a great time tonight.”

“Thank you, me too.”

“I sense there’s a ‘but’ coming up,” he says, still wearing his beautiful smile.

“I’ve just had some guy blindsided me and if I’m being honest, men aren’t my favorite people right now,” I reply apologetically but also with a little bit of pride for myself. Just because he’s this incredibly hot, wealthy, and charming man, and he’s shown some interest in me, it doesn’t mean I have to fall for him. I can say, ‘No, thank you’, and take some time for me. Miss Independent and all that.

“I understand,” he says softly, “though your reason only makes me like you even more.”

Oh, God, he's really pushing the limits of my willpower!

“Ellie, it’s fine,” he says as I begin to imagine what he might look like naked, writhing around on top of me. “I’m going to wish you luck, apologize on behalf of all men, make sure you get home safely, then return to my Batchelor pad where I’ll probably call my mother to make sure she got the flowers I ordered for her today.”

“Oh, Jesus, Elijah!” I laugh. “You really are doing a number on me.”

“I swear I’m not trying to,” he smiles with his perfect teeth. “Though, I would like to point out that I can cook too.”

“Of course, you can.”

“Perhaps, we could-“

“Elijah?!” a voice from behind us cuts him off mid-sentence. “What are you doing here and who the hell is this?”

This voice sounds beyond angry. In fact, it’s so angry, I’m afraid to turn around and face yet another scorned lover. Because the odds are I have fallen into the middle of yet another cheating scandal, especially seeing as the angry voice is female. Elijah remains looking at me, his hand covering his mouth, as if gauging my reaction. I offer nothing at first, just stare back at him with disappointment. He reaches for my hand, but I whip it away so fast, he can’t even get close.

“Please, Elijah, please don’t tell me...” I begin with a hard lump already forming inside my throat.

“Did Mom send you here?” the voice continues, stopping me dead in my tracks while forming a thoroughly confused frown on my face. Elijah eventually drops his hand from his mouth and emits a heavy sigh before looking up at the voice from behind me.

“Kelly, Jonathan,” he says quietly, with his eyes darting back to mine as soon as he says that second name – *Jonathan*. Surely not? “This is Ellie Russo; Ellie, this is my sister, Kelly, and her husband, Jonathan.”

With all breath suddenly leaving my body, I slowly turn around to face the man who I’ve been sleeping with... and his wife! She’s stunning, elegant, and wearing something priceless on every part of her body, including a huge diamond ring on her left hand. By comparison, I feel small, ugly, and so stupid, I want to run and hide under a huge rock and die. The man beside her, the cheating ex-lover, gasps in open horror at the sight of me. In fact, his reaction is so unsubtle, his wife looks at me with instant recognition as to who I am – the mistress, the other woman, the home wrecker.

“I knew it, this is her, isn’t it?!” Kelly practically screams at Elijah before darting her eyes back to me with a thunderous scowl on her face. “I knew you and Mother would do something like this. Is this the woman you were so desperate to tell me about?”

“Kelly...” Elijah begins but is cut short by his sister slapping him across the face.

“Ellie, wh-what...” Jonathan begins but is soon silenced by his wife’s venomous glare.

“What the hell made you think bringing her here was a good idea, Elijah? What did you hope to achieve by bringing my husband’s whore to shove in my face in the middle of a crowded restaurant on Valentine’s Day?!” she tries to whisper but is no less quiet than if she had said it for all to hear, for they do. In fact, several pairs of eyes are now staring right at me like I’m lower than a snake’s belly.

“Kelly, enough!” Elijah says angrily, now getting to his feet to try and shield me from this humiliation, but it’s much too late.

“Ellie, please, I had no idea...” Jonathan starts to grovel which is enough to have the tears falling in streams down my face.

“Don’t you even dare speak to this poor girl, you worthless piece of shit!” Elijah snaps, pointing his finger at Jonathan’s face.

“Don’t you speak to my husband like that!” Kelly shouts. “You caused this, you and Mother both did with your meddling!”

“Kelly, please, let’s go, this was a mistake, a huge mistake, I swear,” Jonathan flusters with his hands clinging onto his wife. “*She* was a mistake!”

“Excuse me,” I whimper before taking flight and leaving behind the dozens of eyes that are all on me, all judging me for something I didn’t even know I was a part of.

Elijah

“Fuck!” I curse to myself as I grab my coat and run after Ellie. By the time I’m out on the street, she’s already rummaging around for her phone, probably to get the Carter brothers to come down here and kick my ass. Not that I don’t deserve it. Jonathan got one thing right this evening; this was a *huge* mistake.

“Ellie!” I shout as she pulls out her phone from her bag. She looks up at me with wet, puffy eyes and a tremble in her hand.

“Don’t come near me!” she snaps as she begins backing away.

“Ellie, I’m so incredibly sorry, please!” I beg as I grab hold of her hand to try to get her to look at me, to see how sorry I really am.

“Why would you do that to me?” she whimpers. “Why would you throw me under the bus like that? Have I not been through enough today?”

“I didn’t know what else to do! Kelly wouldn’t believe me when I told her, and my mother was worried. She begged me to do whatever I could to make Kelly believe me, to show her what a cheating scumbag her husband is!”

“You used me!” she screams.

“I...know,” I admit with guilt spreading all over my body. “And if I could take it back, I would.”

“All that crap about liking me, feeling bad for me, wanting to see me again, it was all bullshit!”

“No, not now, not after talking with you,” I plead with her to understand, even though I know it’s a fruitless exercise. I wouldn’t trust me, why should she?

“Oh, please,” she scoffs, “you are just as bad as he is!”

“No, I’m not,” I tell her through clenched teeth, though not because I am angry with her, but because I’m angry with myself. She’s right, and deep down, I know that. I’ve become what I swore I never would be – a cheat.

“No, you’re not,” she says with so much rage swimming around her eyes, I almost jump back in anticipation of another slap around my face. “You’re worse!”

“Ellie, please don’t say that,” I whisper but can already see the solid wall of anger that has been put up around her.

“I’m going to call my cousins, so I suggest you fuck off before they get here,” she says, sounding eerily calm. “Thanks for finally getting it through to me; nice men don’t exist.”

“Ellie…” I begin but she cuts me off with a push, so I finally let go of her.

“Go!” she shouts, causing a few by-passers to begin staring at us.

With one last glare, she turns around and begins to walk away. Although I so dearly want to chase after her, I let her go. I really am an asshole, and she doesn’t deserve another one.

Chapter 4

Ellie

Six months later

Step one, find my dominant eye; that's easy at least. Always been my right eye, always. As a kid, I had a lazy left eye that I had to cover with a patch. Sure, I received the odd pirate joke, but otherwise, I think I was lucky with the kids I went to school with. It helped that my attractive, beefy, older cousins used to pick me up, donning their private school blazers and charming smiles. The girls gushed, even if they were far too young to understand why; they just knew these boys were something special. The boys, on the otherhand, either looked up to them in awe, or they were simply too afraid to try anything. My left eye eventually corrected itself, and my right eye was stronger for having had to work for them both.

Step two, stance. Feet shoulder width apart, pointing toward my target. Said target alternates between Ryan, my first kiss who ended up porking my best friend; Blake, the guy who dumped me last year; Jonathan, the adulterer, and Elijah Woods, who was perhaps the worst one of the bunch. *Shake it off, Ellie, shake it off and aim.*

Step three, grip.

Step four, nock your arrow.

Step five, position my fingers like an Englishman giving a naughty hand gesture (yep, I know my history, ladies and gents).

Step six, find my aim-point.

Step seven, pre-draw.

Step eight, draw.

Step nine, aim.

Step ten, release.

Step eleven, take a breath and look at how close you got to the bullseye.

“Ah!” I cry out in gleeful shock, causing the man at the end to release prematurely and completely miss. I’m gifted with a scowl, causing me to wince with an apology. He simply tuts and stomps off. I bet he’s used to prematurely releasing anyway, the grumpy bastard.

Before I can worry too much about Mr Premature Releaser, my phone begins to buzz. I rush over to muddle through my bag of never-ending crap before finally answering it.

“Hi,” I gasp.

“Hey, Ellie,” Cam says casually over the phone, “you picturing different guys’ heads as you shoot arrows at them again?”

“Of course,” I reply with a smile in my voice. I bend down to pick up my stuff so I can begin heading over to the reception desk to return my equipment.

“Good for you, Ellie,” he says, with only marginal condescension in his voice. “I wish you’d tell me what happened with that Woods guy.”

“Why? So you can mount your steed, donning your armor? Sorry, Cuz, I’m no longer on your white knight list. I’m taking charge of my own battles. Anyway, what’s up?”

“How do you fancy a work trip to Paris?” he asks like such a thing is an everyday occurrence. “You’d be accompanying Nate for three days. All expenses paid of course.”

“Are you serious?! I’ve never been to Europe before. Sign me up yesterday!” I squeal, practically jumping up and down on the spot. This is just the thing I need to get me over the bad hand of men I keep being dealt. A break away from everything! My mind wanders over all the sights I’ll get to visit, completely dismissing the fact that I’ll have to work. However, Cam’s laughter soon snaps me back to reality.

“Excellent! You just need to act as his PA, plus keep him out of trouble.”

“Oh, hell!” I reply, the smile dropping from my face almost instantly. “Why isn’t Bea, his actual PA, going?”

“Do you really need to ask?” he scoffs. “He’ll ditch her the minute he can, and I need someone who will keep an eye on him. She’s a great PA, but not Nate-sitting material. You, on the other hand, can be counted on to kick him into touch if necessary.”

“Ah, I think I’m touched,” I tease, “can that go on my appraisal?”

“You keep him out of trouble, you can write your own appraisal!”

“Yes, Sir,” I say mockingly. “Cam?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you, I really need this,” I tell him seriously. “You two are the big brothers I never had.”

“No problem, Ells. And you’re the little sis...”

I wince over his unfinished sentence. He does have a little sister; they just don’t talk anymore. I have no idea what happened between them, but whatever it is, it cut Cam pretty deep. As for Helena, his actual little sister, it practically destroyed her.

“See you later, Ellie,” he says, dropping the subject altogether. “I’ll give you and Nate the details when you’re back in the office.”



Three hours later, I'm glaring at my cousin, aka, my boss, like he's grown an extra head. Conversely, he's looking back at me with such a serious expression, it's hard to turn away. His brother is standing just to the side of him, staring at me with his arms crossed and a stupid grin all over his face. I can't believe I've been duped by the Carter brothers!

"Wait, one more time, just for my left ear," I say low and quiet, "it's not quite believing what the right ear just heard."

"There's no conference, just a ticket for you to go to Paris," Cam explains one more time, "to wash away the past year. Come back and start afresh."

"Am I really that pathetic?!" I sigh as I lean over to stop the blood rushing from my head.

"Yes," Nate teases, to which Cam stands to slap him upside the head. The asshole just laughs all the harder. "I'm kidding! Come on, Ellie, instead of getting all bent out of shape, why not just embrace the offer?"

"Because I'm sick of having to rely on you," I gesture toward Cameron. "Not you, Nate, you're just a pain in my ass."

“And this is why I went all cloak and dagger,” Cam sighs as he sits back down. “I have the means to help, Ellie, and you deserve this. Think of it as a bonus.”

“A pity bonus!” I scoff.

“No, a well-earned bonus,” he argues, all the while I continue to shake my head at him. “Besides, you agreed to go so I’ve already purchased the ticket. If you back out, I’ll lose the money anyway.”

“Yeah, Ellie, why would you wanna waste Cam’s money?” Nate teases. “Seeing as he’s on the breadline and all.”

I get up suddenly, feeling overwhelmed by what’s happening. Cam might be trying to help, and I know Nate’s only teasing because he cares, but life has dealt me blow after blow, this year. It hurts even more to know the rest of my family seem to find happiness so much more easily than I do. There’re only so many times you can tell your nearest and dearest that someone else has disrespected you and still manage to have a smile on your face.

The Carter boys have remained quiet, as if showing caution before the wild beast that is me. I appreciate it; it shows they’re taking me seriously, that my pain is real and valid, even to Nate. As if to prove this point, I soon feel Nate’s hands slipping around my shoulders while he kisses me affectionately on the back of my head.

“It’s just hard,” I sniff as the tears catch me off guard.

“We know, Elle,” he mumbles against the back of my head.

“Why am I not enough?” I gasp after a whimper. “I mean, why am I a target for guys who are less than? Why am I not targeted by the good guys?”

“Ellie, you’re only twenty-four,” Cam says from behind us, to which I roll my eyes, “it will happen!”

“It’s more than that, Cam,” I sob, “I feel pathetic all the time. I feel like you guys all get together to talk about me like I’m a ridiculous side character from a rom-com.”

“We don’t...” Nate begins but I cut him off before he can finish.

“I know, but it doesn’t change the fact that that’s how I feel!”

“Ellie,” Cam says before taking hold of me from his brother, “you are not pathetic. Don’t let any guy be the definition of who you are. If they cheat, that’s their flaw, not yours; you didn’t do anything wrong. So, see this ticket as an opportunity for you. Go and eat crepes, see the louvre, and let go of everything.”

“If I agree,” I begin with a long sigh, “then you have to promise to stop trying to save me. I mean it, this is it!”

“Deal,” Cam says with a mischievous smile that says he knows he’s won. “But you have to promise to get the most out of this, for you. Don’t settle for anything less.”

“Ok,” I reply as I take the ticket from his outstretched hand.

“We’re proud of you,” Nate says from behind me, “you have never shown anything other than class with these assholes. Remember that.”

“Gee, thanks, Nate,” I whimper because even he’s being serious with me.

“Bon vacance!”



Ellie

Three days later

“Bonjour,” I say to the ticket office assistant, completely butchering the language with a nervous hand flap and a bright red flush to my cheeks. My nervous giggle causes the woman behind the glass to roll her eyes and huff through her nose. “Parlez-vous anglaise?”

“Oui,” she sighs, “tell me which package.”

I inwardly curse myself for being so awful at languages when I was at school. I just couldn’t get past Mr Stephen’s beard which always held remnants of his last meal. It was both gross and a point of interest, trying to guess what he had eaten,

all the while he droned on in a monotone voice that sounded even less French than I just did. Still, at least I'm trying.

“What would you recommend?” I brave it to ask. She looks back at me with pure derision in her eyes before slumping over to retrieve a leaflet of some kind.

“Paris is extremely busy at this time of year,” she says, still without expression, “so you can go and queue at the Eiffel tower, the Louvre, or the Notre Dame. It matters not to me.”

“Oh,” I reply disappointedly.

“Er, if I may,” an older, gentlemanly type of voice says from behind me. I turn around to face a man who looks like he just walked out of an Agatha Christie novel. With a crisp white Panama hat, a cream linen suit, and a greying beard, he tips the rim of his hat and nods with the warmest smile I've received since arriving here yesterday. “Do you like art?”

“You're American?” I ask, ignoring the woman who is still rolling her eyes at me.

“Coincidence, no?” he chuckles.

“Not so much in a major city,” I laugh with him, now moving out of the woman's line of sight.

“I guess not, my dear,” he says, offering me his arm as any gentlemanly fictional character would. “Even so, do you enjoy art?”

“I guess,” I reply, not having ever really thought about it. “It depends on whose art it is. I’m not so keen on the artist who likes to put dead animals in vinegar, or whatever it is.”

“Damien Hirst?” he asks, to which I shrug, for I really don’t know him that well. “Well, each to their own. The intricacies of the body, as well as the stillness of death, are enticing to some. It reminds us that we are all but biology at the end of the day, mortal, and leading a journey to the ultimate end.”

“I suppose,” I reply, furrowing my brow when I think of it from this point of view. “Then I must be someone who prefers to see life - the journey, rather than the end.”

“I was right,” he says with a proud look on his face, “you do like art; I knew you would.”

“Oh, really?” I laugh softly, liking this man already. A man who makes me feel comfortable and who won’t break my heart. “What gave me away?”

“Why, your eyes, of course.”

“My eyes?”

“Your eyes speak of heartache,” he says with a now serious expression. Apparently, my pathetic persona travels internationally with me. I guess it fell asleep on the long-haul flight over here and has suddenly awoken for all to see. “But they also speak of a fresh start; a chance to reinvent yourself in one of the most breathtaking cities in the world!”

“I’m not sure my heart is broken,” I murmur, “just my ego.”

“Ah, that can be just as devastating,” he says as though he’s been there many times himself. “So, you like art, life, and journeys, then may I suggest you join me on a trip to Monet’s Garden in Giverny. You cannot find more life or beauty and without the queues.”

“Is it far to walk?”

“You cannot walk, my dear, we shall journey by automobile!” he says as he gestures toward a sleek looking Mercedes. The thought of getting in a car with a complete stranger, no matter how gentlemanly he appears to be, screams abduction, rape, murder, or living in a basement for the next decade.

“Er...”

Before I can pull away and explain that I’d rather not be trapped inside a confined space with a complete stranger, another voice calls out to us.

“Dad, what on earth have you been doing?”

As soon as my eyes land on the owner of the deep, now-familiar voice, I freeze to the spot with my mouth hanging wide open. I’m sure I don’t make for the most sophisticated-looking person in Paris, but the shock of seeing Elijah Woods, a man who humiliated me, here in my retreat away from the assholes of California, has momentarily rendered my brain useless. He obviously recognizes me from the awkward rubbing of the back of his neck and his sheepish expression.

“Elijah!” the man still linking my arm with his, calls over to Mr Earl Grey himself. The bastard is still as irritatingly handsome as I remember him. “I’ve found someone to take that fourth ticket.”

“Er, I don’t think...” I begin to protest but I’m already being pulled over with enthusiasm.

“Apologies, my dear, I do not even know your name,” he chuckles as he gestures toward Elijah. “This is my stepson, Elijah, and my name is Joseph, Joseph Phelps. My lovely wife is already in the car, making the most of the air conditioning.”

“Hello,” I grin through my teeth, wiggling my fingers awkwardly at Elijah. “Er, Ellie, but I’m not sure I should come; you don’t know me. I might be a homicidal maniac for all you know.”

“Now, that would be exciting,” Joseph teases, before breaking into a wide smile.

“Dad...”

“Ellie, I really don’t think we need to worry about you pulling out the knives and guns on our little excursion,” he says as he pats the side of his nose with his forefinger. “I have excellent instincts, you know.”

“Jesus!” Elijah mutters under his breath.

“I really don’t want to impose, and you’re with your family, and...” I begin to fluster over Elijah’s obvious desire to

be rid of me. “Honestly, it was lovely meeting you, Joseph, but...”

“Elijah, convince the poor girl will you?” Joseph says over the top of my head as he begins marching toward the car with a smile still plastered on his face. “Ellie, see you in the car!”

Once he’s far enough away, Elijah and I turn to face one another for the most awkward moment in history. We smile tightly at one another before I look away, readying myself to be rude and leave.

“Please, thank your stepfather for me, but...”

“Wait,” he says, stepping in my direction, “come with us.”

“Are you serious?” I gasp, now feeling annoyed and remembering how he had made me feel not too long ago.

“Actually, yes,” he says with that debonair tone of voice of his. “I cannot tell you how many times I have thought of what I did to you and how much I have wanted to apologize for my seriously misjudged actions that night. This won’t make up for it, but at least it is something. After all, Monet’s Garden is supposed to be one of the most beautiful places you can visit.”

“I don’t doubt that at all, Elijah,” I tell him as I cross my arms, “but what you did to me was extremely ugly. I’m not sure there’s enough beauty anywhere to make up for what you did.”

“I know,” he says, daring to take another step closer to me.

“Do your parents know about that night?” I ask quietly. “Do they think I’m a homewrecker too?”

“My mother knows what I did,” he murmurs, looking embarrassed of the fact, “she felt awful too. Joseph remains oblivious. As for my sister, she is still with Jonathan.”

“Oh,” I reply, for nothing else springs to mind. “And what about your sister and you? She seemed pretty angry with you that night.”

“And rightly so, even if my intentions were to help her see the truth,” he mutters uncomfortably. “I went about it in completely the wrong way.”

“Elijah, Ellie, are you both coming?” Joseph calls over to us from the car, still wearing his Panama hat and warm smile. “Time’s marching on you know.”

“Please, Ellie, come with us. If only for my stepfather’s sake,” Elijah pleads with me, looking sincere and deeply sorry for what he did.

“That’s cheating, you know,” I reply with a small curl of my lips, “using that kindly old man to bend me to your will.”

He steps forward with a mischievous smile and offers his arm for me to take hold of. I eye it for a moment or two, considering my options and whether I can forgive and forget. With a long sigh, I eventually thread my arm through his and

give him a tut of recognition. He breaks into a breathtaking smile and begins to lead us over to the car.

“If it allows me to make things up to you, I’ll take it,” he says as he helps me into the back seat, “and if it makes you smile like that, all the better.”

Elijah

My stepfather might be a little eccentric, but I have to hand it to him, he did well today. All I had to do was mention the involvement of a beautiful woman who might have wanted to break me from my long abstinence from relationships, and the old romantic was in. For Joseph Phelps has always been the romantic sort, and he certainly showed my mother that she was worth more than being cheated on. But let me back up a few months so I can give you the full picture.

The day after my deplorable behavior toward the young woman now sitting beside me, I was feeling the aftereffects of no sleep, two bottles of Malbec, and the sort of guilt that has you wanting to expel your soul from your body. Ever since the supposed love of my life had left me with nothing but a half-hearted apology for cheating on my answerphone, I decided that the Woods were cursed. Being brought up with Lenora Woods’ stern lessons on manners and gentleman etiquette meant I was destined to be a good guy, a gentle sort, and a complete target for those who mistook my chivalry for weakness. It made me apprehensive, standoffish, and reluctant to let anyone other than my mother get close to me.

That being said, if ever I see someone else being treated with less respect than they deserve, I will not hesitate to step in. So, you can imagine how utterly disappointed I felt with myself after I had done just that to Ellie Russo; a

beautiful young woman who had done nothing wrong other than take a chance drink with me. Her engagement with a married man was not in any way intentional, she was just as cheated as my sister. To say it did not sit well with me is a massive understatement, so I took action. I am not a man to sit around trying to lay blame, instead, I find the problem and find ways to solve it. And to begin solving this problem, I headed straight over to *Medina Technologies* to seek the help of someone who was more likely to hit me than offer me any kind of assistance – Cameron Carter.

I must admit, it wasn't entirely my idea, for I had never met the man before that day. I knew of his good reputation, and his white knight persona, but that only meant he was less likely to help the villain of the story, aka, me. It was Lucius Hastings, head of our sister company, who suggested I go to him, muttering something along the lines of Cameron Carter being just as tragic as I was when it came to the opposite sex. His comment flew straight over my head, of course, for the man is contemptible. A genius of sorts, but completely lacking in any kind of morals. Rumor has it, his heart was broken beyond repair a long time ago, and with it, his conscience.

So, I went to Cameron, fully prepared to be thrown out in the most aggressive way possible, and explained what had happened between Ellie and me. He looked perplexed for a long while, rubbing his finger along his lips as he remained deep in thought over my admission, but when he finally spoke, he shocked me entirely.

“Do you like her?” he simply asked, but with a slight smirk on his face, no doubt caused by my uncomfortable shuffling about in my seat.

“Well, I only...that is to say...” I flustered awkwardly before he began to laugh, tipping his head back as he did so.

“I realize you only met her properly yesterday,” he commented, “but I did not ask if you were in love; I simply want to know if you like her.”

“From the few hours I was fortunate to spend with her, as well as our many meetings at the coffee shop, I would say yes, I like her,” I admitted, my shuffling finally ceasing.

“Ok,” he said, then paused, looking as though he was enjoying the fact he was keeping me waiting for his reaction. “Here’s where I’m at, Elijah, what you did was a shitty, awful thing to do, no doubt about it. I don’t care what your intentions were, you hurt my cousin, who is like a little sister to me. If you are going to try and make it up to her, now is not the time to do it. In fact, I would have to insist you let her be. Let her try to get over not only what you did, but also the piece of shit who you call a brother-in-law. My condolences for that one.”

“Thank you,” I reply with sincerity, for I’ve never been that much enamored with Jonathan.

“However, the fact that it is keeping you this agitated says a lot. I do not imagine for one moment that any of Ellie’s exes have lost sleep over their appalling treatment of her. But you not only braved it to come and see me, but you also ventured to speak with the other asshole in your life, Lucius Hastings. And believe me, I know how unpleasant that must have been for you.”

“Quite,” I reply as we share a knowing look. “Though, at least he is to the point.”

“Give her six months and I’ll help you set something up.”

“Six months?! That’s an awfully long time...”

“If you are truly interested, six months won’t be a problem, will it?” he argues, now getting to his feet.

“Believe me, I do not wish to rush anyone, but I am due in Paris for the summer,” I explain. “A long-awaited trip that I have had planned for my parents. It is where my stepfather proposed, we have family, you understand.”

“Even better,” he declares, “she has always wanted to go. Leave it to me; I will make sure Ellie gets to where you need her to be.”

“Thank you,” I tell him as I get up to shake his hand, “you are as they say you are, it’s a pleasure to have met you.”

“Jesus,” he chuckles, shaking his head as he does so, “where on earth did you learn to talk like that? You sound like a British lord or something.”

“I grew up in Surrey, England,” I explain. “I spent most of my childhood in a boarding school over there, where, frankly, we all spoke like this. My American ‘lazy drawl’ was soon teased out of me, by both my peers and teachers.”

“Oh,” he says sympathetically, but I merely shrug it off. I left England and its harsh lessons behind a long time ago, along with Amanda, the girl who crushed my heart to pieces over a text message.

“Thank you, I’ll be in touch.”

So, here I am trying to make up for what I did to this girl on Valentine’s Day. Looking at her now, with her smile and nervous giggling as she introduces herself to my parents, I am so very glad I am. Something is telling me she was worth the wait.



Ellie

This was far from what I was expecting to happen when I woke up on the other side of the world today. I thought after a croissant and a cup of coffee, I’d spend the rest of the day queuing, perhaps with the odd crepe thrown in. But here I am, gawping over the absolutely stunning beauty that is Monet’s Garden. The house is a little quirky in places, but I could absolutely live in the garden. It’s every child’s dream; you could spend hours making up stories amongst the flowers and foliage. In fact, I think this is exactly what Joseph is doing as he ambles around, poking at the odd plant, all the while rabbiting away to his wife. I have yet to see him draw breath.

Elijah has remained by my side, walking at a slow pace as we take in the sights and scents of this magnificent place. We fall into silence, but rather than feel the need to fill in the gaps like I always have with any other man, I feel strangely at peace. He has a calming presence; though I knew this when I

first met him. It's a shame he had to completely blow it with the Valentine's Day stunt.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Ellie?" he asks as we cross over a rustic bridge. When I peek over the side, I realize we're in the middle of one of the most famous pieces of art in the world.

"Definitely," I reply, "it's very beautiful and peaceful here. Is this...?" I ask, pointing to the pond, which is full of large lily pads; the water is almost perfectly still. You can see the few clouds that are in the sky, together with weeping willows reflected upon the surface.

"It is," he replies with a smile over my excitement. "Monet once declared that he had become quite obsessed with the water and its reflection. Indeed, he designed this entire garden himself; he even planted the lilies which he painted. He said this garden was his greatest masterpiece."

"Well, aren't you a font of knowledge," I reply with a giggle. I should have known he'd be able to reel off a host of facts about anything and everything. "But thank you, this has been such an experience. One I never would have considered were it not for Joseph and you."

"I'm glad," he says, smiling at me, "I've enjoyed being with you today."

"Do you ever talk...casually?" I laugh at him, and he actually blushes. "You always sound like you've had to pre-plan everything you say. I mean, I think you were starting to relax when we went out, just before your sister came in and accused me of being a whore."

“You’re not going to forget that any time soon, are you?” He laughs nervously.

“It was a memorable night,” I tease, “though, I will admit, I was having a good time up until then.”

“As was I,” he says with what looks like regret. “You were, indeed, very easy to talk to. I wish I could go back and change things.”

“Ok,” I let out with a sigh, stopping in the middle of the bridge to stare into the water below. “I’m going to forgive you.”

“You are?” he asks as he stops beside me to lean over the rail.

“It is one of my many flaws,” I admit, “to forgive easily. I’ve already forgiven Jonathan, and Blake, the guy I dated last year.”

“Hmm,” he mumbles as he looks out across the water, “that is mature of you, Ellie, though, after hearing this, I don’t think I want your forgiveness yet.”

“You don’t?” I turn to look at his handsome face with a furrowed brow of confusion. “Why not?”

“Because I haven’t yet earned it,” he says, as though it’s obvious. “And I don’t want you thinking of me as you do Jonathan and Blake.”

“You cannot earn something I’ve already given. And why don’t you want me thinking of you like I do Jonathan and Blake?” I ask with curiosity. “You all messed me about in some way.”

“True, but there are two major differences between those men and me,” he says with a mischievous smile. “One, if you were mine, I would never ever cheat on you; I’m much too intelligent to do such a thing if I already had you to come home to.”

“Wow, I think that’s one of the most romantic things anyone has ever said to me,” I reply, now with a beaming smile on my face. “And the whole ‘mine’ thing? Very sexy, Mr Woods.”

“Thank you,” he replies with his usual charm. “And two, I’m not content to let you go.”

“Let me go?” I ask for further clarification.

“Precisely,” he says as he places his hand on top of mine on the bridge railing. “You see, my asking you to come today isn’t totally unselfish.”

“It isn’t?” I repeat, sounding out of breath and a little nervous. He smiles with self-satisfaction over my reaction, then lifts his thumb to brush gently over my bottom lip.

Oh, dear God, you’re in trouble with this one, Ellie!

“No,” he simply replies, just before he leans in and ever so softly touches his lips against mine. So barely there, yet enough to cause my heart to free-fall to my knees.

“Oh, Christ, you’re the type of man who studies classics for fun,” I whisper, “taking in everything the hero says and does to add to his personal arsenal of seduction.”

“Exactly, you are completely at my mercy, Miss Russo,” he smiles with his lips still a matter of inches away from mine. “I know how to behave as a gentleman, and when to...”

Before he can complete that sentence, I feel his hands slip to my waist and pull me in, our lips finally meeting with a hunger for so much more. His mouth is soft, yet completely skilled to devour me with the most intoxicating kiss any man has ever given me. I half wonder if he has had lessons somewhere, perhaps at an old-fashioned burlesque club where the madam still dresses like a Victorian lady of the night. God, what he’s doing to my tongue is probably illegal in some places. A mixture of gentlemanly gentleness and animalistic dominance. Make of that what you will, I cannot explain it any other way. When he finally pulls back, he almost takes my lips with him, leaving me thirsty for so much more. Those kisses could make you a complete addict!

“...Not,” he says, finishing his declaration from before a kiss that was so deliciously perfect, I wish I had packed an extra pair of panties.

“Elijah, Ellie?” Joseph calls out from across the bridge. “Shall we grab a spot to eat? I hear they do a wonderful menu of the day.”

“Sure, Dad,” Elijah replies, still staring at me with a smile that has rendered me completely speechless. “We’ll meet you there in five minutes.”

“Righto!”

“Are you going to hurt me, Elijah?” I whisper, clasping my hands together to stop them from grabbing at him.

“Only in good ways,” he replies, standing to his full height and offering me his arm again. As we walk toward the restaurant, I begin to get my breath back, along with the feeling in my toes. “And now you, Ellie, can you see beyond the imbecile from that night? You say you’ve forgiven me, but that was when you only saw me as one of those other idiots who hurt you. What if I was to become something more?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know,” I reply, “but I don’t think that’s because of that night. I’ve just been lied to so many times, how can I not expect to be blindsided?”

“I understand,” he says thoughtfully, “I will just have to convince you that I won’t *blindsides* you. Let me start by taking you out for dinner tonight. I know the perfect little place, not far from the Arc De Triomphe.”

“Of course, you do,” I tease. “And will this dinner be with gentleman you, or...the other you?”

“Gentleman me always comes out for the public,” he declares, “but perhaps other me will meet with you in private, after.”

“Can’t wait,” I murmur, just as we spot his parents at a table on the terrace.

“By the way, your nickname?” he says with a smirk on his face.

“Ah, yes,” I grin, “dinner and my nickname, I remember now. Do tell.”

“Alectrona,” he says, which, alas, only causes me to furrow my brow. He laughs at my reaction before pulling out a chair for me to sit on. “In Ancient Greece, she was the goddess of the morning; it seemed fitting.”

“Very good, Mr Earl Grey,” I giggle, “and as charming as one would expect from you.”



Ellie

After a delicious French lunch, the type you could lose sight of the fact that you are essentially eating platefuls of cheese, Joseph asks his son to wander around the garden with him. I smile as he gets up with a squeeze of my hand, but as soon as he's out of earshot, I feel incredibly nervous. His mother and I haven't said much to one another, but I get an uneasy feeling that she knows who I am. As in, the girl who was inadvertently sleeping with her daughter's husband. She turns to smile at me in such a way, I think she's feeling just as awkward. My fingers begin to twitch, so I grab hold of my napkin and begin to fiddle with it, purposely staring at the folds of crisp white cotton to avoid meeting her penetrating gaze.

“My son likes you, Ellie,” she eventually says, causing me to shoot my eyes back up to meet her own. “It's quite

delightful to watch him falling for a girl. I was beginning to worry he would never find anyone after Amanda broke his heart.”

“We barely know one another,” I laugh nervously.

“Have you never heard of love at first sight?”

“I have, though I don’t know if I believe in such a notion,” I reply truthfully.

“Elijah’s father and I were living proof of it,” she declares. “Course, we did have our ups and downs.”

“I think most couples do, don’t they?” She merely smiles with a shrug before picking up her drink to sip. “Do you know who I am? I mean, do you know that Elijah and I have met before? That is to say...”

“I know all of it, dear,” she says, still with that warm smile on her face, “and I must apologize for the role I played in all of that ugliness. You mustn’t blame my son too much. I had practically forced him into it.”

“Oh,” I simply say before drinking my own glass of wine, if only to try and numb the embarrassment of this conversation. “You understand I had no idea Jonathan was married. I hope Elijah told you that I instantly ended things with him once I knew.”

“Of course, he did,” she says with a sigh as she watches her son and husband continue to amble about the garden. “If only my daughter had come to her senses too. I suppose that’s my fault though.”

“I don’t understand,” I reply, looking for further explanation.

“Elijah and Kelly’s father cheated on me for years,” she says quite candidly.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I tell her, followed by a large gulp of wine. I’m not sure what else you’re supposed to say to such an admission. “But you seem happy now?”

“Yes, Joseph is quite a different sort, and he completely dotes on me,” she says with a lovestruck smile. “I’ve made my peace with what my first husband did to me. Besides, I suppose I had my role to play.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You must understand, Ellie, back when I had children, people weren’t quite so knowledgeable about such things as depression and the effects of loss. After I had Elijah, I was so overjoyed, and so in love, but during my second pregnancy, my mother died. It did not feel the same; I felt lonely, dark, and so full of guilt. I hid myself away, refused to go out, and ultimately, pushed their father away.”

“That must have been awful,” I tell her, “I am sorry.”

“I often blamed myself for his infidelity,” she says with a sad smile.

“Forgive me if I am speaking out of turn, but I don’t think anyone can blame themselves for their other half playing away from them. Surely, he could see how low you were?”

“It was a different time, dear,” she says, smiling warmly as she places her hand over mine. “Eventually, we forgave one another; I guess we learned to see the other’s point of view.”

“Do you think you’d be so forgiving now?” I ask out of curiosity.

“I would like to think I would have sought help, and with my husband beside me,” she says with a far-off look in her eye. “No, I don’t think I would have been. It is precisely why I persuaded Elijah to make his sister see what her husband was up to. I am sorry you were caught in the crossfire.”

“She has forgiven him then. Your daughter?”

“I guess she has,” she says sadly, “she isn’t speaking to any of us at the moment.”

“That’s...”

“Right, are we ready to go?” Elijah interrupts us with his charming grin.

“Sure,” I reply with a smile, even though his mother has just told me the most heart-breaking background to her life.

“Wonderful, because I have quite the evening planned for us!”

Chapter 5

Ellie

“I cannot believe you ordered your steak well done,” Elijah laughs at me as we walk toward the Eiffel Tower, “in France!”

“I thought the waiter was trying to vaporize me with just his eyes!” I reply, somewhat truthfully, for he really looked like I had just butchered his entire family when I told him how I would like my meat.

“Well, I’m sorry it made you feel uncomfortable,” he says as we walk hand in hand through the small groups of tourists who are also trying to reach the tower. “Hopefully, the Eiffel Tower will have you falling back in love with Paris.”

Just as he brings the back of my hand up to his lips, we reach the bottom of the tower and join the queue for the lifts. We could walk, but after having eaten a three-course meal, I think any exertion might have the food threatening to come up again. Plus, who wants to look and smell like they’ve climbed a billion steps in front of the beautiful man beside me?

We’re soon squished into the back of the metal cage of the lift, where we hold onto one another. We’re so close, it has me thinking back to that kiss in Monet’s Garden. An ache begins to throb between my thighs, causing me to blush so brightly, he brushes his finger across my warm cheek. He smiles and I instantly melt; he could do anything to me right now and I’d be putty in his hands. I try to fight the urge to give myself away to him completely, to remember the last six months of progress I’ve made, but when he leans in to press his lips gently against mine, my thoughts blur into nothing.

“Ellie,” he whispers as he pulls back only so far that he is now resting against my forehead. I cannot say anything back, so instead, make an indescribable noise from the back of my throat, prompting him to smile at me.

“Ahh,” a tiny, elderly French lady coos at the both of us. We’re no doubt looking like love’s young dream. That, or she’s gushing over Elijah’s beauty. “Amour, so lovely!”

We smile at one another, then thank her. She places her frail hand on her chest, just as the lift comes to a stop at the very top.

“Ready?” he asks me quietly.

“I think so,” I murmur, wondering if my legs are actually going to work. He laughs as he takes hold of my hand and leads me out behind the crowd.

As soon as the cooler air hits me, I notice just how high up we are, in addition to the wind that feels like it’s making the whole structure sway from side to side. Holy shit, this isn’t how I was expecting to feel up here; I want to be on the ground, stat!



Elijah

As I walk out into the beautiful night air, with a clear sky and a sprinkling of stars, I wonder how on earth I got so lucky as to be given a night like this. I couldn't have planned it better if I had tried. I pull out with Ellie's hand firmly inside of mine; however, I soon meet resistance. I turn to see what has stopped her. Perhaps she's still taking in the night sky.

"Ellie?" I ask with worry in my voice. She's frozen still, just shy of the lift door, and has a paler complexion than usual. She remains silent but jumps a little when the lift clunks as it makes its descent. "Good God, what's wrong?"

Still, she says nothing, just opens her eyes wide, and shakes her head with rapid force. I move closer, sliding my arms around her tense body. I keep slow, for fear she might bolt; she looks that terrified.

"Are we moving?" she all but whispers.

"Ever so slightly with the wind, but it is normal, I promise you," I tell her with as soft a voice as I can. "Are you afraid of heights?"

"Apparently," she mumbles as her hands wrap around my biceps and grip on with such force, her hands blanch white.

"Ok," I whisper, trying not to smile, for her fear is real. "God, Ellie, you're trembling! Look, I'll press the button and get you down as soon as possible. Ok?"

"O-ok," she stutters, still gripping hold of me tightly.

“It will be a few minutes, Ellie, do you think you can hold on?”

“I don’t really have a choice in the matter,” she says. She tries to smile but ends up gulping instead.

“Here,” I say as I maneuver her in front of me, facing the window so she can see the night sky. “Pretend we are on the ground, looking out of any other window.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” she gasps as I pull her in against my chest. “I’ve ruined your romantic evening – the steak, even the Eiffel Tower! I think fate has deemed me undatable.”

“Do not talk such nonsense, Ellie Russo,” I laugh softly against her ear, “I did not spend six months thinking of you, only to let France frighten me away.”

“What did we do during these thoughts of yours?” she asks at the same time as she takes a chance to open her eyes and look at the stars.

“Well, we were often kissing,” I tell her, then press my lips to her cheek, making her smile and cuddle into me. “Sometimes we held hands like a couple of teenagers, sometimes we’d just lay around on my couch in my apartment. I’d show you off to my parents, of course.”

“Kind of already did that one,” she says quietly, now with her eyes closed in reverence.

“We’ve also kissed,” I tell her as I lean around to kiss her plump, slightly pale lips. “And held hands. However, there

are plenty of things I thought of us doing that we haven't yet done."

"Oh," she grins, her eyes bursting open with glee, "what sort of things?"

"I'm not telling you," I reply cheekily, just as the lift arrives. We begin to walk slowly toward the doors and wait for the space to clear before walking inside, very much as squashed as before. She's relaxed, but I still hold her close, face-to-face.

"Why not?" she asks, sounding a little disappointed. I cup my hand around her cheek and kiss her, this time slowly and sensually, moving my tongue against hers like I want to move my hands against her body. She grips hold of my jacket, clutching me tight so I have no choice but to show her how aroused I am.

"Because I cannot," I whisper when we pull apart for air. The other tourists blur into insignificance as I brush my knuckles over her jaw, to which she takes a deep inhale to steady herself. "But I can show you?"

At first, she doesn't respond, just stares at me with wide eyes. In fact, I begin to panic, worrying that I've pushed it too far, too soon. However, before I can take it back, she nods her head with a small smile on her face.

"I'd like that," she says, just as we touch down. She doesn't appear to have noticed we are now back on solid ground, for her eyes remain firmly fixed on mine.



Ellie

We've talked the whole way back, and yet, now that we're ascending to the top floor in an otherwise empty elevator, we've hit an awkward silence. That is to say, I have. Elijah looks as calm and collected as before, with his hands tucked behind his back and his eyes watching the numbers get higher and higher. Me? I'm a whole bag of nerves and anticipation. I haven't let a man near me since Jonathan, and even then, I suspect my heart was never in it. In hindsight, I should have seen his strange behavior for what it was. The not seeing me for weeks at a time, the dining out in places outside of the city, the foray of impersonal gifts, as well as the sex that always took place at my apartment, and always had him leaving before morning. God, what an idiot I was!

Elijah looks like he could go either way – ultra charming but oh, so robotic (I'm talking missionary all the way) or rough and kinky. Personally, I'm holding out for the latter, especially after that kiss in Monet's Garden. That kiss was anything but bland. If I had to compare it to underwear, for example, that kiss was the Victoria Secret of tongue action. Besides, he did say he knew when to leave the gentleman persona at the door.

The elevator suddenly comes to a halt with a bump and clatter of cables. I should have guessed he'd be staying in a hotel that was super pricey but super old too. This place is steeped in history, you can tell. I half suspect we'll meet a few

eighteenth-century ghosts on our way back, perhaps with their severed heads being carried underneath their arms.

“Penthouse,” Elijah declares with a small wink and a smirk that is already causing my panties to begin falling down.

“I expected nothing less,” I tease as I try my best to sashay out of the elevator and into the swanky interior of the hallway. Golds and reds as far as the eye can see, as well as one big, ornately decorated door to his room.

“Ellie,” he says as he grabs hold of my hand and pulls me gently toward him, with gentlemanly concern written all over his face. “Are you sure about this?”

“Aren’t you?” I ask, praying he doesn’t reject me like all the others.

“Surer than anything I’ve ever done before, however, you look a little nervous,” he says, though he still drops those beautiful blues down to my lips, looking as if he wants to devour them. “I want nothing more than to worship you, to act upon all my wicked fantasies about you, but out here, I am still a gentleman. I would never force myself on anyone who is not one hundred percent sure.”

“You sound like one of those classics you read for tips,” I tease, causing him to laugh softly at me.

“What I mean to say,” he whispers as he drops his forehead against mine, lacing his fingers with my own as he does so, “for this to work, you have to want me as much as I want you.”

“Now, that’s more like it,” I whisper before kissing him ever so gently on his parted, slightly panting lips. “Time to leave the gentleman at the door; show me naughty Elijah!”

I wiggle my brows flirtatiously at the same time as he grins with his teeth.

“You asked for it,” he says before releasing me so he can turn to open the door to his swanky Parisian pad.

He opens the door up wide, then takes hold of my hand and pulls me in behind him, where the nerves hit me hard. He keeps his hold on me the whole time, even when he moves back to close the door. Once the sound of the click goes, he pulls me back and up against the wall, caging me inside his much bigger body. I’m about to laugh, if only to release my nerves, when he grips my wrists together above my head and kisses me with such intensity, the giggle caught in my throat instantly turns into a girlish moan. His pelvis thrusts against my hips, revealing just how hard he is for this.

“This is going to destroy me, isn’t it?” I pant as his lips move down to my neck.

One of his hands releases my wrist to cup hold of my breast. He massages my flesh with a skill that tells me he is definitely a boob man.

“That’s the plan!” he gasps between his oral assault on my skin. I’m going to look like a teenager covered in hickies tomorrow, but right now, I positively do not care. “Anything you’re opposed to before I lose myself to your body? Say now, Ellie, or I’ll take whatever I can.”

“Er...erm...Jesus!” I moan as he moves his mouth down to bite at my pert nipple through my silk dress.

“We need to lose these clothes...immediately!” he declares as he spins me around to face the door and begins unzipping my dress. He does so with a much slower pace, as if taking his time to savor the motion. As soon as the fabric hits the floor, he whips off my bra with one hand and begins to pinch and squeeze my nipple with the other one. His pelvis is now up against my back, and his hardness pressing between my cheeks.

“Not there!” I gasp, even though I feel like I’d let him do anything right now. “No one has ever been there.”

“You realize that only makes me want to do it more?” he whispers, crouching down to pull away my panties so I am now only wearing a pair of nonsensical heels.

“Be that as it may, ne pas toucher (do not touch).” I smile against the wood of the door. “I’d only consider letting my husband touch me there.”

“I’ll remember that,” he smiles against my back, “perhaps on our honeymoon!”

“We’re getting married now?” I laugh.

“Yeah, I proposed with a fuck off big ring,” he teases, then flips me around again so he is face-to-sex.

“You did? What was my answer?” I ask as he places his hand between my thighs to move them apart.

“You said...” he begins before swiping a finger through my wet lips below, causing me to groan with a need for more. “You couldn’t promise yourself to someone who hadn’t shown you what he was capable of in bed. Smart girl.”

“You better deliver then, Mr Woo...oh!”

Before I can finish that sentence, he silences me by swiping his tongue all the way through my sex, with his finger now pushing inside of me.

“Oh, I intend to!” he says before he begins what can only be described as sweet torture, using just his tongue and forefinger. Just as I’m about to detonate in such a way my head feels like it might actually implode, he pulls back. I’m ashamed to say, I literally mewed like a cat. He laughs at first, a low, self-satisfied laugh, that makes me want to both slap and straddle him all at the same time. “Two rules, Ellie Russo; one, you do as I tell you, and two, you only come when I give you permission.”

“What happens if I break those rules?” I gasp, no doubt looking completely out of it.

“Then, you will be punished, Ellie!” he declares as he stands to meet me face-to-face. I’m gifted with one PG-13 kiss before I’m hauled over his shoulder and carried into the bedroom, together with a swift smack of my ass.

Once I hit the mattress with a small bounce, he stands back and begins undressing, slowly, but in a manly, I’m-the-king-of-the-world kind of way, smirking the entire time. I have to admit, a man removing his cufflinks never struck me as being particularly erotic, but the sight of him doing just that has me leaning back onto my elbows, with my legs parting just

enough for a healthy view of what he has left wanting. I then smile with a come-hither motion of my finger.

“That is quite the sight,” he says as he begins removing his belt, which is almost as delicious as the removal of his cufflinks. “So much more impressive than what I had conjured up inside my head over the last six months.”

I open my mouth to reply but am cut short when he pulls everything down in one motion to reveal a very tempting sight. I’ve never rated a dick before, but if one were to be given my ‘Best Dick of the Year’ award, Elijah Woods and his angry-looking cock would receive it with a promise to let him do whatever the hell he wants with it.

“Not afraid, are we?” he asks with a quirk of his right brow. All I can do is shake my head at such a pace, it no doubt makes me look the complete opposite of nonchalant. “Good. Now, on all fours, darling!”

I giggle to myself before turning over and doing exactly as he says, ass in the air and with a small wiggle to tease. At first, I feel nothing, just a cold blow of air from the air conditioning, turning my already pebbled nipples even harder. When his fingers eventually begin to stroke the inside of my thighs, I almost collapse onto the mattress. But then he begins to move them apart, wider and with a swipe of his fingers through my aching core.

“Dripping,” he murmurs, “I was ever so cruel to you, wasn’t I?”

“Mhmm,” I moan as he continues running the tips of his fingers through me with such a teasing pressure, I try to back into them. I’m punished with a sudden slap, followed by a rub of my tingling flesh.

“I decide when and how, Miss Russo,” he says, “rules are rules!”

“Sorry,” I whisper, though still with a smile on my lips.

“Good girl,” he says smugly before using his wicked tongue to lick me from one end to the other.

“Ah...fu...!”

Lord, I’ve actually lost the ability to speak. He simply emits a low growl from the back of his throat, causing a delicious vibration against every nerve within the vicinity of my clitoris. He continues torturing me with the tip of his oh, so talented tongue, only stopping to pull me in when he sucks with a suction that I swear is borderline unnatural.

“Please, God, I’m going to –“ I gasp as a powerful feeling begins to build, intensifying at such a pace, I’m not sure I’m going to survive it.

“Shall I let you?” he chuckles quietly, withdrawing for but a moment, though enough to let me cry out in complete frustration. “Permission, granted!”

All it takes is one more swipe of his tongue and I feel like every nerve ending is being set alight with a climax so intense, I collapse onto the mattress. Not that I have much time to recover before he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me back up into position.

“You’re not even nearly finished, Miss Russo,” he says as I peek between my legs to see him stroking himself with

slow but forceful movements.

“I think you killed my clitoris,” I pant, causing him to laugh again, just as he begins rubbing the tip of his cock around my entrance. “She died happy; real fucking happy!”

“Time to revive her,” he says before leaning down to pepper my back with little, soothing kisses, as though easing me back to Earth before he takes me to kinky heaven again. “You ready?”

“Would you judge me if I said I’ve been ready since that kiss in Monet’s Garden?”

No answer is given other than his throaty laugh, followed by a hard thrust of his cock. The shock of him has me taking in a large gulp of air and holding it. I don’t release it until he withdraws, so painfully slowly, then slams back inside of me again. When I moan over the sheer size of him, he stops to begin circling his hips so I can feel him moving around inside of me. It’s so intense, so ridiculously euphoric, I have to grip hold of the sheets to stop myself from releasing far too early for my liking.

“I’m trying really hard to not fuck you like I so dearly want to, darling,” he whispers with what sounds like real strain in his voice.

“You left the gentleman at the door, remember?” I remind him with a cheeky peek over my shoulder. I’m gifted with a wicked grin before he grips hold of my hips and begins thrusting against me with such speed and pressure, I can barely breathe.

“God, I’m so close, Elijah,” I cry out, “please, let me!”

“Let go, Ellie,” he orders, and I do, almost violently.

“God, I could feel you, all of you,” he gasps between thrusts, “it was amazing, it was-“

Before he can finish that declaration, he shudders, and I feel a pulse from inside. I cannot help but smile as he releases his own held breath with such a satisfied sigh, I have to move up straight to meet him face-to-face. His hand moves around my neck, while his other one keeps hold of my hip, and we kiss.

“More?” he asks with a smile that tells me this wasn’t just a meaningless fuck; it was the beginning of something *more*.

“More!”

At least, I hope it is.

Chapter 6

Ellie

Hours and many orgasms later, I am straddling Elijah Woods, writhing slowly against him as he lets me take control for the first time. He's sitting on the penthouse couch, legs wide apart, impaling me with his cock that never seems to fall flaccid. This man has magical powers I cannot even begin to fight; not that I ever would. His hands roam up and down my body while I move in lazy but delicious movements against him. He looks at me as though I am the most precious thing in his world; no one has ever looked this sincere before, like I am their everything, their one and only. I've always been a stand-in or a side piece, never the main event.

"You look ridiculously beautiful right now, Ellie Russo," he says with a lazy, relaxed smile. "I've had to talk myself out of coming at least four times."

"I'm surprised you're letting me be in control, Mr Woods," I tell him as I brace myself against his muscular chest and arch my back to feel him even deeper.

"Sometimes I like to let the gentleman come into the bedroom," he replies as he reaches down to rub my clitoris in such a way, I have to bite my lip to stop my own climax from coming too soon. I'm enjoying the intimacy of this far too much to let it end yet.

"I can't decide which one of you I like best," I murmur between breaths.

"Luckily for you, you won't ever have to choose," he says as he takes my nipple into his mouth. "I will give you

whatever you need, whenever you need it. I want you in my life, Ellie.”

“Really? Oh!” I’m hit with an orgasm out of the blue, completely without my permission. I’d scream in frustration if hadn’t felt so deliciously euphoric.

“Absolutely,” he smiles, just before he grips hold of my hips to lie me flat against the couch so he can move against me how he likes it. Missionary never felt so good. As soon as he hisses with his own release, he lies against me and begins stoking my arms with such softness, I want to hold onto him forever more.

“What do you say?” he asks, with his fingers leaving trails on my tingling skin.

“I think so, yes, I want to, but-“

“Do you trust me, Ellie?” he asks as he looks up at me with those intense blue eyes of his. “It’s ok if you don’t yet. As I said, I need to earn it.”

“I cannot honestly say I trust any man yet,” I admit, and even gentleman Elijah cannot hold back the look of disappointment on his face. “But, Elijah, you’re the only one I want to try to.”

“Then I am happy,” he says and moves up to kiss me. “Now, shower, then bed. You must be exhausted, and, alas, we’ve finally gone through my ample supply of condoms.”

“How positively disgraceful of us!” I giggle, mocking his well-spoken tone of voice.

He smiles as he lifts me up and carries me into the shower, where we do nothing but kiss, long and lazy. It's perfect.



Ellie

By the time I arrive at work the following week, two hours late after a delayed flight and a long kissing fest of a goodbye to Elijah, Nate is sitting on my chair with his legs resting unapologetically on top of my desk. He gives me the judgmental eye, even though he's paid a shed load more than me, and is quite obviously bunking off from his own work to come and guilt me. He even tuts with a theatrical wag of his finger. Of course, I huff while simultaneously shoving him off my chair.

"I know, I know!" I tell him, just as my office mother, Edith, brings me a hot cup of coffee. I sometimes love this woman more than my real mother. "My plane was delayed and my baggage was the last one out, and--"

"And you were tired from all the sex you've been having?"

"Wh-wh-...I mean, what?!" I gasp. How could he possibly know I hooked up with Elijah?!

“Come on, Ellie, you haven’t had sex in months, and you’ve just spent a long weekend in Paris,” he laughs, “you must have found some saucy, young waiter.”

“I did not find some saucy, young waiter!” I declare indignantly.

“A saucy, *old* waiter?”

I reply with a dramatic roll of my eyes as I begin powering up my laptop, praying I don’t have an email from Cameron already. With any luck, he won’t have noticed my late arrival. Alas, when I open the envelope icon, his name appears right at the top of my unopened list, along with a watch emoji. It’s not that he’ll give me a hard time like a boss hard time, it will be more like a big brother hard time. I’m going to be quizzed beyond belief and how can I deny him? After all, he did pay for the trip, and he has been looking after me ever since I can remember. I may not have always wanted his help, but he’s given it, nonetheless.

With nothing but a flick of my hand in Nate’s direction, I make my way over to the elevator, readying myself to receive the lecture of a lifetime. I know he won’t approve of the man who threw me under the bus with his sister, however, we didn’t truly know each other back then. He was looking out for his little sister while trying to placate his mom. Do I wish he would have warned me first? Hell, yes. Do I fully trust him yet? Honestly, no. Do I still want to spend every minute of the day with him? Stupidly, I do. The real question, however, is whether Elijah is different from all the others, or if he’s just another mistake to add to my growing list.

“I’m glad I wasn’t naked or anything,” Cam’s teasing tone of voice floats through my ears as I wander into his office

absent-mindedly. I was too deep in thought to think of knocking before entering his fancy, top-floor office.

“Sorry,” I mumble, “do you want me to go back and knock?”

“What kind of pretentious asshole would that make me?” he laughs as he ambles over to kiss me on the cheek. “You’re lucky I wasn’t in a compromising position though.”

“Between business hours?” I ask before slumping down onto his couch that sits in front of his floor-to-ceiling windows. The city looks breathtaking this morning. Either that or my new relationship with Elijah is making me see everything through rose-tinted glasses.

“It’s been known,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders, “I am engaged, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, magical fairy-tale and all that,” I giggle while he looks all gushy for a moment or two. It suits him; I’ve never seen him this happy before.

“So, Paris?” he says with a happy sigh. “I trust you had a good time?”

“It was...adequate, thank you,” I reply nonchalantly while perusing my nails.

“That’s it?”

“Why? What were you expecting?” I ask with suspicion in my voice.

“Oh, no reason,” he says, pretending to look at his computer screen while spinning back and forth in his pretentious office chair.

“I know that look,” I utter as I point at him with accusation, “you did something; you’ve done your whole white knight thing, haven’t you?”

“What?! No, of course not,” he cries out just as Nate waltzes in without a care in the world. “Does no one knock anymore? I’m only the boss around here.”

“You’re a big brother first,” I argue, “an interfering one at that!”

“I concur,” Nate says at the same time as he takes up the chair next to me. “What’s he been interfering with now?”

“Nothing!”

“You knew about him being there, didn’t you? You knew about Elijah turning up in Paris!”

“The asshole who messed Ellie about? Are you serious?!” Nate snaps angrily.

“Look, the guy came to me after what happened,” Cameron tries to explain, putting up his hands to try and calm us both down. “He explained what happened and told me how much he liked you. It took guts to come and face me after what happened, so I figured he must be genuine. You could do with someone sincere, Ellie. But if I got it wrong, I apologize. Did I get it wrong?”

All eyes turn on me and I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment. But when I think of Elijah and the time we spent together this week, I cannot hold back my smile any longer. It doesn't help when Cam grins with his teeth, looking oh, so proud of himself. Nate, on the other hand, looks murderous.

“Unbelievable!” he snaps as he gets to his feet in outrage. “Have you not learned anything from Helena? Do you wanna lose another sister to some asshole who doesn't deserve her?”

“Don't bring Helena into this,” Cam growls through his teeth. “Helena and Evan are completely different. Elijah Woods, although a bit of an idiot when he first met Ell, is a good guy. He even went to seek advice from Lucius Hastings. Now, that really does take guts!”

“Hastings?” Nate questions him, pausing in his outrage to think on this. “Jesus, he must like you.”

“I've never met this Lucius Hastings, but I must say, I'm dying to meet the guy,” I comment as I let the two brothers have one of their little arguments.

“No, you're not, trust me,” Cam says as he settles back down at his desk.

“The guy's the devil incarnate!” Nate adds, seemingly forgetting his little outburst.

“So, what are you thinking? About Elijah?” Cam asks, now looking at me with a softness in his eyes.

“I really like him,” I admit with a nervous giggle, “and the chemistry is...” I finish that sentence with a roll of my eyes and a groan of ecstasy. Both brothers gasp in horror, then begin complaining with flaps of their hands.

“God, Ellie, we don’t want to hear about that!” Nate grumbles.

“How many times have I had to hear about the two of you and your sexual antics?” I huff. “I swear some stories were like having a detailed anatomy lesson.”

“Do you trust him?” Cameron asks, bypassing Nate and his double standards.

“Not yet, not completely,” I admit, “I don’t think I would trust anyone after my track record. If he hurts me too, I don’t know if I’d ever recover from it. But he knows this, and he wants to try and convince me that I can.”

“Then, I’m happy for you, Ellie,” he says with his big brother smile.

“Thank you,” I reply before turning to face his idiot little brother. “Nate?”

“Yeah,” he moans, sounding less convinced, “I guess so. But if he hurts you, can I have permission to beat his ass this time?”

“Of course,” I reply, and get up to wrap my arms around his shoulders. “You are such a fool sometimes.”



Elijah

The usual bell chimes as I walk inside the florists, immediately gaining the attention of Carol. I'm offered her familiar beaming smile, but this time with a frown of curiosity between her brows. I brace myself for an interrogation as to why I am here so soon after having bought my mother a bunch of roses only a few days ago. I have a standing order that goes out monthly, so she should have already received them.

“Elijah?” she questions me straight away.

“Evening, Carol, I think I'm lucky to have caught you, given the time,” I observe, glancing at my watch. It's precisely two hours before I get to see Ellie again and I can't help wearing a goofy smile, giving myself away completely.

“I know that look,” she says smugly, “who's the lucky girl?”

“I'm not going to even pretend I don't know what you're talking about; her name is Ellie,” I tell her. “And I would like to buy her something with lilies. I remember her liking them in Monet's Garden.”

“You mean, you're giving me some creative license?” she gasps, knowing how I am usually very precise with my mother's flowers. “Well, I am surprised.”

“We are still getting to know one another, and I’m enjoying every minute of it,” I tell her truthfully.

“She must be special, given the ridiculous look on your face.”

“She is,” I admit, “very.”

By the time I step outside the florist with an exquisite bouquet for Ellie, I am ready for a drink, so stroll over to a bar I usually frequent after work, just to take the edge off after a day of arguing with people. I order my usual drink, falling into predictability. I thank the barman and give him a generous tip before glancing around at my surroundings. It’s then that I notice someone very familiar. In fact, I notice two very familiar people, though I haven’t seen one of them in years.

I cannot help staring at her, taking in what I left behind after she all but destroyed me with a text message. As if sensing my eyes on her, she turns to face me. Goodness knows what I must look like with my glass halfway to my gaping mouth and a confused furrow between my brows. She smiles with perfect teeth, slicked-back hair, and an outfit any member of the royal family would be proud of. Amanda West, still perfecting the role of a socialite with a set of ridiculously rich parents and a trust fund too large to put a precise figure on. And next to her, is my estranged sister, looking entirely smug over me catching them.

I brace myself before getting to my feet and walking over to them, trying to suck in any confidence I can from my Tom Ford suit and Italian leather shoes. I guess I look a little different from the lanky teenager who used to wear whatever he could find to sling on that morning. I never knew why

Amanda chose to be with me, except for the fact that we were friends, and I made her laugh.

“Elijah Woods, as I live and breathe,” Amanda says as she stands and offers me her cheek. “How wonderful to see you again!”

“Amanda, Kelly, I must admit I’m lost for words,” I reply. “It’s totally unexpected to see you both here, together, and without your usual entourage, Amanda?”

“I have a few tricks up my sleeve when I want to lose them, darling,” she says with a wink. “Besides, I’m a little less important in the States. You look well, Elijah, extremely well. I’m glad you’ve finally found a sense of style.”

“Quite,” I utter, “the ability to wear a suit is surely what makes you in the world.” By the look on her face, she hasn’t caught on to my sarcastic tone of voice. Either that or she’s simply choosing to ignore it.

“I was just telling Amanda how you’re seeing the very same girl who was sleeping with my husband behind my back,” Kelly says with a hint of bitterness she cannot conceal.

“Yes, quite shocking, I must say,” Amanda adds, laughing in such a way, I wonder why I was ever attracted to her.

“Ah, I see,” I reply with a long sigh. “This all makes sense now, Kelly. I am sorry your husband cheated on you, but Ellie had no idea he was with anybody else. As soon as she did, she ended things.”

“You know I will never accept her, Elijah, how could I?”

“You don’t have to,” I reply matter of factly, “just as I don’t have to accept Jonathan. It amazes me how you are so willing to forgive the real cheat, yet you’ll happily blame someone who was oblivious to your marriage.”

“You know nothing about our marriage-“

“Oh, look, come on you two, you have always been so close,” Amanda interrupts, “let’s not let Elijah’s lady friend get between you both.”

“She hasn’t,” I snap while getting to my feet, preparing myself to get out of here. “Ladies.”

With those parting words, I begin marching out of the bar and toward the street. I need the cooling air to blow away my anger and frustration. However, as soon as I get to the door, a hand pulls me back.

“Elijah, please, wait,” Amanda says when I turn to look at her with anger coursing through my veins. “Don’t go like this. It pains me to see you looking so out of sorts.”

“Is that why you decided to break up with me over a text message?” I snap, causing her to flinch over my cutting tone. The gentleman in me immediately steps back at the same time as I utter, “Apologies.”

“This is exactly why I agreed to meet up with Kelly when she called me,” she says, twisting my sister’s knife in that little bit more. “I have grown up a lot since we last saw

one another and the way I treated you has been playing on my mind a lot. Please, let me take you out for dinner so I can explain myself, Elijah.”

“I don’t think that would be wise,” I tell her, now sounding sorry instead of angry about the fact. “I am with Ellie now and going out with another woman isn’t the right message I want to convey.”

“Oh, Elijah, this is just two old friends going out for a drink in a public place,” she says with an innocent smile. “Surely if you explain that to her, she’ll understand.”

I sigh heavily as I take her in, looking innocent and friendly. Perhaps her reasons are just, but something is warning me to tread carefully. Amanda never does anything without something being in it for her. And besides, Ellie is still learning to trust me. But then the need to know what caused Amanda to act so callously and break my heart like it was nothing, wins out. I’ve spent years trying to figure out what the hell happened to make her treat me so badly.

“If I tell her and she doesn’t like it, then drinks are off,” I state, and she smiles with triumph. “This better not be a game, Amanda.”

“It’s not, I swear,” she says with a serious expression. “As I said, I’ve grown up so much since then. I just want to give you those answers you so desperately crave.”

“Very well,” I reply, “meet me here tomorrow night at seven. If I’m not here, you know Ellie said no. She means a lot to me, Amanda, and I will not risk anything that will cause her to doubt me.”

“Of course,” she says with a nod of her head.

I notice my sister watching from inside and second-guess my decision, but then I turn away and begin marching down the street without another word.

Chapter 7

Ellie

“Ah, these are so beautiful,” I gush over Elijah’s bouquet of white lilies. “But, yeah, it’s been at least a bazillion hours since I last kissed you, so lay those lips on me, your lordship!”

“With pleasure,” he laughs as he pulls me against his chest and delivers one of those barely legal kisses on me, the type that leaves you semi-conscious for a few minutes afterward.

“Do you want a drink?” I mumble between kisses as he begins pushing me inside my apartment. He simply mumbles something that sounds on the ‘no’ side of things, all the while he continues kissing me with his tongue doing unspeakable things to mine.

“Food?” I ask, though, only to be polite.

“Mm,” he says while shaking his head, still kissing me as he removes his suit jacket which he simply throws on the floor.

“Ok, just sex then?” I ask, completely giving into this as I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders.

“Mm,” he groans as he hoists me up, giving me invitation to wrap my legs around his hips.

Somehow, we make it to the bedroom, and without me even needing to tell him where it is; he just has magical

homing instincts. I'm literally thrown onto the mattress with a healthy bounce and a nervous but excited chuckle.

"Strip!" he orders with a smirk on his face, all the while he takes off his clothes.

"Where's my gentleman who brought me flowers?" I tease, even though I'm now up on my knees and unbuttoning my shirt as fast as my fingers will work.

"He's waiting with the flowers," he plays along. "There's no gentleman in here now, Ellie, just you, me, and my cock, which has been dying to slip inside of you since I left you at your office this morning."

"Ooh, dirty-talking Elijah!" I gasp with joy. "I like him."

"In that case, lie back, open those gorgeous legs, and let me see her," he orders, making me giggle with giddy excitement. As soon as I do as he says, he begins stroking himself and simply stares at me for a moment or two. "Perfect!"

He moves toward the bed, as though he's going to come and kiss me, but no sooner have I reached out for him, he smiles deviously, then drops down to lick me from one end to the other. *Jesus, I've died and gone to oral heaven!*

"Your pussy is addictive, Ellie, I couldn't stop thinking about it all day!" I giggle while he continues with that talented tongue of his, building me up much too soon to be anywhere near cool. "Filling in mindless forms, and she's there, in my head; meeting with clients, she's there, taunting me with her

wet lips; even while on the phone to Lucius Hastings, the devil himself, and she's there, inviting me in."

"Oh, God!" I moan as he brings me to a pinnacle that I cannot resist any longer. As I come in a rush, he moans against me, the vibrations of which cause me to shudder with more intensity.

"Now, you're nice and ready for me, I want you to straddle me, but face the other way," he says as he begins moving me up to sitting. My limbs feel like jelly, but I'm more than willing to do as he says; I know this is going to be a good ride.

He holds himself up as he lies into position, then moves his other hand to my hip to help lower me onto his awaiting hardness. I slide on top of him, circling when it begins to feel intense with how deep he reaches inside of me. Gentleman Elijah returns for a moment or two to let me acclimatize, but as soon as I begin moving, he works with me to build this up into something more deliciously urgent. His hands slide to my hips to help push me against him, his thumbs resting on my ass and his own pelvis thrusts up against me. I arch my back to feel the full impact of him. He cannot help reaching up around to my breasts as they bounce up and down.

"God, this image will haunt me tomorrow," he says breathlessly, "and the feeling of your body around me...Jesus, Ellie!"

"You feel so deep," I gasp, which only encourages him to move faster. His thumb reaches around to begin circling my clit, which almost immediately tips me over the edge with a none too subtle whimper from my lips.

“That’s it, baby, ride it, ride me!” he says through what sounds like clenched teeth. As soon as my climax comes to an end, he takes hold of my hips and flips us over so that I’m lying flat on the mattress while he’s riding me from behind. It’s so sudden, I gasp from the shock of it. At first, he goes hard and fast, but then he slows to circle around. *Jesus, he’s trying to get me to come again!*

“Elijah, I can’t...” I moan.

“Yes, you can, come with me this time!” he orders through a growl of a voice.

I’m no longer able to answer, just grip hold of the sheets while I let him take me on this ride to an explosion which I’m not sure I’ll survive. He builds up his thrusts again, and within moments, we both let go with a series of moans. So much so, I know I won’t be able to look my neighbors in the eye for a few weeks.

“Oh, my God, you’ve actually killed me!” I gasp as we finally disentangle ourselves and fall to the mattress, side by side, panting after all the exertion. “I’m going to have to start exercising or something.”

“You and me both,” he laughs softly, “but I’m happy to be your personal gym.”

“I can’t feel my legs, Elijah!” I giggle as he pulls me in closer to him. “And my vagina has officially passed out from shock.”

“She just needs training up a bit,” he says as he leans over to kiss me gently. “I could get used to this.”

“What? Sex?” I ask him with a silly grin on my face.

“That too, but no, I meant coming home to you,” he says with a breathtaking smile.

“God, how can I resist you, Mr Woods?”

“I’m not entirely sure, Miss Russo,” he says with a small frown of mock concern. “I’d certainly fall for me if I were you.”

“Don’t hurt me and I will give you all of me,” I tell him truthfully.

“That is the last thing I’m planning to do,” he says and kisses me gently. “But I *am* planning to take you out for dinner, so up!”



Elijah

I’ve taken Ellie to one of my favorite restaurants, one that is far away from the hustle and bustle of the trendier areas. It’s a little way beyond the city, but she’s more than worth the effort of driving out here. It has a much homier feel,

and the food is to die for. Her reaction to the menu is precisely why I brought her here. She's been staring at it for at least ten minutes and keeps telling me she cannot decide between all the amazing dishes on offer.

She lets me choose the wine and finally decides on a meal I recommend. We've eaten out a fair few times now, and I'm fast learning what she likes and what she doesn't. She likes to eat, and I enjoy that about her. I remember Amanda would often only eat a few mouthfuls before feigning being full. I used to worry about her incessant need to keep her weight down, but she never listened to me. When she ended things, I gave up caring. The thought of Amanda has me taking a large gulp of wine, readying myself to tell Ellie about her. I sincerely hope she doesn't take things the wrong way.

"So, I bumped into somebody today," I begin, taking a breath before I drop the bombshell on her. "Her name is Amanda. She was the girl who I used to date in England."

"You mean 'the' girl? The one who 'cracked' your heart?" she asks with concern written on her face, which makes me feel even worse. Perhaps I shouldn't say about the drink and just not go. *But you need answers, Elijah, it will only plague you if you don't.*

"The very same, having drinks with my sister," I tell her in a tone of voice that confirms how weird that is.

"Oh," she says, wincing for me. "Things still not good between you and her then?"

"Apparently not," I reply sadly. I know Kelly is hurting, trying to ignore what she doesn't want to know, but it still stings to know that she's blaming me of all people. I always thought we had a good relationship.

"I'm sure she'll come around," Ellie says soothingly as she covers my hand with hers. "You won me round, right?"

“I don’t think I can use the same skillset to win my sister around,” I tell her with a devious smirk, to which she laughs and takes a sip of her drink. I take the moment to watch as her neck swallows back her wine, feeling both lustful and anxious. “Anyway, Amanda caught me before I stormed out of the bar,” I tell her, bracing myself when she instantly changes the way she’s looking at me – less reassuring, more apprehensive. “She wants to explain what happened all those years ago, to give me some answers to questions that have plagued me for so long, Ellie.”

“Oh,” she says as she withdraws her hand to chew on her thumbnail. I immediately pull her hand back and begin to stroke it with my free one. She fakes a smile as she looks at me, trying to remain strong while having all the doubts she warned me about.

“Ellie, you have absolutely nothing to worry about,” I tell her honestly. “I felt nothing for her; all I could think about was you. I just need to know why she treated me like she did; to have some form of closure.”

“I know,” she says with a rapid nodding of her head, still trying to sound confident, “and you should go.”

“Ellie, if this is going to make you have doubts about us, then I won’t go, I promise,” I whisper.

“Oh, God,” she gasps, then withdraws her hand from mine to take a healthy gulp of wine. “When are you supposed to be going?”

“Tomorrow evening,” I reply, “but I’ve already said I won’t go if it’s going to cause you to have any doubts about

us.”

“Jesus, she must think I’m some sort of neurotic mess,” she says, then drops her forehead against her fingertips, squeezing her eyes shut as she does so.

“No, she doesn’t, and even if she did, who cares? The only people who matter here, are you and me.”

“You have to go, of course, you do,” she says, even though her expression is telling me something completely different. “This is my issue, not yours. If we’re really going to make this into something, then I’ve got to learn to trust, and the only way I can do that is to let you show me. This is you showing me; this is a good thing, right?”

“Right,” I tell her with a smile. “I will show you with flying colors, I promise.”

“Ok...ok,” she says before she takes in another gulp of wine, “though, I should warn you, Nate has got first dibs on kicking your ass if you don’t.”

I lean over to kiss her, but I know she won’t be comfortable again until this meeting with Amanda is over. Hopefully, with the answers I need.



Elijah

When I arrive at the same bar as yesterday, ready to meet with Amanda, I take out my phone to send Ellie a quick text. She's been on edge since our dinner. I get it, she's been nothing but let down in the past so she's expecting the worst to try and protect herself. She's right, this is a good thing; I can finally show her that no other woman is going to even tempt me away from her. I would never cheat, for many reasons, but mainly because she means so much to me already.

How's my girl? X

I pace for a moment or two while I wait for her response. Truth be told, I'm on edge just as much as she is. I've been waiting for this moment for years, the whole time questioning everything about myself. What did I do to make someone who supposedly loved me just throw me away without even bothering to meet me face to face?

I'm ok, but I'm staying with Nate tonight. He's promised to make me dinner. X

Good, I'm glad you're not on your own. Trust me, baby. X

I do...I'm learning to. I hope she gives you what you need. X

Honestly? Me too. See you tomorrow. X

With that, I put my phone away, stand up straight, and prepare to march into battle, or so it feels like anyway. I spot her as soon as I walk in, wearing a little black dress that no doubt cost a small fortune. She regularly shops at Harrods and

other designer boutiques, and I shudder to think what her clothing budget is. Being an only daughter to a billionaire has certainly allowed her to live a life that others can't even imagine.

“Elijah,” she beams as she stands to offer me her cheek, which I dutifully kiss.

“Amanda,” I reply in greeting before we take our seats.

“Have you eaten, darling?” she asks, and I inwardly tut over the affectionate name she calls me. “You look tired, Elijah.”

“I admit, I didn't sleep at all well last night. You turning up with my sister and the promise of answers had me tossing and turning all night.”

“Oh, darling-“

“Please stop calling me that, Amanda,” I interrupt, “it's a little inappropriate, don't you think?”

“Elijah,” she says, now without the fakery, “I'm sorry if I've made you feel that way, it wasn't my intention.”

“Then what is your intention, Amanda? Why now?” I snap after having had to keep everything in for so many years.

“Perhaps to absolve myself of this guilt I have been feeling for much too long,” she says with an air of exasperation in her voice. “Elijah, I broke up with you because Daddy forced me to. He told me that you weren't of the same ‘caliber’ as us and

that if I didn't end things, he'd cut me off. He knew I was getting much too close to you, falling for you in such a way he might not be able to end things at all. It was shallow of me, but I gave into his demands."

"I see," I reply with a long exhale of held breath. "I see. So why the text? Why not talk to me and explain everything? Or at the very least, break up with me when I was there in front of you? I gave you everything, Amanda; you gave me a text!"

"I'm ashamed to say that I was being cowardly," she says, looking at the floor with sadness in her eyes. "I knew I couldn't do it otherwise. I thought it would be easier if I sent a message and never looked at you again."

"Easier for you, you mean?"

"Yes, easier for me, I'm sorry," she says with a few tears now running down her cheeks. "Though, it wasn't as easy as I thought, Elijah. I've been following you on social media ever since. I've watched you grow into the man you are today, loving you from afar. You're the one that got away, the one I cannot live without, the one no other man can ever compare to. I want you back, Elijah, with or without my father's blessing."

Without any words, I drop my glass to the tabletop and stare at her with my mouth hanging wide open. My mind is full of tangled webs that seem to fog my vision. What.The.Fuck?!

Chapter 8

Ellie

I didn't sleep last night, not one little bit, even with Nate trying desperately hard to reassure my anxieties by making me laugh with his cheesy dad jokes. I tossed, turned, and went to the bathroom about a billion times, before conceding that I was going to feel like shit today. After checking my phone for the umpteenth time, Nate had taken it away, switched it off, and hidden it. I cursed him for it at the time, but eventually let it go; perhaps it was for the best.

I want to trust him, I really do, and if he can prove to me that he doesn't want anyone else, then perhaps I can admit my deeper feelings for him. Until then, I daren't risk it. My history keeps repeating itself, and if it does this time, I know I shall never be with anyone else again, not on a deep level anyway. My heart will just refuse to feel like this again. So, for both our sakes, I hope Elijah has proven I can trust him wholeheartedly.

I get up and ready extra early, order an Uber into work, then leave Nate a note, ordering him to bring my phone with him. Lord knows where he hid it, but I can live without it for an hour or two. The Uber drops me off at a bakery around the corner from work. If anyone deserves a sickeningly fattening pastry before work this morning, it's me. I then start my amble up toward the office building, but something catches my eye. Something that turns my stomach and forces me to drop my pastry on the floor.

"No!" I gasp as an image of Amanda West kissing Elijah on the front of a gossip paper hits me with the weight of a freight train.

“Helena?” an unfamiliar, deep, and husky voice says to me, sounding as though the owner of the voice has seen a ghost. “Are you crying?” he asks as he turns me by the shoulder to face him.

As soon as our eyes meet, I emit a small gasp, for this man looks like he could tear out your heart and you’d still be begging for more of his delicious torture. His eyes are intensely blue; they hypnotize me to the point of losing any ability to form words. He’s so tall, so masculine, yet also graceful. I could spend all day studying this man and still want more. The look of disappointment on his face, however, reveals I haven’t had quite the same effect on him.

“Apologies, I thought you were someone else,” he says as he releases me and stands up straight to his full height. At my silence and less-than-cool expression, he readies himself to walk away.

“Helena?” I call out before he leaves. He freezes for a moment or two, then turns to look at me again, this time looking stern and formidable. “H-Helena is my cousin’s name. People say we look very similar. Her name is Carter.”

He stares at me for a moment, smiles just a fraction, then looks at the gossip paper that had just turned me to dust. He picks it up and studies it with a sneer on his face. Every movement he makes is controlled, as though he doesn’t waste time on anything without meaning to.

“How do you know Helena?” I venture to ask.

“Not important,” he replies without looking at me. “Ellie Russo, I’m guessing.”

I nod with confusion written across my face while he pays the man for the gossip paper, something I wouldn't have pegged him for having any kind of interest in. But then he holds the front cover up to me, showcasing a picture I really don't want to be looking at without a sick bag.

“As we've just demonstrated, Miss Russo, looks can be deceiving,” he says matter of factly. “Have a good day.”

“Wait...what's your name?” I ask as he turns away from me. “You know who I am, and my cousin, but I don't know who you are.”

He doesn't answer me straight away, but when he does, it feels like ice is running clear through my blood. God, this man is intense, to say the least.

“Hastings,” he replies with that one word before marching away with the gossip mag still in hand.

I head into the office, feeling utterly dejected and with my heart screaming at me, ‘I told you so’ on repeat. I don't know what is harder to believe, the fact that he betrayed me so quickly, or that I believed he wouldn't. I'm truly cursed, destined to never belong in a monogamous relationship. It's the only explanation, isn't it? I can't be that awful at everything to do with relationships that I deserve for this to keep happening.

Only the cleaning staff are here at this hour, so I make my way up and head straight for the bathroom where I proceed to throw up *Exorcist* style. Right now, I'd be happy to have someone possess me, and for me to go away to another dimension and never come back. I'm done with men. Forever. But then...

“I could get used to this...coming home to you.”

God, I want that, and I wanted that with him. As always, I gave away too much, too soon, too intensely. Hours seem to have passed by the time I peel myself off the tiled floor. I look in the mirror and see a shell of a woman with panda dark eyes, scraggly hair, and the look of a broken heart. Perfect.

The offices are now full of people, and I expect my absence will have been noted, which means another big brother conversation with the Carter brothers.

However, when I finally do walk through everyone’s desks, no one looks up to stare at me with pity. I’m not sure I could keep my cool together if someone were to say anything about that newspaper article. Of course, Elijah’s Amanda happened to be a socialite darling with an uber rich family that makes her worthy of the media’s time. Just my luck!

The phone buzzes through before I even have a chance to place my butt on the seat, so I pick up with a long sigh and a disgruntled edge to my voice.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ellie, it’s Helena; I have an Elijah Woods to see you.”

“Tell him I don’t want to see him,” I reply coldly.

“Oh...er...wait a moment,” she stutters, then puts me on hold for a few seconds. “He’s being quite insistent, plus, he’s

got quite a lot of stuff with him. Do you want me to call Cameron?"

"Oh, God, no," I sigh as I rub my tired eyes with the heel of my free hand. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Ok, if you're sure," she says, sounding worried.

"Yeah, it's fine. Thanks, Hels."

Where the hell is Nate or Cameron when you need them? I could do with a pep talk right about now. With no other option, I stand up straight, brush down my crumpled outfit that probably smells of bathroom, and begin my descent into even more anger, frustration, and broken heartedness.

I try to remain standing confidently in the lift, to stare at my reflection with determination and a take-no-crap-expression, even if I feel anything but. However, as soon as the door opens to reveal the man himself, standing tall and imposing in the middle of the reception area, I immediately slump.

Be strong, Ellie, be strong, just for five more minutes!

"Ellie," Elijah says, now turning and looking as thoroughly disheveled as I am. "Ellie, thank God, you came down!"

"What do you want, Mr Woods?" I ask in a formal tone of voice. "Amanda West doesn't work here."

"Yeah, thank God!" he snaps at the same time as he begins grabbing hold of a box full of what looks like the gossip

papers from before.

“Oh, I see you brought souvenirs.”

“What? No!” he gasps, looking positively frantic, not at all like his usual gentlemanly persona. In fact, he looks like a complete mess.

“What do you want, Elijah? You proved how trustworthy you can be, so let’s just leave it alone.”

“To prove to you that I never broke that trust,” he snaps. “Look, you can see my hand pushing her away, and my other one is in the air, cos she grabbed me, Ellie. I had no fucking idea what was going on until she had her lips on mine. My eyes aren’t even closed!”

“Or you’re embracing her with that hand, and the other one is simply mid-flight to pull her into you!” I argue. “It could be either way; how do I know?”

“L-l-look,” he says, sounding really flustered, “I swear to you, Ellie, that kiss meant nothing on my part. She told me she wanted me back, that she didn’t care about her trust fund anymore, that she just wanted me, cos I’m the one that got away or something. But I left as soon as I could get out of there. When I got outside, there were cameras and she was suddenly kissing me. Please, Ellie, you have to believe me... trust me, Ellie!”

“I don’t know,” I just about utter, “I don’t know what to do.”

“You can trust me, Ellie,” he begs as he takes hold of my hand, looking completely desperate.

“But...” I begin, then trail off, not knowing how to finish whatever it was I was going to say.

“Ellie, I know I’m innocent,” he says, suddenly standing back, as if trying to compose himself. “I know that I thought nothing of you for those six months when I was kicking myself for hurting you; I know I went to not only your cousin, but also to Lucius Hastings of all people, to try and get you back; I know I’ve done everything within my power to prove to you that I’m a good guy; I know I’ve been upfront about everything. Ellie, I would not have done any of that just to ruin it over some woman who threw me away, who gave me nothing but a text because it was too hard for her to do it in person.”

“Elijah...”

“But if you don’t know that, if you don’t know how much I feel for you, then there is no us,” he says, transforming back into his gentleman persona. “The photograph is damning, I can see that, but I have explained everything, just like you explained about not knowing Jonathan was married. I believed you; I could see it in your eyes. Look at me, Ellie, look into my eyes and tell me you don’t see the truth in them.”

I scan his face, looking into his eyes with nothing but anxiety and fear taking over me. Eventually, when the silence becomes deafening, he nods once and steps away from me.

“I spent the last few hours buying up every one of those gossip papers that I could,” he says sadly. “Do with them what you want. I wanted to save your dignity, as well as my own. And Miss Carter?”

Helena suddenly gets to her feet after having obviously watched this horrendous scene, and stands to attention, looking almost terrified. Elijah walks sadly up to her and hands her a small envelope, the size of a card you would find in a bouquet.

“Mr Hastings asked me to give you this,” he says and passes it over to her outstretched hand, which looks as if it’s now trembling.

“Thank you,” she barely manages to whisper, and immediately shuffles it under her desk.

“Elijah?” I call out as he begins to walk past me.

“Goodbye, Miss Russo,” he says, and continues walking.

As I watch him leave, I begin to feel as though I’ve lost a limb, like my whole life has just left without me. He grows smaller, and I soon feel a presence beside me. I turn to face whoever it is, only to find Helena standing there. She’s not been this close to me since we were kids, but now I see it; we do look much alike, a little fairer than her brothers, but still very much showcasing our Italian heritage.

“Ellie, if I may, I’d like to know why you’re still standing here?” she asks softly.

“Because I don’t know if I’ll survive it if he proves to be like all the others,” I whimper. “I care about him too much.”

“Far be it from me to offer advice on relationships, but I have always been very good at observing what others take for

granted. This is not the image of a man who wants to be a part of this kiss,” she says, holding a copy of the paper out in front of us. “This is the image of a man who has no idea what is about to happen to him. This is a man who is, in his own right, not one of the people who have hurt you in the past.”

“God, I’m an idiot, aren’t I?”

“We can all be accused of that when it comes to love,” she says wisely, “what makes us tragic is when we let it slip away.”

“What happened to you, Helena?” I ask while she remains staring at Elijah’s retreating form.

“Nothing that anyone wants to hear about,” she says with a small, fake smile on her face. “Now, go, before you lose something you won’t know the true value of until it’s too late.”

“You’re right,” I say resolutely and turn to hug her. She immediately tenses up, unable to hug me back, and I realize how thin she is. “That story, Helena, I want to hear it one day.”

She merely smiles before returning to her desk, where she sits down as if nothing has happened. I watch her with quiet fascination for a second or two before I shake myself out of it and bolt for the door.



Elijah

As I turn the corner, down a side street where no one will see me break down, I find an old garbage truck and begin kicking and punching it like a mindless thug. I'm beyond gutted; I thought she'd listen, thought she'd believe me when I explained everything, but she didn't, not at all, not-

"Elijah!" I hear her shouting from the entrance to the side street. I whip my head up to find her panting for breath, all the while brushing away tears from her cheeks. My heart feels like it's come to a complete standstill inside of my aching chest. It doesn't start beating again until she begins running toward me like her life depends on it.

"Ellie, what are you doing?" I ask, now shaking away the pain I just inflicted on my fists.

"I trust you," she blurts out, "and I believe you completely. I was just scared because of...well, everything, and I couldn't stand it if you-"

"You believe me?" I ask with shock in my voice.

"One hundred percent; I'm all in," she tells me. I literally laugh out loud before slamming my lips on top of hers, all the while taking in her scent, her fluster, and just her, all of her.

"Ellie Russo, for once, I am speechless!" I tell her when we pull apart just enough to be able to look at one another and only one another.

"Then tell me something off the cuff, without pre-planning it," she says with a beaming smile on her face.

“I love you,” I tell her without hesitation. “We might not have been together long, but I already know I love you and only you.”

“And now I can finally admit I love you, all of you, Mr Woods.”

Epilogue

Helena

The card slips between my fingertips haphazardly while I contemplate whether or not to open it. After all, what good would it do? I am not the girl I once was, haven't been for a long time. Come to think of it, I don't feel like I am anyone anymore. Helena Carter is just a name, a memory, a label written across my security pass. And I know, I know with every fiber of my being, that whatever is inside this envelope is going to be so painful, I shall lose just a little bit more of myself.

"Helena," Cameron, my boss and once upon a time big brother says without any emotion in his voice, nor in his expression either.

"Cameron," I reply meekly before looking down at my work again.

We were so close once, so incredibly close I felt like I could turn to him for anything, and he'd instantly have my back. And now, he walks away without comment. I think even the night-time crew gets more conversation out of him, and he barely sees them. Not that I can blame him; he chose to believe the very worst of me.

"Hey, Hels, he'll come around," Nate, my little brother, says in his usual carefree manner.

"It's ok," I tell him sadly. "How are you, Nate?"

"So, so," he replies, "still living the Batchelor dream."

“I won’t ask what that means,” I say with a smile, trying to sound like a fraction of what I used to. “Jess has been asking after you, would you like to come over for dinner one evening?”

“Yeah?” he clarifies, sounding shocked that I would ask such a thing.

“It’s ok if you don’t, I won’t mind-“

“Helena, I would love to come and have dinner with my sister and niece,” he says with his cheeky boy smile that takes me back to our younger years together. Picnics on the beach, playing pirates in the treehouse, sneaking in midnight snacks when we thought Mom and Dad weren’t looking.

“OK, then, just let me know when,” I tell him, suddenly feeling nervous about someone coming around for dinner who isn’t Mom.

“I’ll check my schedule and let you know as soon as,” he says, now sounding like he’s one of my bosses again. “Have a good one, Hels.”

“You too,” I reply, even though he’s already walking away, and he won’t have heard me.

That tiny envelope catches my eye again and I cannot help but pick it up and inhale its scent.

Just one drink, mia topolina...

Those words come back to haunt me, remembering the perfect script from so very long ago. The excitement and fear I had felt whenever I had found one of these little envelopes waiting for me. They are, after all, his signature calling card. No one knows Lucius Hastings as I do; intense doesn't even begin to describe what he is. And I lost him.

As I feel a well of tears beginning to form, I brush them away before anyone can see; before I can admit to feeling anything real again. All of that is reserved solely for my Jess, my baby girl. With that, I rip open the small envelope with determination to forget about it as soon as I've looked at what's inside. A quick stab through my already fragmented heart, then move on, just like everyone else has.

When I see what's inside, still in perfect black script, I feel my fingers beginning to tremble against the white card. I knew this would be painful, knew it would hurt, but I forgot how much Lucius Hastings has the ability to destroy me, and with only one word – *Mine!*

If you have a spare minute or two, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and/ or my Goodreads page. Many thanks!

To continue with the 'Carter' series, you can find the following books on my Amazon page:

'The Knight', Cameron's book, is now available on Amazon KU. You can read an excerpt below.

'The Fool', Nate's book, will be released onto Amazon KU on June 10th. For a sneaky peak of the prologue, carry on reading.

'The Devil', Helena's book, will be released onto Amazon KU on July 8th.

Find all the links below.

**To read more from the 'Wild Blooms' series, you can
find them all at:**

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[Mayfield Trilogy](#)

A dark, suspense romance. All three books are written and will be released within a month of each other (I wouldn't leave you hanging).

[A Marriage of His Convenience](#)

A historical romance

[The Knight](#)

The first in the ‘Carter’ series.

Willows and Waterlilies (The Gentleman)

Ellie’s story from the ‘Carter’ series and in connection with the Wild Bloom’s Series.

To be released later this year:

The Fool

Nate’s Story

The Devil

Helena’s Story

A Marriage of His Choosing

Elsie’s Story from my historical romance series (see A Marriage of His Convenience)

Here is an excerpt from Cameron’s story, the first in the ‘Carter’ series:

The Knight

Prologue

Let us begin with a party.

An innocent night of care-free fun amongst teenagers.

Nate Carter, the popular boy with a heart, was throwing one of his infamous bashes that aimed to let the kids of Westlake Prep let down their hair and give in to their urges within the safe confines of the Carter household. His parents were away at one of their social soirees, and his big sister was already married and living in a house not too far away, which only left his big brother, Cameron. However, Cameron knew how to have a good time, and having him around would be handy should anyone decide to push the boundaries just that little bit too far. The evening would be good, perhaps even great, for his events usually were.

However, tonight wasn't going to be great for everyone. For three young women, it was going to be a night of fear, of realization, and of feeling even more lost than they had felt before. Something would happen to each of them to make them feel that little bit smaller, that little bit more silenced, that little bit more afraid. Love and respect were merely fairy tales for children to believe in; they were not for them.

That is not to say that nothing good would come out of this party, far from it. For if this party had never happened, people might not have met, people might not have learned lessons, people might not have been open to change. Occasionally, tragedy comes from the most loving of relationships, whereas a happy-ever-after can be salvaged from the direst of situations.

And on that note, I shall begin with my story. The story of how I fell for my knight, otherwise known as Cameron Carter.

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